

Examining work environments for disabled Members of the House of Commons through the lens of parliamentary procedure and lived experiences

Research report based on the Parliamentary Office for Science and Technology (POST) Fellowship hosted by the Centre of Excellence for Procedural Practice of the House of Commons, 2022-24

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report aims to raise awareness of and reflect upon the needs and experiences of disabled Members of the House of Commons, as well as accessibility provisions to improve the work environment for politicians with physical and mental health impairments.

It resonates with the ongoing efforts to improve working conditions of the House and MPs' staff and accessibility of parliamentary building as part of the Restoration and Renewal Programme. It enhances understanding of the specific needs and experiences of disabled Members – and accessibility-related challenges stemming from the complexity of their parliamentary role and the increasing pressures on their personal and professional lives.

The report is based on the Parliamentary Office for Science and Technology (POST) Fellowship research hosted by the Centre of Excellence for Procedural Practice of the House of Commons in 2022-24, drawing on parliamentary documents and semi-structured interviews with Members and peers, the House, Parliamentary Digital Service, Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority and Members' staff. It draws on the individual, diverse experiences of Members and contextualises them within the institution, its practices and its working environment. Based on the analysis, the report offers several observations on how to improve accessibility and disability inclusion in the House.



These insights could be of interest to the Procedure Committee, the Administration Committee and the Modernisation Committee in the context of future procedural considerations, administration and modernisation of the House, respectively.

The report is structured as follows:

- Section 1 starts from discussing the definitions of disability and applying them to the parliamentary context. It also places the issue of accessibility and disability inclusion in Parliament into a wider societal context by exploring the role, duties and activities of an MP.
- Section 2 evaluates existing provisions for accessibility and examples of good practice with regards to disability inclusion in the House of Commons.
- Section 3 reflects on remaining challenges to disability support and inclusion, focusing on parliamentary services and the accessibility of the debating Chambers and Committees.
- Section 4 offers several observations on potential ways to strengthen institutional practices and improve accessibility of the House of Commons for disabled parliamentarians.

INTRODUCTION

The importance of disability inclusion, including in political institutions, has increased substantially with the increasing presence of disability in British society, especially in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. Based on the Annual Population Surveys and Family Resources Surveys, more than one in five (22%) or 14.6 million Britons report being disabled¹ based on the definition of the 2010 Equality Act,² that is, have a physical or mental health impairment which has a substantial and long-term (approximately 12 months or more) adverse effect on their ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities.³ This includes 46% reporting mobility issues and 33% issues with low stamina, breathing difficulties, and fatigue. Additionally, the proportions of people reporting symptoms of depression, anxiety or stress rose from 9% in 2014 to 31% in 2021.⁴

While a fifth of the British population report having a disability, there is a significant disparity between the rates of physical and mental health related disabilities among the population and (visible) disabilities in the House of Commons. By contrast, only 8 MPs⁵ (or 1.2%) declared having a disability in the 2019-2024 Parliament, with the number increasing to 12 MPs⁶ (just under 2%) after the 2024 general election. While in practice this number is higher (and the report will discuss issues of identification and visibility), there is still an apparent disparity in the proportion of disabled Britons in the House of Commons and in society at large. This presents challenges to the (perceived) representativeness of the House of Commons, and to political trust among voters, with higher symptoms of mental distress, for example, associated with lower perceptions of policy responsiveness and lower trust in and satisfaction with government.⁷ Likewise, a lack of parliamentarians with first-hand experience of disability raises concerns that the interests of disabled Britons may be overlooked or misinterpreted.⁸

There are benefits of greater descriptive representation for disabled Britons, and yet there is also a need to address the scepticism among voters (and party selectorates) about the effectiveness of disabled politicians.⁹

¹ Kirk-Wade, E. 2023. *UK disability statistics: Prevalence and life experiences*. House of Commons Library Research Briefing CBP9602, 23 August 2023.

² HM Government. 2010. *Equality Act 2010*.

³ In the context of this study, terms ‘impairment’ and ‘disability’ are used interchangeably owing to the wording of the Equality Act 2010. In line with existing social surveys (for example, the Life Opportunities Survey) and practices of the House of Commons (interview 17 on 09 January 2023, interview 19 on 16 March 2023), this research uses the social model of disability (see the discussion of the concept of disability in Appendix 1).

⁴ Shevlin, M., Butter, S., McBride, O., Murphy, J., Gibson-Miller, J., Hartman, T. K., Levita, L., Mason, L., Martinez, A.P., McKay, R., Stocks, T.V.A., Bennett, K., Hyland, P., Bentall, R. P. 2023. Refuting the myth of a ‘tsunami’ of mental ill-health in populations affected by COVID-19: evidence that response to the pandemic is heterogeneous, not homogeneous. *Psychological Medicine*, 53(2), 429–437.

⁵ Disability Policy Centre. n.d. *Breaking Down Barriers: Improving Disabled Political Representation & Participation Across The United Kingdom*, <https://thedisabilitypolicycentre.org/representation> (accessed on 14 August 2024).

⁶ Disability Policy Centre. 2024. *Disabled Representation in the 2024-2029 Parliament*, <https://thedisabilitypolicycentre.org/disabled-representation-in-the-2024-2029-parliament> (accessed on 14 August 2024).

⁷ Bernardi, L., and Gotlib, I.H. 2022. COVID-19 Stressors, Mental/Emotional Distress and Political Support. *West European Politics*, 46(2), 425–36.

⁸ Evans, E. and Reher, S. 2022. Disability and political representation: Analysing the obstacles to elected office in the UK. *International Political Science Review*, 43(5), 697-712.

⁹ Durose, C., Gains, F., Richardson, L., Combs, R., Broome, K. and Eason, C. 2011. *Pathways to politics*. Equality and Human Rights Commission Research Report 65. <https://archive.equalityhumanrights.com/sites/default/files/research-report-65-pathways-to-politics.pdf> (accessed on 06 August 2024); Campbell, R. and Cowley, P., 2014. What voters want: Reactions to candidate characteristics in a survey experiment. *Political studies*, 62(4), 745-765.

This belief reflects deeper-seated prejudices about the capacity of disabled people in general,¹⁰ though the depth of such prejudice differs depending on the type of disability.¹¹ It is also reinforced by actual and perceived institutional barriers – from issues of physical access to communication, to the ability to participate in the full range of parliamentary activities – assumed to hinder the participation of a disabled politician, thus, making them less desirable as candidates.¹² As a result, most candidates are reluctant to declare disability (even if they have it) for fear of electoral penalty, making disability almost invisible in the Commons. This further reinforces the idea that disabled people make for inadequate representatives and feeds into common stereotypes around disability. This also resonates with expectations that disabled politicians must ‘adapt themselves to existing political cultures and processes, rather than political parties and “selectorates” adapting their processes and cultures’.¹³ Together these considerations have been noted to create a particularly difficult working environment that may be detrimental to the physical and mental health of Members.¹⁴

Reasonable adjustments to improve accessibility and make working environments more inclusive for disabled persons are implemented in workplaces across the country. This approach, however, is challenging for Members of the House of Commons. This partially stems from the demands of the role, especially of an MP rather than a peer who may have a more public/constituency-facing role and a more visible social position, as well as the ever-intensifying workload.¹⁵ Such adjustments can be detrimental to the quality of parliamentary deliberation and harmful for the ability of the House to scrutinise the Government and hold it accountable. Finally, disability-related needs manifest in a complex patchwork of remedial measures aiming to improve work environments for disabled MPs, which makes developing a systematic approach rather than addressing these needs on a case-by-case basis challenging.

Therefore, identifying existing good practices and further possible adjustments to the work environment of the House of Commons also necessitates an assessment of their feasibility considering existing cultural and procedural norms in the context of a specific institution.¹⁶ It also benefits from building on existing good practices in the House of Commons and the experiences of the House of Lords. The latter illustrates tangible ways of making parliamentary politics more inclusive for disabled persons when the needs of the House

¹⁰ Deal, M. 2007. Aversive disablism: Subtle prejudice toward disabled people. *Disability & Society*, 22(1), 93-107.

¹¹ Reher, S. 2021. How do voters perceive disabled candidates?. *Frontiers in Political Science*, 2, 634432.

¹² Durose, C., Gains, F., Richardson, L., Combs, R., Broome, K. and Eason, C. 2011. *Pathways to politics*. Equality and Human Rights Commission Research Report 65. <https://archive.equalityhumanrights.com/sites/default/files/research-report-65-pathways-to-politics.pdf> (accessed on 06 August 2024).

¹³ Evans, E. and Reher, S. 2022. Disability and political representation: Analysing the obstacles to elected office in the UK. *International Political Science Review*, 43(5), 697-712.

¹⁴ Flinders, M., Weinberg, A., Weinberg, J., Geddes, M. and Kwiatkowski, R. 2020. Governing under pressure? The mental wellbeing of politicians. *Parliamentary Affairs*, 73(2), 253-273; Weinberg, A., 2015. A longitudinal study of the impact of changes in the job and the expenses scandal on UK national politicians' experiences of work, stress and the home–work interface. *Parliamentary Affairs*, 68(2), 248-271.

¹⁵ Childs, S. 2008. *Women and British party politics: Descriptive, substantive and symbolic representation*. London: Routledge; Flinders, M., Weinberg, A., Weinberg, J., Geddes, M. and Kwiatkowski, R. 2020. Governing under pressure? The mental wellbeing of politicians. *Parliamentary Affairs*, 73(2), 253-273.

¹⁶ Crewe, E. 2021. *The Anthropology of Parliaments: Entanglements in Democratic Politics*. London: Routledge; Crewe, E. 2021. Reluctant Anthropologists: Revealing but Rare Insights into Legislatures. *PoLAR: Political and Legal Anthropology Review*, Emergent Conversation 14, <https://polarjournal.org/2021/11/18/reliant-anthropologists-revealing-but-rare-insights-into-legislatures/> (accessed on 06 August 2024); Geddes, M., Rhodes, R.A.W. 2018. Towards an Interpretive Parliamentary Studies. In J. Brichzin, D. Krichewsky, L. Ringel and J. Schank (eds) *Soziologie der Parlamente. Politische Soziologie* (pp 87–107). Springer VS, Wiesbaden.

membership demand it (for example, relatively high average age of peers and associated physical and mental health impairments¹⁷). With the increasing presence and visibility of disability in British society (if it translates to more disabled Members), a greater need for similar accommodations will arise in the House of Commons.

At present, there is also a window of opportunity to consider options for improving accessibility and disability inclusion in the House of Commons in the context of:

- Ongoing discussions about the future and format of Restoration and Renewal,
- Changes to Members' Services and consolidation of Health and Wellbeing Services,
- Findings of the Speaker's Conference on the employment conditions of Members' staff,¹⁸
- Growing attention to disability in political discourse and legislation (for example, the British Sign Language Act 2022¹⁹; Mental Health Bill 2022-23²⁰).

This report explores the existing support services and structures available for disabled Members, as well as their engagement with these resources. It also identifies gaps and weaknesses in this provision (or engagement of Members with it) and offers several observations on potential ways of improving the accessibility of the House of Commons and its workings for existing and future disabled Members. In doing so, the report recognises both challenges in developing a systematic (rather than ad-hoc) approach to addressing disability-related needs, as well as trade-offs in introducing different remedial measures for Members with diverse needs and for the needs of the institution.

¹⁷ Crewe, E., 2005. *Lords of Parliament: Manners, rituals and politics*. Manchester: Manchester University Press; Purvis, M. 2014. *Membership of the House of Lords: Ethnicity, Religion and Disability*. House of Lords Library Research Briefing LLN 2014/017, 12 June 2014.

¹⁸ House of Commons. 2023. *Speaker's Conference on the employment conditions of Members' staff*, 20 July 2023, HC 1714 2022-23.

¹⁹ HM Government. 2022. *British Sign Language Act 2022*.

²⁰ HM Government. 2022. *Draft Mental Health Bill 2022-23*.

SECTION 1. BEING AN MP – ‘A JOB LIKE NO OTHER’

There is no job description for a Member of Parliament because of the features of their constitutional and legal status. Members are not employees, and as such they are not covered by Part 5 of the Equality Act 2010 that covers work-related provisions within the scope of the Act.²¹ Instead, they are elected office holders, and as such as specifically excluded by Section 52(9) and Schedule 6, para. 2(2), as holding ‘an office of the House of Commons held by a member of that House’.²²

While public authorities are required to comply with the public sector equality duty as defined in Sections 149(1-2) of the Equality Act 2010, that is,

- 1) *A public authority must, in the exercise of its functions, have due regard to the need to—*
 - a) *eliminate discrimination, harassment, victimisation and any other conduct that is prohibited by or under this Act;*
 - b) *advance equality of opportunity between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it;*
 - c) *foster good relations between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it.*
- 2) *A person who is not a public authority but who exercises public functions must, in the exercise of those functions, have due regard to the matters mentioned in subsection (1),*²³

the House of Commons is not a ‘public authority’ for purposes of the Act. Furthermore, it, and any ‘function in connection with proceedings’, are specifically excluded from the provision of Section 149(2) by Section 149(9) and Schedule 18, para.4(2)(a) and (3)(a). Likewise, exemptions apply to peers and the House of Lords by Section 52(9) and Schedule 6, para. 2(2) and by Section 149(9) and Schedule 18, para.4(2)(b) and (3)(a), respectively.²⁴

In other words, provisions of the Equality Act 2010 apply neither to Members and peers, nor to the House of Parliament as institutions.²⁵ That said, the authorities of both Houses act as if the legislation does apply meaning that reasonable adjustments and other similar accommodations are made in the spirit of equality legislation despite the exemptions.²⁶ The language of reasonable adjustments and the public sector equality duty too is used for the sake of continuity and to avoid confusion.

This study, therefore, draws on the existing, often uncodified practices of making reasonable adjustments for disabled Members that are made routinely, even though there is no legal requirement for the House of Commons (or the House of Lords) to do so.

Provisions made by the Parliamentary Buildings (Restoration and Renewal) Act 2019 are an exception to this.²⁷ Section 2(5)(e), in particular, stipulates that the Sponsor Body responsible for the Parliamentary building works ‘must have regard to the need to ensure that (after completion of those works) all parts of the Palace of

²¹ HM Government. 2010. *Equality Act 2010* (s6).

²² HM Government. 2010. *Equality Act 2010* (s6).

²³ HM Government. 2010. *Equality Act 2010* (s6).

²⁴ HM Government. 2010. *Equality Act 2010* (s6).

²⁵ Note that the House staff employed by the House of Commons Commissions and MPs’ staff employed by Members are covered by the Equality Act 2010, meaning that a duty to make reasonable adjustments as per the Equality Act 2010 in a legal sense applies to some parliamentary passholders, but not to all.

²⁶ Interview 35 on 11 August 2023

²⁷ HM Government. 2019. *Parliamentary Buildings (Restoration and Renewal) Act 2019*.

Westminster used by people working in it or open to people visiting it are accessible to people with disabilities’.²⁸ This goal is reiterated in the Inclusion and Diversity Strategy as one of the three strategic priorities,²⁹ including ‘[a] programme of specialist accessibility audits [to] be undertaken across the parliamentary estate to improve physical accessibility... [concentrating] on areas that are crucial to facilitating the business of the House, undergoing change, or of particular inaccessibility... [and incorporating] inclusivity for neurodivergent users of the estate and our services’.

With this in mind, most discussions with regards to disability inclusion in the House of Commons (and the UK Parliament) are framed within the Restoration and Renewal Programme and improving (mostly physical) accessibility of the estate, as well as developing sufficiently accessible places to keep parliamentary business going and creating places to do politics (for example, lobbies, meeting rooms) if/when decant from the Palace of Westminster that houses both Houses of Parliament is required.³⁰ On the one hand, undertaking a comprehensive restoration of the Palace whilst improving its safety, accessibility and enabling it to run more sustainably (that is, making it carbon neutral) is an admirable aim.³¹ On the other hand, as noted by the Clerk of Parliaments, Simon Burton, in his evidence to the Public Accounts Committee on 02 February 2023, ‘...you have time, you have cost, you have accessibility and you have sustainability, and all those things will pull us in different directions’.³²

Negotiating these competing priorities – alongside concerns regarding the costs of Restoration and Renewal – resulted in delays in agreeing and implementing the programme and little substantive progress over the past 4 years. There are also concerns that the original aspirations of the Act have been watered down and changed from ‘fully accessible’ to the perhaps more realistic ‘broadly accessible’,³³ to reflect that, in the words of Sir John Benger, former Clerk of the House of Commons, ‘[m]aking the building fully accessible... would, again, be staggeringly, unimaginably expensive’.³⁴ This makes hanging a long-term accessibility strategy on the Restoration and Renewal programme even more challenging, especially in the context of competing priorities of managing parliamentary buildings that try to find a balance between conservation, accessibility, sustainability, and security.³⁵

The spirit of ‘preserving rather than renewing’ (and issues around conservation areas³⁶) driven by the protected heritage status of the building makes changes to the architecture/layout of the Commons Chamber, for example, challenging.³⁷ Alongside concerns over costs of such changes that are significantly higher for heritage sites, it explains reluctance for (and places practical constraints on) change and difficulties in building consensus for accessibility-related modifications. This includes physical accommodations for disabled Members (for example, accessible office spaces, making the Chamber and parliamentary estate easier to

²⁸ HM Government. 2019. *Parliamentary Buildings (Restoration and Renewal) Act 2019*.

²⁹ Interview 19 on 16 March 2023

³⁰ Interview 3 on 02 March 2023; Interview 22 on 22 June 2023

³¹ Interview 22 on 22 June 2023; Interview 19 on 16 March 2023

³² Public Accounts Committee. 2023. *Oral evidence: Restoration and Renewal Recall*, 2 February 2023, HC 1021 2022-23.

³³ Interview 3 on 02 March 2023; Interview 19 on 16 March 2023

³⁴ Public Accounts Committee. 2023. *Oral evidence: Restoration and Renewal Recall*, 2 February 2023, HC 1021 2022-23.

³⁵ Interview 1 on 13 July 2023; Interview 19 on 16 March 2023; Interview 22 on 22 June 2023

³⁶ Interview 22 on 22 June 2023

³⁷ Interview 19 on 16 March 2023

navigate for wheelchair and mobility aid users) and affects capacity for procedural changes (for example, allowing use of laptops that require more space than hand-held devices, reserved seating in the Chamber).³⁸

Owing to the sovereignty of the UK Parliament, and by extension, the special constitutional status of MPs, this is unavoidable, that is, no one should dictate or constrain the work of an elected Member³⁹ who is accountable to their electorate and, to a lesser extent, their parties. However, the unpredictability of the role can be challenging for disabled Members, as management of disabilities (that, by definition, affect daily lives) relies on the predictability of daily routines.⁴⁰ Reasonable adjustments – especially for complex needs – also require the involvement of multiple agencies and services, which is more complicated when the nature of the job is so fluid.⁴¹ Such flexibility increases pressure on planning and managing workload and may be an additional challenge for some disabled Members (for example, some learning disabilities and forms of neuro-divergence can make concentration difficult). However, it can be beneficial for others; in contrast with a 9-to-5 job, their schedules can be adapted to accommodate their impairments⁴² They also can define their roles. Their political parties and more experienced colleagues, as well as the House staff, help by explaining what opportunities this job presents rather than define expectations⁴³ meaning that Members have a great degree of independence in determining their priorities and work style. Additionally, while they carry the responsibility for their work as MPs, they still have opportunities to delegate some of the tasks, such as running of the constituency office, constituency case works, elements of campaigning, etc.

There is no ‘one size fits all’ approach to being a Member of Parliament, and to understand how disability resonates with the work experiences of MPs, it is important to break the role down to explore how its different elements resonate with disabilities.

1.1. Duties and activities of Members and how they resonate with disabilities

The duties of a Member of Parliament, aptly summarised by Sir Winston Churchill as working to benefit the country, their constituents, and their party,⁴⁴ result in Members undertaking a wide range of tasks in several key areas, including as noted by Sarah Childs:

1. Working with and for local people (constituency work),

³⁸ Interview 1 on 13 July 2023

³⁹ Interview 27 on 15 December 2022; Interview 19 on 16 March 2023; Interview 21 on 31 March 2023

⁴⁰ Interview 8 on 19 May 2023; Interview 10 on 16 August 2023; Interview 14 on 24 April 2023

⁴¹ Interview 26 on 06 December 2022

⁴² Interview 21 on 31 March 2023; Interview 7 on 24 May 2023

⁴³ Constitution Unit. 2024, June 5. *Priorities for new MPs' induction in the next parliament*,

<https://www.ucl.ac.uk/constitution-unit/events/2024/jun/priorities-new-mps-induction-next-parliament> (accessed on 06 August 2024).

⁴⁴ King-Hall, S. 1954. The duties of a Member of Parliament by the RT. Hon. Sir Winston Churchill KG, MP. *Parliamentary affairs*, 8(3), 302.

2. Publicly perceived aspects: speaking in the Chamber(s), serving on select committees, introducing amendments and contributing to debates, campaigning in and outside the House,
3. Working with and for a political party,
4. Pursuing individual interests/causes,
5. Being an employer.⁴⁵

Except for their role as an employer, these areas resonate with the common tasks recognised by Members (see Select Committee on Modernisation of the House of Commons - First Report, 2007):

- *supporting their party in votes in Parliament (furnishing and maintaining the Government and Opposition);*
- *representing and furthering the interests of their constituency;*
- *representing individual constituents and taking up their problems and grievances;*
- *scrutinising and holding the Government to account and monitoring, stimulating and challenging the Executive;*
- *initiating, reviewing and amending legislation; and*
- *contributing to the development of policy whether in the Chamber, Committees or party structures and promoting public understanding of party policies.*⁴⁶

Despite a broad agreement that MPs ought to devote their time to working at Westminster, in their constituencies, as well as within and alongside their political parties and campaign groups, approaches of Members to carrying out their duties vary greatly. This applies to their priorities, amount of time spent on these activities, and how they relate to each other. The Select Committee on Modernisation of the House of Commons - First Report, 2007 argues that ‘[t]he different roles that make up the job of being a Member of Parliament are not separate and competing; they are interconnected and interdependent’.⁴⁷ In other words, they should not be seen as a patchwork, but rather as a network of activities that are all means to one end – representing the people in Parliament.⁴⁸

Academic and policy research, however, tends to separate these activities to understand the priorities of individual MPs, some of whom may prioritise constituency work, and some of whom focus on national and/or party politics. The balance between constituency work and national politics has been the main target of such inquiries. Shifting focus between constituency work and national politics can stem from personal interests and aspirations (for example, whether a Member wants to be promoted to a frontbench position),⁴⁹ the competitiveness of their constituency (for example, an MP in a safe seat could feel more secure in their re-

⁴⁵ Childs, S. 2016. *The good parliament*, 14, <https://www.bristol.ac.uk/grc/research/research-projects/good-parliament/> (accessed on 06 August 2024).

⁴⁶ Modernisation of the House of Commons Committee. 2007. *Modernisation of the House of Commons – First Report*, 20 June 2007.

⁴⁷ Modernisation of the House of Commons Committee. 2007. *Modernisation of the House of Commons – First Report*, 20 June 2007.

⁴⁸ Interview 14 on 24 April 2023

⁴⁹ Searing, D. 1985. The role of the good constituency member and the practice of representation in Great Britain. *The Journal of Politics*, 47(2), 348-381; Searing, D. 1994. *Westminster's world: understanding political roles*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 81-120.

election and invest more time in national and party politics),⁵⁰ and their legislative role (for example, a minister would have less time on non-essential community events).⁵¹

The nature of the British majoritarian electoral system with single member districts strengthens the link between MPs and their constituents, even when MPs have duties and responsibilities outside of their seat. This produces a greater emphasis on constituency representation among British MPs compared with their European counterparts.⁵² This is also evident from the ‘Year in the Life of an MP’ surveys conducted by the Hansard Society in 2005-06 and 2010-11 – with the average proportion of time spent on constituency work amounting to 49% and 59% (including local campaigning), respectively.⁵³ These figures are roughly the same now based on reflections of Members’ staff.⁵⁴ With 69 hours per week worked by MPs on average, this amounts to 41 hours a week on average spent on constituency work alone in 2010-12 session.⁵⁵ This includes meeting with people and local opinion makers and leaders (usually in their workplace or community spaces) to discuss policy issues, canvassing and/or drumming up support within the local party, and meeting individual constituents during surgeries.⁵⁶ With the increase in public expectations,⁵⁷ including the increasing demand for liaising with local councils and other services,⁵⁸ and the diversification of means of contacting MPs – via the post, email, phone, social media – the pressure of constituency work is unlikely to diminish. The increasing volume of constituency work and local campaigning has been highlighted by Members’ staff, who noted that their Members get 150-300 emails per day on average and work 80-100 hours a week when the House sits,⁵⁹ which is higher than the average workload reported by Members in surveys. This is a particular concern for Members who hold a ministerial role. Members’ staff also note that pressure to spend more time and show greater care for their constituents is disproportionately higher for women Members – and indeed, historically, women MPs invested more time in constituency work.⁶⁰ The less experienced, newer Members too tend to over-commit by joining a lot of campaign groups, All-Party Parliamentary Groups, etc., which adds to their workload.⁶¹

⁵⁰ Baughman, J. 2004. Party, Constituency, and Representation: Votes on Abortion in the British House of Commons. *Public Choice*, 120, 63–85.

⁵¹ Searing, D. 1994. *Westminster's world: understanding political roles*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 121-160.

⁵² Dudzinska, A., Poyet, C., Costa, O., Weßels, B. 2014. Representational Roles. In K. Deschouwer and S. Depauw (eds) *Representing the People: A Survey Among Members of Statewide and Substate Parliaments* (pp. 19–38). Oxford: Oxford University Press, 25 and 28-29.

⁵³ Rosenblatt, G. 2006. *A Year in the Life: From Member of Public to Member of Parliament*. Hansard Society, <https://www.hansardsociety.org.uk/blogs/publications/archive/2007/10/17/A-Year-in-the-Life.aspx> (accessed on 06 July 2023); Korris, M. 2011. *A Year in the Life: From Member of Public to Member of Parliament*. Hansard Society, 6 <https://www.hansardsociety.org.uk/publications/briefings/a-year-in-the-life-from-member-of-public-to-member-of-parliament-report> (accessed on 06 August 2024).

⁵⁴ Interview 41 on 31 May 2023

⁵⁵ Korris, M. 2011. *A Year in the Life: From Member of Public to Member of Parliament*. Hansard Society, 5-6 <https://www.hansardsociety.org.uk/publications/briefings/a-year-in-the-life-from-member-of-public-to-member-of-parliament-report> (accessed on 06 August 2024).

⁵⁶ Crewe, E. 2015. *The House of Commons: An anthropology of MPs at work*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 87

⁵⁷ Modernisation of the House of Commons Committee. 2007. *Modernisation of the House of Commons – First Report*, 20 June 2007.

⁵⁸ Interview 41 on 31 May 2023

⁵⁹ Interview 41 on 31 May 2023

⁶⁰ Norris 1992, 44

⁶¹ Interview 41 on 31 May 2023

Intense workloads, an increasingly diverse range of activities associated with constituency work and avenues in which they are undertaken⁶² can be a mixed blessing for disabled Members. On the positive side, the increased use of social media and digital technologies for communicating with constituents and local stakeholders, and for campaigning, allows mitigation for fatigue associated with some disabilities (for example, myalgic encephalomyelitis, depression, fibromyalgia). It also enables Members to participate in events, contribute to campaigns and harness public input into their initiatives remotely, thus reducing physical barriers to participation. This is particularly beneficial for wheelchair users and Members diagnosed with arthritis and other conditions affecting joints, cerebral palsy, multiple sclerosis, and other mobility-related impairments. It also allows for greater levels of delegation to members of MPs’ staff who can be employed to provide assistance, manage social media accounts and emails, and do constituency case work.⁶³ While provisions for this support, including through IPSA allowances, have been in place for some time, the increasing digital component allows disabled MPs to maximise the benefits of their physical presence and develop a team-based approach to managing their intense workload, and to develop new, effective ways of campaigning that go beyond door-to-door canvassing (for example, Robert Halfon’s roadside stall by the A414⁶⁴, Anne Begg inviting voters to come talk to her while campaigning in Aberdeen South⁶⁵, and Sal Brinton having tea and a chat with voters on an estate green during her 2010 general election campaign in Watford⁶⁶).

While online engagement and digital participation can provide alternative means of campaigning for Members with limited mobility and are considered useful enabling tools, they also have disadvantages. Firstly, they can further intensify Members’ workload, as seen in the avalanche of emails and other digital communications that are received by Members daily. This also reflects the fact that emailing an MP, tagging them in a social media post or direct messaging them on social media is a low-cost form of political engagement for individuals compared to posting a letter, attending a surgery or an in-person event. Yet for an MP and their staff, it creates much extra work, including trying to identify whether the contacting person is their constituent, how to triage an often-unstructured request that lacks key details, and how to follow up contact if required. This is despite the increase in MPs’ staffing allowance in recent years meaning that Members have the equivalent of five full-time staff on average.⁶⁷

Online and digital engagement also goes hand-in-hand with proficiency in data collection and management, which includes both the role of Members as data controllers for their own staff data, as well as management of information going through their offices.⁶⁸ Despite that, there is a relatively low uptake in Parliament-provided data protection and management training from Members (though this does not exclude a possibility that Members and their staff attend external training or briefings).⁶⁹ Second, making online presence the norm is particularly problematic for disabled Members with learning difficulties, as well as visually impaired Members for whom some unstructured, often complex written and visual materials may be inaccessible (though recent technological improvements have rectified some of these issues). It is also recognised that

⁶² Interview 42 on 22-23 May 2023

⁶³ Interview 42 on 22-23 May 2023

⁶⁴ Kumutat, L. 2015, July 15. *From 'bloodied knees' to the House of Commons as a disabled MP*. BBC News, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/blogs-ouch-33519345> (accessed on 07 August 2024).

⁶⁵ Interview 5 on 03 July 2023

⁶⁶ Interview 1 on 13 July 2023

⁶⁷ Interview 43 on 18 August 2023

⁶⁸ Interview 24 on 04 April 2023

⁶⁹ Interview 33 on 08 June 2023

online presence makes it harder to maintain a work-life balance and increases exposure of Members to harassment and abuse online.⁷⁰ The former is particularly detrimental for those with mental health impairments and disabilities that can be aggravated or triggered through repeated exposure to a hostile online environment⁷¹

Overall, despite the improvements in support and allowances provided through IPSA and an increased ability to delegate some tasks to staff, the pressure of workload alongside the complexity and quantity of tasks that need to be performed under the umbrella of constituency work and local campaigning is intense.⁷² The flexibility of the role provides some relief, yet much depends on the capacity of the MPs’ offices and office managers who do not enjoy the same level of institutional and peer support in the constituency as they do on the parliamentary estate. New Members find this particularly challenging, as their political parties may encourage them to retain the staff of their predecessors rather than seek new recruits who could be more suitable.⁷³ This is also where the effectiveness of an MP as an employer is crucial.

Historically, not much attention has been paid to this aspect of a role of an MP, and it was not explicitly discussed in the Select Committee on Modernisation of the House of Commons - First Report, 2007 owing to limited staff support for Members, which reduced their line managerial responsibilities.⁷⁴ However, it has become a focus of many internal guidelines – from induction materials to HR guidance and handbooks⁷⁵ – as well as the 2022-23 Speaker’s Conference on the employment conditions of Members’ staff. Most recently, the Speaker’s Conference concluded that MPs should continue to be the employers of their staff and recommended an expansion of the Members’ Services Team (to be renamed the Members’ and Members’ Staff Services Team) to build and expand on existing best practices and improve support for MPs’ staff.⁷⁶ These recommendations and additional support will develop existing guides and handbooks that cover much ground – from office recruitment (up to 5 FTE staff based on an IPSA staff office allowance)⁷⁷ and restructuring to resolving workplace disputes and grievances, managing absences, and creating an inclusive and accessible workplace in an MP’s office.⁷⁸ In relation to their staff, MPs get detailed guidance from the Members’ HR Advice Service in collaboration with IPSA regarding recording short- and long-term sickness, phased return to work and related accommodations, in line with the protections offered to employees considered disabled for the purposes of the Equality Act 2010. They are also advised how to enable their employees to carry out their roles by allowing flexible working and/or other reasonable adjustments for persons under one of the nine

⁷⁰ Collignon, S. and Rüdiger, W. 2020. Harassment and intimidation of parliamentary candidates in the United Kingdom. *The Political Quarterly*, 91(2), 422-429.

⁷¹ Interview 29 on 23 January 2023

⁷² Interview 42 on 22-23 May 2023

⁷³ Interview 43 on 18 August 2023

⁷⁴ Modernisation of the House of Commons Committee. 2007. *Modernisation of the House of Commons – First Report*, 20 June 2007.

⁷⁵ ParliNet. N.d. *Getting Started*, <https://parlinet.parliament.uk/working-here/members-hr-advice-service/members-hr-getting-started/> (accessed on 07 August 2024).

⁷⁶ House of Commons. 2023. *Speaker’s Conference on the employment conditions of Members’ staff*, 20 July 2023, HC 1714 2022-23.

⁷⁷ Interview 43 on 18 August 2023. Based on an IPSA policy review on the funding of MPs’ staff, in 2020, 75% of MPs employed between three and five full-time-equivalent (FTE) staff, and all 650 MPs employed at least one staff (McKee, R. 2024. *What support are MPs given to do their jobs?*. Institute for Government <https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/explainer/support-mps-jobs> (accessed on 15 August 2024)).

⁷⁸ ParliNet. N.d. Guides and handbooks search, <https://parlinet.parliament.uk/search/?sortby=relevance&query=best%20practice%20guide> (accessed on 07 August 2024).

protected characteristics (including disability) enshrined in the Equality Act 2010. These needs can be assessed with the help of a Workplace Adjustments Manager⁷⁹ and funded using the Access to Work programme⁸⁰ and IPSA’s disability access fund.⁸¹ There are also two specific guides that reflect on the workplace challenges disabled people face, and offer specific guidance for disabled staff and managers,⁸² including MPs – with specific advice on chronic conditions, deafness and hearing loss, and autism. In a wider sense, disability awareness guidance to MPs and their staff gives specific, practical recommendations on how to communicate effectively and respectfully, and to include disabled persons into meetings and events (this applies to constituents, as well as employees).⁸³ These guides work alongside e-learning resources and training scenarios that aim to help MPs understand disability and manage their disabled employees in a mindful, respectful and effective manner.⁸⁴

Despite the extensive list of in-depth and varied resources on disability, two things stand out. Firstly, considering the intense workload of Members (discussed above), it is not entirely clear how extensively and consistently these resources are used, and whether MPs’ motivation to understand the needs of disabled staff and develop an inclusive working environment gives way to more immediate demands from their constituents, political parties, and other stakeholders. As these guides are written for Members or their HR proxies, it is possible that the HR proxies are a more realistic audience. HR proxies – often the Members’ office managers – are different from their pay/expenses proxies who work with IPSA.⁸⁵ Secondly, while understanding of disability and reasonable adjustments is transferable knowledge, and Members should be able to apply it beyond their staff to fellow Members in the context of parliamentary work, the focus of these guidelines is predominantly on MPs’ staff rather than other Members, and this bears significant consequences for shaping the expectations of Members with regards to reasonable adjustments that could be and should be available for MPs. This affects the working environment of the House, making Members less likely to come forward and request adjustments they may need to facilitate them doing their jobs. This, in turn, feeds into the overall culture of perseverance against all odds and presents gaps in accessibility provision as elements of institutional tradition to be lauded rather than redressed.⁸⁶

This is particularly obvious in the context of the second group of tasks that Members undertake as part of their job: parliamentary work, including in the Chamber, Committees, and other related structures (for example, All-Party Parliamentary Groups). Compared to constituency work, this takes less time based on the 2005-06

⁷⁹ ParliNet. N.d. *Meet the Team. Parliamentary Health and Wellbeing Service*, <https://parlinet.parliament.uk/working-here/health-safety-wellbeing/phws/phws-meet-the-team/> (accessed on 07 August 2024).

⁸⁰ HM Government. N.d. *Access to Work: get support if you have a disability or health condition*, <https://www.gov.uk/access-to-work> (accessed on 07 August 2024).

⁸¹ IPSA. N.d. *Rules & eligibility: Help for disabled people*, <https://www.ipsonline.org.uk/guidance/rules-and-eligibility#help-for-disabled-people> (accessed on 07 August 2024).

⁸² ParliNet. N.d. *Guidance for disabled staff and managers*, <https://parlinet.parliament.uk/working-here/culture-values/inclusion-diversity/house-of-commons/information-and-guidance/guidance-for-disabled-people-and-managers/> (accessed on 07 August 2024).

⁸³ ParliNet. N.d. *Disability awareness: information for MPs and their staff*, <https://parlinet.parliament.uk/working-here/culture-values/inclusion-diversity/house-of-commons/information-and-guidance/information-for-mps-and-mps-staff/> (accessed on 07 August 2024).

⁸⁴ ParliNet. N.d. *Disability e-learning and videos*, <https://parlinet.parliament.uk/working-here/culture-values/inclusion-diversity/house-of-commons/information-and-guidance/disability-e-learning-and-videos/> (accessed on 07 August 2024).

⁸⁵ Interview 43 on 18 August 2023

⁸⁶ Interview 13 on 22 April 2023

and 2010-11 surveys of MPs – 28% and 35%, respectively.⁸⁷ This amounts to 24 hours per week per MP in the 2010-12 session on average, in line with the House of Commons business schedule – with 10 hours of travel per week on average in addition to it.⁸⁸ These activities are more visible to the public and often hold greater esteem, as is obvious from the attention allotted to them in the Select Committee on Modernisation of the House of Commons - First Report, 2007,⁸⁹ and the structure of the House services that are dedicated to support Members almost exclusively in their work while on the parliamentary estate.

This includes procedural (for example, Centre of Excellence for Procedural Practice, Chamber and Participation Team, Select Committee Team), digital (for example, Parliamentary Digital Service, Parliamentary Broadcasting Unit) and information (for example, Communications Office, House of Commons Library, including for constituency information) services, facilities for Members (for example, Members’ Services, Health and Wellbeing Service) support and guidelines in relation to rules and policies applicable to MPs and their staff (for example, Code of Conduct and Behaviour Code for Members of Parliament, Independent Complaints and Grievance Scheme). In addition to individual health and wellbeing support, these services support and enable MPs to represent their constituents and support their parliamentary parties, as well as campaign for certain causes in the House of Commons, to scrutinise and hold the Government to account, to initiate, review and amend legislation, and to contribute to the development of public policy. While all Members undertake these tasks, depending on their legislative role and preferences, they can choose to prioritise some of them. For example, given the constraints of a ministerial role, backbenchers have more opportunities to engage in Committee work,⁹⁰ as well as to table Private Members’ Bills and Early Day Motions⁹¹ and to engage in other scrutiny-related activities that amount to ‘making trouble’ in the eyes of a Whip.⁹² Opposition MPs are also particularly likely to table Parliamentary Questions to challenge and seek information from the Government and scrutinise the Government’s policies and their outcomes.⁹³

It is all but impossible to adopt a ‘one size fits all’ approach when it comes to facilitating working lives of disabled Members, as one can hardly identify what a ‘typical’ Member looks like and does. And yet it is possible to develop a holistic, systematic approach to providing such services based on examples of good international practices and academic research.

⁸⁷ Rosenblatt, G. 2006. *A Year in the Life: From Member of Public to Member of Parliament*. Hansard Society, <https://www.hansardsociety.org.uk/blogs/publications/archive/2007/10/17/A-Year-in-the-Life.aspx> (accessed on 06 August 2024); Korris, M. 2011. *A Year in the Life: From Member of Public to Member of Parliament*. Hansard Society, 6 <https://www.hansardsociety.org.uk/publications/briefings/a-year-in-the-life-from-member-of-public-to-member-of-parliament-report> (accessed on 06 August 2024).

⁸⁸ Korris, M. 2011. *A Year in the Life: From Member of Public to Member of Parliament*. Hansard Society, 5-6 <https://www.hansardsociety.org.uk/publications/briefings/a-year-in-the-life-from-member-of-public-to-member-of-parliament-report> (accessed on 06 August 2024).

⁸⁹ Modernisation of the House of Commons Committee. 2007. *Modernisation of the House of Commons – First Report*, 20 June 2007.

⁹⁰ Crewe, E. 2015. *The House of Commons: An anthropology of MPs at work*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 157-159

⁹¹ Kolpinskaya, E. 2016. Does religion count for religious parliamentary representation? Evidence from Early Day Motions. *The Journal of legislative studies*, 22(1), 129-152.

⁹² cited in Crewe, E. 2015. *The House of Commons: An anthropology of MPs at work*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 151

⁹³ Kolpinskaya, E. 2017. Substantive religious representation in the UK parliament: Examining parliamentary questions for written answers, 1997–2012. *Parliamentary Affairs*, 70(1), 111-131.

SECTION 2. PARLIAMENT AND DISABILITY SUPPORT – STATE OF PLAY

There is much academic and policy research on how to make parliaments more sensitive and responsive to the needs of disabled parliamentarians (for example, from the Inter-Parliamentary Union⁹⁴, the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (CPA)⁹⁵, and the United Nations' Zero Project Conference⁹⁶). All international networks and organisations that aim to improve institutional accessibility for, and the work experiences of, disabled parliamentarians operate within the framework of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), which the UK signed on 30 March 2007 and ratified on 8 June 2009. Article 29 states that:

'States Parties shall guarantee to persons with disabilities political rights and the opportunity to enjoy them on an equal basis with others, and shall undertake:

a) To ensure that persons with disabilities can effectively and fully participate in political and public life on an equal basis with others, directly or through freely chosen representatives, including the right and opportunity for persons with disabilities to vote and be elected...

b) To promote actively an environment in which persons with disabilities can effectively and fully participate in the conduct of public affairs, without discrimination and on an equal basis with others, and encourage their participation in public affairs...'.⁹⁷

Reflecting on what these commitments mean for legislatures in practice, the Inter-Parliamentary Union produced a handbook for parliamentarians in collaboration with the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights in 2007.⁹⁸ It summarised and reflected on the general approach to legislation and national practices with regards to disability inclusion and reasonable adjustments as a cornerstone of legislation, including with regards to elected institutions (even if they have legal exemptions).

Advancing this work, the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association sought to address disability-driven inequalities within legislatures specifically by establishing the CPA's network of Commonwealth Parliamentarians with Disabilities (CPwD) after the inaugural conference in Nova Scotia in 2017.⁹⁹ It has also produced several toolkits and examples of best practice aiming to increase the presence of parliamentarians with disabilities (including in leadership positions), and develop a more inclusive parliamentary culture,

⁹⁴ Inter-Parliamentary Union. 2007. *Handbook for Parliamentarians on the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities*, <https://www.ipu.org/resources/publications/handbooks/2016-07/handbook-parliamentarians-convention-rights-persons-with-disabilities> (accessed on 07 August 2024).

⁹⁵ Commonwealth Parliamentary Association. N.d. *Commonwealth Parliamentarians with Disabilities (CPwD)*, <https://www.cpahq.org/our-networks/commonwealth-parliamentarians-with-disabilities/> (accessed on 07 August 2024).

⁹⁶ Zero Project. 2023. *The Zero Project Conference 2023*, <https://zeroproject.org/conferences/zerocon23> (accessed on 07 August 2024).

⁹⁷ United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs. 2016. *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD)*.

⁹⁸ Inter-Parliamentary Union. 2007. *Handbook for Parliamentarians on the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities*, <https://www.ipu.org/resources/publications/handbooks/2016-07/handbook-parliamentarians-convention-rights-persons-with-disabilities> (accessed on 07 August 2024).

⁹⁹ Commonwealth Parliamentary Association. N.d. *Commonwealth Parliamentarians with Disabilities (CPwD)*, <https://www.cpahq.org/our-networks/commonwealth-parliamentarians-with-disabilities/> (accessed on 07 August 2024).

including by improving the accessibility of parliamentary buildings and proceedings.¹⁰⁰ Alongside physical accessibility concerns (including restroom facilities and toilets), they pay much attention to the accessibility of information and ability to fully participate in deliberation and debates by presenting information in accessible, multimedia formats capable of supporting written, audio, plain-language, human reader and augmentative and alternative modes and means of communication.¹⁰¹ This includes, for example, use of text in large print, braille, digital copies for print information; accessible HTML text and screen readers for online text; closed captions (and transcripts), sign language interpretation and audio descriptions for spoken word, video/audio information.

While these recommendations may seem generic, there is much variation in terms of the technical solutions available considering the increase in the levels of technological sophistication and institutional capacity for improving institutional accessibility, as evidenced by solutions showcased at the UN's Zero Project Conference in Vienna in February 2023, for example.¹⁰² Some of them offer tools for understanding the needs of disabled parliamentarians. These can be based on perfecting algorithms for data linkage within institutions to address the specific needs of disabled persons within their respective work environments, and making surveys and questionnaires less structured to enable greater variation and reflexivity in responses.¹⁰³ Others offer practical solutions to improving captioning and subtitles that are based on speech recognition, with outputs presented in different formats to improve their accessibility for persons with different disability requirements.¹⁰⁴

In addition to addressing accessibility-related adjustments, the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association and the CPwD have also developed a toolkit aiming to address mental health issues among parliamentarians and parliamentary staff.¹⁰⁵ It identifies parliament-specific stressors and risk factors, such as high expectations and workloads, intense scrutiny, pressures of constantly being in the public eye, competitive political environments and the frequently adversarial political culture and interactions, including harassment and abuse from the public, in addition to adverse effects from commuting and being away from family for part of the week. The solutions offered are based on effective communication and screening, as well as offering a comprehensive range of support services, including one-to-one counselling and access to external services. Importantly, they also highlight the importance of awareness campaigns to counter stigma and misconceptions around mental health, and of peer support networks, including the training and appointment of mental health champions among Parliamentarians and parliamentary support staff. While there is a lack of empirical research in this area, there is a growing literature that highlights the importance of addressing mental health in the context of the UK Parliament (especially the House of Commons) with research by

¹⁰⁰ Commonwealth Parliamentary Association. 2023. *CPwD Strategic Plan 2021-2024*, 11, https://www.cpahq.org/media/mhzd5n1a/cpwd_strategicplan_2021-2024_final.pdf (accessed on 07 August 2024).

¹⁰¹ Commonwealth Parliamentary Association. 2020. *Disability Inclusive Communication Guidelines for Parliaments*, 8, https://www.cpahq.org/media/u2rgizem/disability_communication_guidelines_facilities-1.pdf (accessed on 07 August 2024).

¹⁰² Zero Project. 2023. *The Zero Project Conference 2023*, <https://zeroproject.org/conferences/zerocon23> (accessed on 07 August 2024).

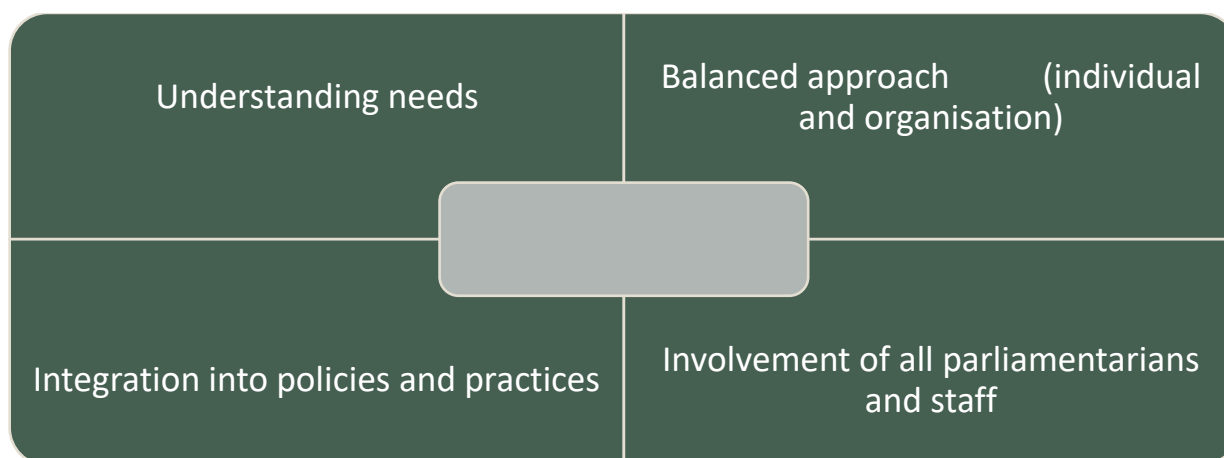
¹⁰³ Zero Project. 2023. *ZeroCon23: Using Data to Create Change*, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=te4627zk4kE&list=PL5B37BDmdNW_fZnacZ5I1XEEpYj6wKtRE&index=11 (accessed on 07 August 2024).

¹⁰⁴ Zero Project. 2023. *ZeroCon23 Fireside chat: Why Human Intelligence Is Needed in Media Accessibility*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=59M7akkVQyU> (accessed on 07 August 2024).

¹⁰⁵ Commonwealth Parliamentary Association. 2022. *Mental Health Toolkit for Commonwealth Parliamentarians*, https://www.cpahq.org/media/cczlingr/mentalhealth_toolkit_final_web.pdf (accessed on 07 August 2024).

Matthew Flinders et al.¹⁰⁶ and Ashey Weinberg indicating that, for Members, ‘experience or threat of harassment, stalking or violence may lead to profound psychological effects, including post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, fear, anxiety, and avoidant behaviour which may include altered social engagements and intensified security precautions’.¹⁰⁷ Four out of five MPs reported experiencing abusive or intrusive behaviours in 2015.¹⁰⁸

The wide scope and the intersecting nature of disability-related adjustments that span across issues of physical and mental health, technical capacity and communication is further complicated by the unique context of a legislature, as a closed-up institution with deep-seated rituals and culture. Addressing these complexities while maintaining effective communication and trust within the institution requires a holistic and a more systematic approach enabled by a comprehensive service provision, supplemented by informal networks and community buy-in. These elements of effective support (originally designed for mental health support) are reflected in these best practice principles:



Source: Adapted from CPA’s Mental Health Toolkit 2022, p. 17¹⁰⁹

Importantly, previous policy and academic research – as well as proposed solutions – are necessarily focused on addressing accessibility-related concerns and grievances, while paying less attention to institution-specific trade-offs and competing priorities. These considerations, however, often explain why systematic approaches to disability inclusion struggle in such institutional contexts as the UK Parliament. While there is an institution-wide provision of services supported by overarching principles and practices, the approach for accessibility adjustments for disabled parliamentarians taken by the House of Commons is oriented for designing individual solutions on request rather than addressing disability-related adjustments systematically. This accounts for greater variation in such practices in Member-specific contexts (for example, in debating Chambers and, to a

¹⁰⁶ Flinders, M., Weinberg, A., Weinberg, J., Geddes, M. and Kwiatkowski, R. 2020. Governing under pressure? The mental wellbeing of politicians. *Parliamentary Affairs*, 73(2), 253-273.

¹⁰⁷ Weinberg, A., 2015. A longitudinal study of the impact of changes in the job and the expenses scandal on UK national politicians' experiences of work, stress and the home–work interface. *Parliamentary Affairs*, 68(2), 248-271.

¹⁰⁸ James, D. V., Farnham, F. R., Sukhwai, S., Jones, K., Carlisle, J., & Henley, S. 2016. Aggressive/intrusive behaviours, harassment and stalking of members of the United Kingdom parliament: a prevalence study and cross-national comparison. *The Journal of Forensic Psychiatry & Psychology*, 27(2), 177–197.

¹⁰⁹ Commonwealth Parliamentary Association. 2022. *Mental Health Toolkit for Commonwealth Parliamentarians*, https://www.cpahq.org/media/cczlingr/mentalhealth_toolkit_final_web.pdf (accessed on 07 August 2024).

lesser extent, in Committees, and within parliamentary parties) – in other words, in the contexts that are more ritualised and less transparent, and that may be harder to reform because of a need for cross-party consensus and a significant amount of political will, considerations of costs (for example, funding, staffing, parliamentary time) and public image. That said, there is much that the House of Commons and the UK Parliament can build on; with the examples of good practice discussed in sections 2.1 and 2.2, with the former focusing on service provision, and the latter on accessibility adjustments in the debating Chambers and Committees.

2.1. Good practices for accessibility and disability inclusion in the House of Commons

2.1.1. The House, Parliament, and external disability support services

The primary and most important example of good practice with regards to improving accessibility and disability inclusion is the existence of (continuously improving) unicameral and bicameral services. They assess and address existing needs and are examples of a structured and systematic institutional support system that involves parliamentarians from both Houses, the House staff, as well as employees of Parliament-wide services such as the Parliamentary Digital Service (PDS) and the Parliamentary Broadcasting Unit (PBU).

While services are available to MPs, peers, the House and parliamentary staff, and Members' staff alike, the way they work for Members is different from other passholder groups for several reasons.¹¹⁰ Firstly, this is because of the legal status of Members as employers of their staff but not employees of the House, making them distinct from House staff and their own staff, as Members are not covered by the Equality Act 2010¹¹¹. Secondly, because of their constitutional status as elected representatives, while House or IPSA services have scope to offer advice, they can only use persuasion to influence the behaviour or activities of MPs; ultimately, nobody can compel Members.¹¹² Finally, differently from peers, Members are eligible for salaries, pensions, and allowances (such as the staff office allowance provided by IPSA). Being elected by and accountable to their constituents (and to a lesser extent, to their parties) also makes them significantly more visible, which may make them both less likely to disclose their disabilities¹¹³ and be treated harshly if they do.¹¹⁴

When looking at the scope of services, the following clusters can be identified:

- Services that are responsible for the daily running of the parliamentary estate, including security, catering, cleaning and maintenance, retail, as well as facilities for worship and childcare. All of them enable passholders (including those with disabilities) to sustain long and irregular work hours without leaving the estate by catering to their needs, including dietary requirements and physical access. That

¹¹⁰ Interview 7 on 24 May 2023

¹¹¹ Interview 35 on 11 August 2023

¹¹² Interview 43 on 18 August 2023; Interview 33 on 08 June 2023; Interview 27 on 15 December 2022; Interview 6 on 18 April 2023

¹¹³ Interview 7 on 24 May 2023

¹¹⁴ Collignon, S. and Rüdiger, W. 2020. Harassment and intimidation of parliamentary candidates in the United Kingdom. *The Political Quarterly*, 91(2), 422-429.

said, owing to the long working hours of parliamentarians and staff that leave little flexibility for daily tasks, it would be helpful to add such services as a grocery/convenience store on the estate;¹¹⁵

- Members' Services that offer advice and support for Members specifically, such as HR and staff management advice, information governance, procedural, health, and wellbeing services. The latter include a nurse clinic, an in-house counsellor, on-site GP, occupational health support and workplace assessment, Individual Assistance and Employees Assistance Programmes, and additional facilities such as the Westminster Gym, the Civil Service Sports Council membership, and the Wellbeing programme;¹¹⁶
- Members' procedural services and support include Chamber services, and the Centre of Excellence for Procedural Practice that – alongside the MPs' Guide to Procedure¹¹⁷ – support daily work on parliamentary business, including (with support from clerks) in Committees. This includes offering advice on the norms and etiquette of the House, voting, 'how to' guides on tabling amendments, parliamentary questions, Early Day Motions and Private Members' Bills, making a statement, contributing to debates and other aspects of parliamentary work in line with both the needs of individual Members and the procedure and etiquette of the House.
- Services that provide support for visitors to the Palace of Westminster as a heritage site, as well as coordinate and deliver the Education Centre and other outreach and training activities. This service also contributes to identifying and resolving issues around access requirements for disabled persons in the context of a protected building;
- Services that provide digital, information-related and research assistance, including Parliamentary Digital Service, the House of Commons Library, the National Audit Office, and the Parliamentary Office for Science and Technology. They also link to the Parliamentary Broadcasting Unit and the Communication Office that support internal and external communications for parliamentarians and their staff, with the former also providing technical solutions for remote participation of Members and public-facing adjustments such as closed captioning and British Sign Language translation.

These services embrace the social model of disability and focus on mitigating and adjusting disabling factors and practices within the institution.¹¹⁸ Despite various challenges to make them work effectively (to be discussed further), there is a broad consensus within Parliament and between political parties regarding the importance of taking care of the health and wellbeing of Members and of supporting them, including by providing reasonable adjustments.¹¹⁹ With an emphasis on individual rather than a 'one-size-fits-all' approach, there are differences in what form such adjustments may take and how far they go.

Recently, much effort has been made to consolidate support available through PDS and House services,¹²⁰ with focus on Members' Services (including Health and Wellbeing, especially with regards to mental health support), in the context of the Speaker's Conference on the employment conditions of MPs' staff and attempts to increase the presence of disabled people among the House staff.¹²¹ This is an uphill struggle considering the

¹¹⁵ Interview 2 on 09 February 2023

¹¹⁶ Interview 31 on 10 January 2023; Interview 20 on 03 February 2023; Interview 42 on 22-23 May 2023

¹¹⁷ UK Parliament. 2024. *MPs' Guide to Procedure*, <https://guidetoprocedure.parliament.uk/mps-guide-to-procedure> (accessed on 07 August 2024).

¹¹⁸ Interview 40 on 13 April 2023

¹¹⁹ Interview 21 on 31 March 2023

¹²⁰ Interview 20 on 03 February 2023; Interview 40 on 13 April 2023; Interview 32 on 11 April 2023

¹²¹ Interview 31 on 10 January 2023; Interview 19 on 16 March 2023

competing considerations (for example, institutional rules and rituals, the heritage status of the building, partisan concerns) and the evolutionary way in which these services have developed over a long period of time.¹²² However, a greater level of consolidation is needed both to make it easier for disabled Members (and other passholders) to access and triangulate different forms of support (especially when needs are complex),¹²³ and to develop customised (for example, digital) solutions that are both most suitable for a particular type of disability based on conversations with the Workplace Reasonable Adjustments Manager and compliant with security and data protection protocols, which requires different teams to communicate with each other.¹²⁴

Digital solutions have been a focus of attention, with the recent changes to the intranet, ParliNet, and ongoing work on other information services and online resources aiming to make digital spaces and parliamentary information more accessible, including for disabled Members and staff. This includes:

- (1) assessing the needs and acting on user research and input from users across Parliament,¹²⁵
- (2) offering training and guidance, including on how to adapt one's phone, computer or tablet to meet specific needs (for example making text larger) or filter the guides based on symptoms (for example hand tremor) or condition (for example dyslexia),¹²⁶ and
- (3) making online content accessible and adaptable to a wide range of needs in line with the Public Sector Bodies (Websites and Mobile Applications) (No. 2) Accessibility Regulations 2018¹²⁷.

This includes options to adjust how information appears on the screen (for example, change colours, contrast levels and fonts, and zoom in up to 300% without the text spilling off the screen) and to navigate websites using alternative means (for example, a keyboard and voice recognition software), thus, enabling access to this information for visually impaired persons, staff and parliamentarians with arthritis and other conditions that affect ability to use a touchpad, for example. As this work is ongoing, parliamentary web-resources are currently partially compliant with the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines,¹²⁸ with some content (for example, pre-2018, less used and extensive such as committee written evidence submissions from the public) remaining less accessible at this time.¹²⁹

The House services, and to a lesser extent IPSA, also engage with partisan and less formal networks, including political parties and ParliAble, one of the Workplace Equality Networks (WENs),¹³⁰ to facilitate the work of disabled Members and improve their work environment. In line with the best practice principles of involving all Members and staff and understanding the needs of disabled persons, ParliAble is a bicameral, impartial

¹²² Interview 40 on 13 April 2023; Interview 31 on 10 January 2023a; Interview 24 on 04 April 2023; Interview 19 on 16 March 2023

¹²³ Interview 30 on 12 December 2022; Interview 20 on 03 February 2023; Interview 14 on 24 April 2023

¹²⁴ Interview 23 on 09 May 2023

¹²⁵ Importantly, while all users can feed into such consultations, there is also a dedicated network of accessibility champions within PDS that raise accessibility-related concerns and can pre-test software solutions such as accessibility features within the Microsoft suite (Interview 23 on 09 May 2023).

¹²⁶ AbilityNet. N.d. 'How to' guides to make your device easier to use, <https://mcmw.abilitynet.org.uk/> (accessed on 07 August 2024).

¹²⁷ UK Parliament. 2018. *Public Sector Bodies (Websites and Mobile Applications) (No. 2) Accessibility Regulations 2018*, SI 852.

¹²⁸ W3C Web Accessibility Initiative. N.d. *Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) 2 Overview*, <https://www.w3.org/WAI/standards-guidelines/wcag/> (accessed on 07 August 2024).

¹²⁹ UK Parliament. 2024. *Accessibility statement*, <https://www.parliament.uk/site-information/accessibility/> (accessed on 07 August 2024).

¹³⁰ ParliNet. N.d. *Workplace Equality Networks*, <https://parlinet.parliament.uk/working-here/workplace-equality-networks/workplace-equality-networks/> (accessed on 07 August 2024).

network that acts as a critical friend (for example, for the House of Commons Inclusion and Diversity and the House of Lords Diversity and Inclusion teams) and advises on disability-related initiatives (such as inclusion analysis). It is run as a community offering advice and support, and a forum for disabled people working in Parliament, including signposting disabled passholders to relevant services and assisting with requests for disability-related adjustments.¹³¹

2.1.2. Flexibility and multi-agency assessment of Members' needs

The second example of good practice in providing disability and accessibility support to Members is a multi-agency approach to assessing their needs. This approach gives Members a greater choice about whom to use as an initial point of contact for discussing their accessibility – it can be their buddy, their whip, Members' Services and/or IPSA.

This is important as Members value their anonymity and may not necessarily be keen on approaching the House services or their political parties if there is a chance that this information may become public. They feel the public do not necessarily have a positive view of disability, especially when it comes to the people who lead their communities.¹³² However, there is also a sense of the House starting to 'open up' to issues around disability and Members (especially in safer seats, or those who plan to stand down) starting to talk publicly about their mental health, neurodivergence, life-changing illnesses, and their personal experiences more broadly (for example, former Conservative MP, Sir Charles Walker¹³³; former SNP MP, Amy Callaghan¹³⁴; Emma Lewell-Buck MP¹³⁵; Olivia Blake MP¹³⁶).¹³⁷ A sense that accessibility and disability inclusion are gradually becoming part of the parliamentary fabric is aided by the increasing range of technological and software solutions. They have also become a lot more integrated with other software (for example, immersive reader for the Microsoft suite, transcription and parliamentary TV coverage in real time that allows lip-reading).¹³⁸ Such software is more routinely used by all Members making accessible software solutions a new institutional norm.

The flexibility of a multi-agency approach is aided by flexibility in the timing of the assessment of Members' accessibility needs. Such assessments can be done by different agencies – political parties and the House leadership, Members' Services (including buddies, the Workplace Adjustments Manager), IPSA and by such informal channels as the ParliAble network – and at different points during their parliamentary tenure, starting from induction.¹³⁹

¹³¹ Interview 17 on 09 January 2023

¹³² Interview 7 on 24 May 2023

¹³³ *HC Debate*, 14 June 2012, vol. 546, cc. 517-518.

¹³⁴ *HC Debate*, 12 October 2022, vol. 720, cc. 215-216.

¹³⁵ *HC Debate*, 4 December 2018, vol. 650, cc. 314WH-316WH.

¹³⁶ *HC Debate*, 5 November 2020, vol. 683, col. 214WH-215WH.

¹³⁷ Interview 5 on 03 July 2023; Interview 24 on 04 April 2023; Interview 19 on 16 March 2023

¹³⁸ Interview 24 on 04 April 2023; Interview 23 on 09 May 2023

¹³⁹ Interview 33 on 08 June 2023; Interview 21 on 31 March 2023

Once election results are announced, each winner receives a letter from the Clerk of the House of Commons welcoming them to Westminster and a booklet with essential information for their first few days, including a letter from IPSA outlining their duties and responsibilities and guidance with regards to allowances and finance. Upon arrival on the estate, newly elected Members get their security passes and equipment and meet with IPSA and Members' HR to help them set up and begin office recruitment. Each Member is assigned a buddy who facilitates their introduction to the new role and the induction process and helps them navigate the first visit to the estate and first days in office.¹⁴⁰ This includes buddies (known previously as access buddies) who are trained to be more familiar with workplace adjustments.¹⁴¹ Induction materials explicitly mention reasonable adjustments and provisions for disabled Members to make it easier to start this conversation. This is further explored in the first follow up call with newly elected Member's (often with their whip or campaign manager) the day after the election when they are invited to come to the estate (where they meet their buddy) and their initial accessibility needs are discussed. For by-elections, the pre-arrival first contact call already includes a buddy.¹⁴²

The main function of buddies is to smoothen a way into parliamentary life for a new Member by offering advice, guidance, and encouragement in the early days. They occasionally remain in contact with their Members during their first months in office (and even longer than that). Both buddies and political parties (for example, election managers) encourage newly elected Members with specific needs relating to visible and less visible disabilities to discuss these needs with the House staff, so that reasonable adjustments can be made for them on the estate, including signposting them to the contact centre that triangulates different avenues in which support is required.¹⁴³ This includes primarily technical solutions and specialised software sourced by the Parliamentary Digital Service, recruitment of relevant staff supported by the Members' HR Advice, and procedural support. Buddies can also signpost Members to specific support provided by Members' Services and the Health and Wellbeing Services, including a Workplace Adjustments Manager.¹⁴⁴

The role of the Workplace Adjustments Manager is relatively new. It is meant to fill the gaps for multiple needs and support Members in getting workplace adjustments both during induction and at any point thereafter. It became bicameral in January 2024, and covers PDS, both Houses of Parliament (and their members), and parliamentarians' staff. Members of the House of Commons have been the hardest group to reach so far. The Members HR Advice team and Members' Services refer MPs to the Workplace Adjustments Manager periodically and make this service visible during induction and in regular communications, including with political parties.¹⁴⁵

Assessment of a Member's needs for work away from the parliamentary estate (for example, in the constituency) is also done by IPSA. Members use IPSA to request equipment and software for their constituency staff, including for disabled employees (for example, adjustable desks, specialist chairs) and their own work off the estate. In recent times, there have been more requests for support relating to mental health issues and neurodivergence. IPSA also offers funding for accessible accommodation, care, and assistance, if

¹⁴⁰ Interview 30 on 12 December 2022; Interview 19 on 16 March 2023.

¹⁴¹ Interview 39 on 25 January 2023

¹⁴² Interview 20 on 03 February 2023

¹⁴³ Interview 18 on 17 July 2023

¹⁴⁴ Interview 31 on 10 January 2023

¹⁴⁵ Interview 39 on 25 January 2023

necessary. Such requests are made to IPSA regional officers, with much of the recent work going into increasing awareness of IPSA and its funding among Members and their staff.¹⁴⁶

There is also a way for triangulating assessment and support plans made by IPSA and the House services. While IPSA are external to and independent from Parliament and the House services, the Data Sharing Agreement (DSA) with IPSA¹⁴⁷ enables coordination of support for Members (without sharing disability data),¹⁴⁸ though gaps in support made in a constituency (the IPSA domain) and on parliamentary estate (by the House services) remain.¹⁴⁹ The latter is a challenge that is discussed in section 3.1.2 of this report.

The House Services and IPSA are only one side of the process of identifying and making administrative reasonable adjustments, with political parties being equally if not more important in this process. This applies in several areas, especially in the role of political parties (via whips) in securing appropriate accommodation on the parliamentary estate and in getting pastoral support and guidance on managing the political aspect of their role. Differently from other agencies, this applies to both Prospective Parliamentary Candidates (that is, pre-election) and to elected Members.¹⁵⁰ For political parties, engagement with disabled politicians begins well before their election to the House of Commons. This entails financial and mentoring support, leadership training, as well as practical support such as getting around a constituency.¹⁵¹ Through earlier exposure to and greater familiarity with candidates, political parties have an opportunity to get an idea as to the needs of their newly elected Members before the House services and IPSA through observing them and campaigning alongside them during an election.¹⁵²

This resonates with a range of pastoral and community functions that party whips (and political parties at large) perform, though parliamentary party management and ensuring party cohesion in voting are their main priorities.¹⁵³ This reflects the changing nature of the role – while retaining its core functions of ensuring attendance in the debating Chambers, following agreed messages and lines, supporting your own party and opposing the others, including during voting – which leads to whips resembling ‘HR managers’, except when working against their opponents,¹⁵⁴ which is particularly true for smaller parties.¹⁵⁵ The extent to which whips engage into pastoral support varies greatly between political parties (depending on their size and how flocks are distributed) and within them (depending on the culture of the office and the priorities of the Chief Whip). For example, before the 2024 general election, Liberal Democrats only had one whip (though they assign buddies from among existing Members representing the nearest constituencies), while the Labour Party and the SNP divided their Members based on the location of their constituencies. While in Government, the Conservative Party had a more complex system of allocating whips. In addition to accounting for the location

¹⁴⁶ Interview 32 on 11 April 2023

¹⁴⁷ ParliNet. N.d. *Data Sharing Agreements*, <https://parlinet.parliament.uk/information-resources/data-protection-freedom-of-information-and-information-security/data-protection/data-protection-for-commons-staff/data-sharing-agreements/> (accessed on 07 August 2024).

¹⁴⁸ Interview 33 on 08 June 2023. Disability-related and other sensitive, individual-level data is exempt from the Freedom of Information (FOI) requests. Also, Members see an advance copy of the information that will be shared in response to such a request, so that they are not blindsided by some information appearing publicly (Interview 32 on 11 April 2023).

¹⁴⁹ Interview 14 on 24 April 2023; Interview 7 on 24 May 2023

¹⁵⁰ Interview 40 on 13 April 2023; Interview 1 on 13 July 2023

¹⁵¹ Interview 5 on 03 July 2023

¹⁵² Interview 10 on 16 August 2023

¹⁵³ Interview 19 on 16 March 2023; Interview 7 on 24 May 2023

¹⁵⁴ Crewe, E. 2015. *The House of Commons: An anthropology of MPs at work*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 138.

¹⁵⁵ Interview 10 on 16 August 2023

of constituency, Government whips were linked with specific Government departments, as well as reflected individual factors (for example, seniority, voting patterns of Members).¹⁵⁶

2.2. Accessibility practices in the debating Chambers and Committees

Assessing the working environment and level of accessibility of the debating Chambers (the Chamber and Westminster Hall), especially the former, are crucial for the overall perception of disability inclusion in the House of Commons. Of all parliamentary spaces, the debating Chambers are most visible to the public, constituents, and political parties. This is evident in the high levels of internal (including broadcasting) and external attention given to parliamentary behaviours and activities that occur on the floor of the House, including scrutiny of bills, oral questions (especially to the Prime Minister), urgent questions, contributions to debates, ministerial statements – and to a lesser extent, Private Members' Bills and adjournment debates. Parliamentary voting too comes under intense scrutiny from political practitioners, academics and the public. This attention concerns not only activities and their outcomes, but also the behaviours and rituals surrounding it,¹⁵⁷ whereby it does not only matter what questions are asked and answers are given at the Prime Minister's Questions, for example, but also how the parties and party leaders perform during this exercise. For disabled Members whose conditions affect mobility, stamina or communication, the debating Chambers can be an extremely challenging environment, where their need for reasonable adjustments is particularly acute. However, because of such high visibility, the cost of standing out and being seen as requiring special treatment, which may equate to 'not up for the job' in the discourse of one's opponents, is greatest and may affect their public image and chances of re-election.¹⁵⁸ This is despite several high-profile examples of former and current Members who disprove this assumption, yet concern among the party selectorate and, to a lesser extent, among voters remains.¹⁵⁹ This may also add to the reluctance in enacting sweeping changes within the context of the Chamber that is synonymous with tradition and ritual.

Political parties, the Speaker's Office, and the House leadership play major roles in identifying how to make procedural practices more disability-inclusive, as well as how to reconcile the individual needs of Members with wider institutional priorities. Based on the points that were most frequently raised in the interviews, physical accessibility of the Chamber and other parliamentary spaces for Members, assisting with reasonable adjustments to participation in the debating Chambers (for example, seating arrangements for Members with mobility constraints, catching the eye of a Speaker, available technical support) and Committees (for example, remote participation, accessible language of reports), as well as the etiquette (for example, use of online

¹⁵⁶ Interview 10 on 16 August 2023, Interview 13 on 24 April 2023; Interview 6 on 18 April 2023; Interview 7 on 24 May 2023

¹⁵⁷ Crewe, E. 2021. *The Anthropology of Parliaments: Entanglements in Democratic Politics*. London: Routledge; Crewe, E. 2021. Reluctant Anthropologists: Revealing but Rare Insights into Legislatures. *PoLAR: Political and Legal Anthropology Review*, Emergent Conversation 14, <https://polarjournal.org/2021/11/18/reluctant-anthropologists-revealing-but-rare-insights-into-legislatures/> (accessed on 06 August 2024); Geddes, M., Rhodes, R.A.W. 2018. Towards an Interpretive Parliamentary Studies. In J. Brichzin, D. Krichewsky, L. Ringel and J. Schank (eds) *Soziologie der Parlamente. Politische Soziologie* (pp 87–107). Springer VS, Wiesbaden.

¹⁵⁸ Interview 34 on 06 June 2023

¹⁵⁹ Evans, E. and Reher, S. 2022. Disability and political representation: Analysing the obstacles to elected office in the UK. *International Political Science Review*, 43(5), 697-712; Durose, C., Gains, F., Richardson, L., Combs, R., Broome, K. and Eason, C. 2011. *Pathways to politics*. Equality and Human Rights Commission Research Report 65. <https://archive.equalityhumanrights.com/sites/default/files/research-report-65-pathways-to-politics.pdf> (accessed on 06 August 2024).

devices) and dress code (for example, dispensing with ties for male MPs) practiced within the Chamber are the core areas of interest here.

2.2.1. Infrastructure and facilities of the Chambers

The first example of developing good practice with regards to disability inclusion are improvements to physical infrastructure and facilities of the debating Chambers.

Physical access to them has improved for Members who are wheelchair users (both in terms of being present in the Chamber and being able to contribute to debates from their seat as shown by the former MP, Anne Begg).¹⁶⁰ At the same time, access to restrooms has improved since the 1990s, with the addition of the ladies toilets (next to the gents) in both lobbies in 1997 and an accessible toilet in the Central Lobby. While these improvements do not cover the entire estate,¹⁶¹ with advice from a disability user group and relying on the disability audit¹⁶² the creation of new spaces and adaptation of most¹⁶³ existing spaces (for example, making doors easier to distinguish from walls, changing doorknobs) and environments is in the pipeline.¹⁶⁴

Secondly, developing and allowing assistive technology (including supporting devices such as tablets and phones), the introduction of hearing loops (including infrared loops), microphones and British Sign Language interpretation, and recent advancements to video recording and transcription made by the Parliamentary Broadcasting Unit, have made engaging with parliamentary business easier for Members with hearing and visual impairments, dyslexia and other visible and less visible conditions.¹⁶⁵ The latter is also facilitated by the communication team that works to present parliamentary documents in clear and good English, with accessibility checks using specialised software.¹⁶⁶ This includes a commitment by the Speaker to ensure that the Vote Office provides order papers and related materials in large print. While originally (according to the 2019 ruling) this was done by default, now it is done by request, but also accessible in other formats (for example, compatible with readers HTML formats).¹⁶⁷ The PBU's subtitling portal that provides close captions of ongoing debates and Minister's Questions, including PMQs, operates as a tool for Members, and is used by clerks too.¹⁶⁸ While most useful for Members with hearing impairments, it is generally useful to keep track of a multi-person, fast-paced conversation that cuts out background noise and mitigates the rowdiness of the Chamber during PMQs, for example. It is also useful as a campaigning tool, whereby Members and their staff can do screen grabs and create their own video clips of the House proceedings (with captions) for their websites and/or social media.¹⁶⁹

¹⁶⁰ Interview 7 on 24 May 2023

¹⁶¹ Interview 7 on 24 May 2023

¹⁶² Interview 19 on 16 March 2023

¹⁶³ Excludes such areas as the Elizabeth Tower that cannot be completely accessible (for example, for wheelchair users) (Interview 19 on 16 March 2023; Interview 21 on 31 March 2023)

¹⁶⁴ Interview 40 on 13 April 2023; Interview 19 on 16 March 2023; Interview 18 on 17 July 2023

¹⁶⁵ Interview 3 on 02 March 2023; Interview 34 on 06 June 2023

¹⁶⁶ Interview 24 on 04 April 2023

¹⁶⁷ Interview 24 on 04 April 2023; Interview 42 on 22-23 May 2023

¹⁶⁸ Interview 34 on 06 June 2023; Interview 18 on 17 July 2023

¹⁶⁹ Interview 34 on 06 June 2023

Overall, these adjustments are more administrative than procedural in nature,¹⁷⁰ and yet physical and digital access to the Chambers and their proceedings is dependent on accommodations being made. In other words, while technical and practical solutions are put forward by the House services, PDS and PBU, without the cooperation of the House (and of the Speaker and his Deputies) Members are unable to use them.

2.2.2. Procedural adjustments and courtesies and etiquette in the Chambers

Recently, there have been several procedural changes foster disability inclusion and make it easier for disabled Members to fully participate in the business of the House. This includes making the timetable more predictable (with some exceptions) and manageable in terms of the length of the sitting hours in the House and in Westminster Hall (Standing Orders No. 9-12). This also allows a greater capacity for planning around one's disability, such as arranging toilet breaks and short breaks during the sitting day.

While there has been a push for sitting hours to be shorter and closer to a regular work pattern, this is not a universal viewpoint among parliamentarians, especially those who commute long distances and would not necessarily benefit from this change. Such Members prefer extended working hours on the estate for those days that they spend away from family to reduce the need to work on the weekend. In such cases, reducing working hours on the estate would not result in more work-life balance, but rather more time spent on commute and less time spent working on weekends.¹⁷¹

Improving accessibility of voting too has led to the development of three practices: nodding through, pairing and proxy voting. All of them, in different ways, aim to enable Members to make their votes count when they physically cannot walk through lobbies. Nodding through is based on an informal agreement between whips to record voting of Members who are on the estate but are unable to come to the Chamber (for example, because of an illness or disability), as if they have walked through the lobby.¹⁷² Pairing – when two Members from opposite sides agree to be absent at the same time, so that the majority in a division is not affected – works on a similar informal basis and is overseen by whips. This practice is especially dependent on trust, as paired Members (and their whips) must trust that one of the Members does not break pairing on the day, as was the case when Brandon Lewis MP broke his pairing with Jo Swinson MP at Report Stage of the Trade Bill 2017-19 on 17 July 2018.¹⁷³ Differently from nodding through, if a Member who is paired comes onto the estate and votes, thus, breaking a pairing, while the other pair is away and cannot get to the lobby on time, there is no remedy. That said, pairing enables Members to retain their anonymity, as it is not necessarily made public (unless the Members wish to do so). This may resonate with some disabled Members who may avoid visible markers of disability, as noted earlier, and therefore, prefer to manage their needs via the practices of nodding through and pairing rather than proxy voting.

Proxy voting is a more formalised practice of making a Member's vote count while they are absent. It also offers an alternative to practices managed by whips, as a proxy is certified by the Speaker, with whips often acting as proxies for their Members. Originally, a proxy voting pilot under terms of a temporary Standing Order

¹⁷⁰ Interview 27 on 15 December 2022

¹⁷¹ Interview 2 on 09 February 2023

¹⁷² Interview 27 on 15 December 2022

¹⁷³ *HC Debate*, 13 September 2018, vol. 646, c. 922.

was introduced for Members absent 'by reason of childbirth or care of an infant or newly adopted child'.¹⁷⁴ It was made permanent¹⁷⁵ as Standing Order No. 29A on 23 September 2023.¹⁷⁶ Eligibility was further extended to cover complications relating to childbirth, miscarriage or baby loss following the debate on 12 October 2022, as part of a proxy voting pilot scheme, which included serious long-term illness or injury as criteria for eligibility.¹⁷⁷ In March 2023, the Procedure Committee's Third Report of the 2022-23 session reviewing the scheme (paragraph 7) recommended extending 'eligibility for a proxy vote to include serious long-term illness and injury on an ongoing basis',¹⁷⁸ but the Government has only agreed to extend this pilot until the end of the 2019-2024 Parliament.¹⁷⁹ Proxy voting for reasons of ill-health and injury (and potentially, disability) remains one of the focal points for debate of reasonable adjustments.¹⁸⁰ In particular, the Procedure Committee has concluded that flexibility should be urged in terms of the 'length of time for which the proxy voting arrangement should be used' (paragraph 15). They also recommend retaining the presumption of absence from the estate as a pre-requisite of having the proxy authorised by the Speaker, in line with the scheme's focus on 'serious' and 'long-term' illnesses (paragraph 10). If an illness, injury (or pre-existing disability) prevents the Member from voting in consecutive or late votes, but the Member works on the estate and is regularly present, then the practice of nodding through should be used instead (paragraph 11).¹⁸¹

Together these practices facilitate the working lives of Members whose medical needs are acute (for example, a stroke), and may necessitate them missing a vote. However, each practice has drawbacks and benefits, and none of them applies to disability (that is, a physical or mental health impairment that has a 'substantial' and 'long-term' negative effect on ability to do normal daily activities); they focus on redressing immediate health needs rather than the management of a lasting condition. Hence, physical voting is still the norm (Standing Order No. 39¹⁸²), and whips and Members like to engage and converse with each other in person, especially in the lobbies.¹⁸³ This is also evident in the expectation that should the proxy voting pilot scheme becomes permanent, it will become more restrictive, making sure that physical voting remains a norm, and have exclusion¹⁸⁴ as well as inclusion criteria.¹⁸⁵

Finally, as most reasonable adjustments for disabled Members are done on an ad-hoc basis and upon request, the range of adjustments available in practice is wide; wider than a limited range of options outlined in Erskine May, para 21.6.¹⁸⁶ For example, individual Members have been given permission not to bob and to contribute to the debate from their seat (or wheelchair), to bring a water bottle into the Chamber, to lay notes on a music

¹⁷⁴ UK Parliament. N.d. *Erskine May*, para 20.87.

¹⁷⁵ *HC Debate*, 23 September 2020, vol. 680, c. 1075.

¹⁷⁶ House of Commons. 2021. *Standing Order No. 39A*.

¹⁷⁷ *HC Debate*, 12 October 2022, vol. 720, c. 221.

¹⁷⁸ House of Commons Procedure Committee. 2023. *Proxy voting: Review of illness and injury pilot – Third Report of Session 2022–23*, HC 807, 16 March 2023.

¹⁷⁹ House of Commons. 2023. *Order Paper*, 26 June.

¹⁸⁰ Interview 21 on 31 March 2023

¹⁸¹ House of Commons Procedure Committee. 2023. *Proxy voting: Review of illness and injury pilot – Third Report of Session 2022–23*, HC 807, 16 March 2023.

¹⁸² House of Commons. 2021. *Standing Order No. 39*.

¹⁸³ Interview 19 on 16 March 2023

¹⁸⁴ House of Commons Procedure Committee. 2023. *Proxy voting: Review of illness and injury pilot: Government Response to the Committee's Third Report Third – Special Report of Session 2022–23*, HC 1325, 9 May 2023.

¹⁸⁵ Interview 14 on 24 April 2023

¹⁸⁶ UK Parliament. N.d. *Erskine May*, para 21.6.

stand if holding them is not possible, and to be allowed to speak closer to the start of the debate.¹⁸⁷ This illustrates both a bespoke nature of such accommodations based on individual needs and circumstances and trade-offs between individual needs of different Members and between institutional considerations and constraints.¹⁸⁸

2.2.3. Disability inclusion and the House of Commons Committees

Since the expansion and investment in resourcing of their work from the early 2000s, Select Committees have become an alternative pathway to political career progression, especially for backbench Members who may find it more realistic and/or rewarding compared to pursuing a ministerial role.¹⁸⁹ This applies to some disabled Members who see themselves as policy advocates and campaigners; or ‘constituency champions’ rather than ‘ministerial aspirants’ (using Donald Searing definitions adapted by McKay et al.¹⁹⁰).¹⁹¹ In other words, improving accessibility of Committees serve a dual purpose – enabling backbench Members, as well as Members with disabilities.

Differently from General Committees that have a shorter lifespan and a stronger partisan element (and a bigger role in delivering the Government’s legislative agenda) in their composition and operation, Select Committees aim for a more cross-party, consensus-driven, flexible approach.¹⁹² While they have limited influence and power,¹⁹³ in terms of culture they are less intimidating, as they are based on work and deliberation with a smaller group of Members supported by impartial staff who maintain confidentiality¹⁹⁴ and have been noted to be dedicated, professional and helpful by interviewees.¹⁹⁵ They help organise the work of Committees, including gathering written and oral evidence, and assisting with the daily running of the Committees, which in practice leads to their greater engagement with reasonable adjustments for witnesses and – to some extent – Committee members.¹⁹⁶ Finally, Select Committees tend to have a more cause-oriented, stable membership (than even compared to General Committees), which is a good basis for alliances and even friendships,¹⁹⁷ making Committee members more sensitive and accommodating to each other’s needs (and more familiar with them).

Smaller membership and flexibility in terms of rooms that can be used for Select (and to a lesser extent, General) Committee meetings also make it easier to discuss, request and make reasonable adjustments to

¹⁸⁷ Interview 27 on 15 December 2022; Interview 8 on 19 May 2023; Interview 34 on 06 June 2023; Interview 7 on 24 May 2023; Interview 14 on 24 April 2023

¹⁸⁸ Interview 7 on 24 May 2023

¹⁸⁹ Evans, P. 2019. Conclusion: So, What Is Good Scrutiny Good For?. *Parliamentary Affairs*, 72(4), 991; McKay, S., Goodwin, M., Bates, S.H. 2019. A Means to an End and an End in Itself: Select Committee Membership, Parliamentary Roles and Parliamentary Careers, 1979–Present. *Parliamentary Affairs*, 72(4), 799–820.

¹⁹⁰ McKay, S., Goodwin, M., Bates, S.H. 2019. A Means to an End and an End in Itself: Select Committee Membership, Parliamentary Roles and Parliamentary Careers, 1979–Present. *Parliamentary Affairs*, 72(4), 799–820.

¹⁹¹ Interview 13 on 24 April 2023

¹⁹² Interview 28 on 03 July 2023; Interview 5 on 03 July 2023

¹⁹³ Crewe, E. and Sarra, N. 2019. Chairing UK Select Committees: Walking Between Friends and Foes. *Parliamentary Affairs*, 72(4), 841-859.

¹⁹⁴ Interview 29 on 23 January 2023

¹⁹⁵ Interview 13 on 24 April 2023

¹⁹⁶ Interview 34 on 06 June 2023; Interview 29 on 23 January 2023

¹⁹⁷ Crewe, E. and Sarra, N. 2019. Chairing UK Select Committees: Walking Between Friends and Foes. *Parliamentary Affairs*, 72(4), 841-859.

ensure everyone's equal participation.¹⁹⁸ Recent upgrades to Committee rooms have improved their accessibility too, though some still have very poor acoustics for those who are hard of hearing, and hearing loops are turned off when the Committee goes into private mode, so that discussions cannot be listened to from outside the room¹⁹⁹. With regards to Select Committee reports, there is a general commitment to write them in plain English, though the final wording may be deliberately cautious or vague, reflecting a tenuous agreement between Members on the Committee, which makes engaging with it difficult for Members with dyslexia and similar conditions.²⁰⁰

While Committees are more accommodating, the extent of reasonable adjustments depends on how strongly the Member requesting them pushes for these accommodations – and the openness for such adjustments vary between Committees.²⁰¹ This reflects differences in their sensitivity to and awareness of disability as an issue. The Home Affairs Committees cluster, for example, has a greater sensitivity than the Foreign Affairs Committees cluster as Members on these Committees have greater and more frequent exposure to witnesses with accessibility needs and disability-related issues more broadly. For example, the Women and Equalities Committee reflected on disability in the context of the Gender Sensitive Parliament inquiry, and the Committees in the Home Affairs cluster engage with disabled witnesses on a regular basis.²⁰²

More extensive use of assistive technology in meetings and evidence sessions too contributes to a more inclusive working environment in Committees. The efforts that have been made to accommodate the needs of witnesses include creating a position of a witness and safeguarding support within the House Affairs Committees cluster and offering options for hybrid participation. Based on pre-briefing before the evidence session, they are offered the option to give evidence remotely, the opportunity to leave the session at any time, adjusted for disability style of questioning (less intimidating, fewer questions, scheduled breaks, etc.), the use of breakout or rest rooms, and having a carer/assistant with them during the session.²⁰³

While this illustrates the high levels of sensitivity to disability-related concerns for witnesses, this does not extend to Committee members. Formally, there is no option for hybrid participation of Members, and formal Committee meetings are always held in person²⁰⁴. Depending on support from fellow Members and the Committee chair, however, holding informal meetings in a hybrid/online format are possible.²⁰⁵ There is also a rule for Members to attend evidence sessions in person, even if witnesses join remotely.²⁰⁶ There are also ways for Members to express their opinions in advance of a formal meeting directly to the chair, and contribute to discussion if an informal²⁰⁷ Committee meeting is held in a hybrid or online format. With support from the chair and the Committee, these opinions are accounted for in the formal meeting, even if the Member in question is absent.²⁰⁸

¹⁹⁸ Interview 13 on 24 April 2023

¹⁹⁹ Interview 3 on 02 March 2023, Interview 34 on 06 June 2023

²⁰⁰ Interview 24 on 04 April 2023

²⁰¹ Interview 28 on 03 July 2023

²⁰² Interview 29 on 23 January 2023

²⁰³ Interview 29 on 23 January 2023

²⁰⁴ Interview 29 on 23 January 2023; Interview 13 on 24 April 2023; Interview 28 on 03 July 2023

²⁰⁵ Interview 13 on 24 April 2023; Interview 28 on 03 July 2023

²⁰⁶ Interview 28 on 03 July 2023

²⁰⁷ Note that this applies only to informal discussions, as formal meeting must be held in person.

²⁰⁸ Interview 28 on 03 July 2023

Accessibility practices in the debating Chambers and Committees

The approach to disability inclusion in Committees mirrors that of the House and is based on ad-hoc accommodations based on requests from individual Members that are considered in the context of institutional priorities. That said, there is a strong steer towards being inclusive to fellow Members, despite some variations in practice.

SECTION 3. CHALLENGES FOR ACCESSIBILITY AND DISABILITY INCLUSION

Examples of good practice regarding disability inclusion in the House of Commons (and the UK Parliament) stem from a good range of support services provided at the unicameral and bicameral levels, as well as by external stakeholders such as IPSA – with support from informal and partisan networks that is, ParliAble and political parties, respectively.

In addition to this comprehensive and well-resourced provision, there is evidence of improvement with regards to physical access and infrastructure and procedural accessibility of the debating Chambers and of the House of Commons Committees – with an overall goal of making working environment more inclusive.

That said, there is a range of challenges that hinder these efforts. This chapter of the report will reflect on these challenges, paying particular attention to those that have been frequently raised in the interviews conducted for this project.

3.1. Challenges for support services

3.1.1. Communication issues

While accessibility support is well-designed and comprehensive there are several issues identified by interviewees that warrant further attention.²⁰⁹ Firstly, there are issues of communication and its effectiveness, as it is not always clear which person – rather than a generic email – should be used in any given situation. Considering it may concern sensitive personal issues relating to health, a Member may not be willing to email a generic email address, as this form of disclosure is built on trust between Members and the House staff, especially their belief that their data will not be shared without their explicit consent.²¹⁰ There is also need for stronger triangulation of information on available (or possible) reasonable adjustments and accommodations, as well as a clear flowchart of what needs to be done and by whom in a case of a Member having a stroke or a developing mental health impairment.²¹¹ Trying to build trust and use multiple avenues of communication, Members' Services are an integral part of the induction process for new Members (and they provide and train buddies for new Members to help them adjust to their new role). They also have regular Teams meetings with Members and party whips, and a chat room for constituency officers and case workers. The Health and Wellbeing team also do promotional talks with Q&A directly to parties.²¹² The Parliamentary Digital Service, including its network of accessibility champions²¹³ and the newly added PDS Accessibility Specialists and Senior Accessibility Specialists, is an excellent resource that addresses issues of digital accessibility and offers technical solutions to reasonable adjustments for disabled Members.²¹⁴ Together these measures are meant to make services more visible and easier to access, as well as provide Members with contact persons who can

²⁰⁹ Interview 26 on 06 December 2022.

²¹⁰ Interview 7 on 24 May 2023

²¹¹ Interview 26 on 06 December 2022; Interview 31 on 10 January 2023; Interview 39 on 25 January 2023; Interview 20 on 03 February 2023; Interview 21 on 31 March 2023

²¹² Interview 31 on 10 January 2023

²¹³ That dealt with 211 queries relating to digital accessibility last year, for example.

²¹⁴ Interview 23 on 09 May 2023

help liaise with these services. That said, while 'updates from all company' and other similar communications are a staple of ensuring everyone gets the same information at the same time and in the same format, their effectiveness when it comes to reaching Members may be limited, as Members' staff who manage their inboxes may overlook/ignore information (for example, Health and Wellbeing updates) if they know that it is not relevant for their Member.²¹⁵

While early intervention is crucial, Members may be unwilling to inquire or fail to do so under the time pressure of the job, which means that health and wellbeing is not their top priority, and they wait until the last minute to check in.²¹⁶ This can lead to a developing condition becoming lasting, chronic or acute.²¹⁷ Mental health issues, in particular, are difficult to address considering the environment of the institution, including concerns about public image and high levels of public and media attention to lives of MPs. Members may find it difficult to seek mental health support out of concern for appearing weak, and/or if they think of themselves as tougher and more resilient than an average person.²¹⁸ This often results in Members reaching a crisis point without letting anyone, including their whips, know about it.²¹⁹ To address this, the Health and Wellbeing teams try different approaches, via political parties and word of mouth from fellow Members and their whips;²²⁰ they also encourage Members to reach out via medical teams (located in accessible and discrete areas), as well as the Workplace Adjustments Manager, which carries less stigma.²²¹ The Members HR Advice team and Members Services Team, in particular, regularly connect Members with health and wellbeing support services and with the Workplace Adjustments Manager. They make these services and resources visible during induction and in regular communications, including with political parties. While there have been a few occasions when Whips have been in contact about concern for a colleague's health and wellbeing, such a positive and proactive intervention is not a regular occurrence.²²² This is a missed opportunity for early intervention, especially with regards to developing cognitive strategies and good mental and physical health routines that could be helpful in dealing with the increasing workloads, and managing response to pressures coming from the media and public.²²³

Other less formal channels of communication include buddies assigned to newly elected Members and the ParliAble network (one of the Workplace Equality Networks known as WENs). While some Members consider buddies very helpful, including with regards to addressing access-related requirements, others found them less useful and offering more generic information that is less tailored for a Member's specific needs, and would have benefited from a more experienced buddy and/or more specific advice.²²⁴ This issue is more pertinent in the context of a general election – rather than a by-election – with a large influx of new Members, which makes providing tailored, individual support more challenging. While the broad, introductory nature of the role of a buddy is noted by some interviewees, this is seen as an inevitable limitation considering that buddies

²¹⁵ Interview 41 on 31 May 2023

²¹⁶ Interview 21 on 31 March 2023

²¹⁷ Interview 31 on 10 January 2023; Interview 39 on 25 January 2023

²¹⁸ Interview 30 on 12 December 2022

²¹⁹ Interview 20 on 03 February 2023

²²⁰ Interview 20 on 03 February 2023; Interview 21 on 31 March 2023

²²¹ Interview 31 on 10 January 2023

²²² Interview 39 on 25 January 2023

²²³ Interview 39 on 25 January 2023

²²⁴ Interview 13 on 24 April 2023; Interview 10 on 16 August 2023; Interview 18 on 17 July 2023

are liaison persons that direct Members to specific staff and services that can address a concern at any given time rather than addressing it themselves.

Equally, while ParliAble is a valuable resource as a peer-to-peer, community network, it is underused by disabled Members, who consider this to be a community for staff rather than parliamentarians and may be concerned that engagement with it may undermine their anonymity.²²⁵ Limited understanding about ParliAble and a lack of will to engage with it can be addressed by including WENs into the induction process for new Members (beyond a mention), though this would not alleviate concerns of some Members that use of the network may reveal their disability to their party and beyond. Establishing a line of communication between party whips and ParliAble and enabling the latter to raise and pursue relevant concerns with the whips effectively may also offer Members an alternative forum and support network. It would supplement the work of the Health and Wellbeing services that focus on the clinical side and add to the communication efforts of the Members' Services by adding a voice of an informal, peer community interested in redressing disability-specific grievances.²²⁶

A lack of engagement with WENs among Members is partially compensated by engagement within their political parties. Party whips (and political parties more broadly) have a range of pastoral and community functions, though parliamentary party management and ensuring party cohesion in voting are their main priorities, which makes the relationships between them and their flock transactional.²²⁷ While whips remain primary managers of their parliamentary parties, as well as parliamentary business at large, 'they are more like intelligence-gathering sheepdogs herding cats' than "'whippers-in' they were supposedly named for'²²⁸, with a stronger pastoral core especially noticeable among smaller parties.²²⁹ In the context of their own flock, whips can offer support and encouragement, including regarding practical challenges facing disabled Members, though this is not the top of their agenda, and Members are often reluctant to disclose health and wellbeing issues to their whips.²³⁰

While whips provide some support and reassurance to their own flock, their interactions with opponents contribute to the competitive and often adversarial mode of inter-party communication. As Emma Crewe notes, '[t]he extent to which whips get embroiled into organizing attacks on the other side depends on the culture of their office, which in turn is linked to their boss, the Chief Whip'.²³¹ That said, even the possibility of such attacks makes disabled Members (especially with less visible disabilities) potentially unlikely to come forward, as one would not want to be 'the wounded wildebeest of the week', as one whip described a Member from the opposing party who was designated to come under attack on a given week.²³² In the past, there have been instances of mockery of disabled Members (for example, a former Conservative MP, Paul Maynard²³³), which were condemned by their colleagues,²³⁴ but may have made other disabled Members wary. Making

²²⁵ Interview 17 on 09 January 2023

²²⁶ Interview 17 on 09 January 2023; Interview 31 on 10 January 2023

²²⁷ Interview 19 on 16 March 2023; Interview 7 on 24 May 2023

²²⁸ Crewe, E. 2015. *The House of Commons: An anthropology of MPs at work*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 134.

²²⁹ Interview 10 on 16 August 2023

²³⁰ Interview 30 on 12 December 2022

²³¹ Crewe, E. 2015. *The House of Commons: An anthropology of MPs at work*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 138-139.

²³² Crewe, E. 2015. *The House of Commons: An anthropology of MPs at work*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 139.

²³³ Asthana, A. and Savage, M. 2011, February 5. *Disabled MP: I was jeered in the House of Commons*. The Times, <https://www.thetimes.com/article/disabled-mp-i-was-jeered-in-the-house-of-commons-35dhw75gsmw> (accessed on 07 August 2024).

²³⁴ Interview 7 on 24 May 2023

disability less visible and not being seen as disabled – as well as competing time pressures – are also the reason why few Members engage with such informal support structures as ParliAble, or one of the WENS.²³⁵ Similarly, while communication between political parties – and whips’ offices – is improving, so far most requests for adjustments for Members come through clerks and Members’ offices rather than the whips, though this does not necessarily mean that they are not signposting Members to the relevant services.²³⁶

Communication pitfalls often result in a lack of awareness of available health and wellbeing services, particularly with regards to early intervention. They also lead to underuse of valuable peer networks and of targeted support (for example, from the Workplace Adjustments Manager) especially by Members because of their heightened concerns over public image and anonymity. Members with less visible disabilities such as dyslexia and dyspraxia may be particularly likely to struggle through on their own, while they would benefit from appropriate targeted support (for example, specialised software, documents in a different format and/or written in plain English) put in place early.²³⁷

3.1.2. Triangulation of support and information sharing

Another challenge associated with providing accessibility-related services is a need to triangulate multiple agencies and sources of such support. The multi-agency approach to identifying needs is a strength of the existing disability support provision. However, it also leads to logistical challenges in developing a holistic approach to and a seamless accessibility service provision on and off the estate that requires a degree of coordination between the Members’ Services, PDS, IPSA and political parties.

For political parties, engagement with disabled politicians begins well before their election to the House of Commons. This entails financial and mentoring support, leadership training, as well as practical support such as getting around a constituency,²³⁸ which used to go hand in hand with the recently scrapped the Access to Elected Office Fund²³⁹ and the EnAble Fund²⁴⁰. Both campaigners²⁴¹ and interviewees²⁴² noted that re-creating these schemes, and potentially following the example of the Scottish government and their Access to Politics scheme,²⁴³ would facilitate running for elected office for disabled Britons. That said, parties do not have systematic formal mechanism to improve descriptive representation of disabled Britons, such as shortlists used for women, even though some – including Labour, the Liberal Democrats and the SNP – have a firm

²³⁵ Interview 17 on 09 January 2023

²³⁶ Interview 34 on 06 June 2023; Interview 24 on 04 April 2023

²³⁷ Interview 40 on 13 April 2023

²³⁸ Interview 5 on 03 July 2023

²³⁹ HM Government. N.d. *Access to Elected Office Fund*, <https://www.gov.uk/access-to-elected-office-fund> (accessed on 07 August 2024).

²⁴⁰ HM Government. 2018. *EnAble Fund*, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/fund-launched-to-support-disabled-candidates-stand-for-office> (accessed on 07 August 2024).

²⁴¹ Disability Right UK. 2020, April 2. DR UK statement on the Enable fund, <https://www.disabilityrightsuk.org/news/2020/april/dr-uk-statement-enable-fund> (accessed on 07 August 2024).

²⁴² Interview 6 on 18 April 2023; Interview 5 on 03 July 2023

²⁴³ Inclusion Scotland. N.d. *Access to Politics* <https://inclusionScotland.org/disabled-people-become-a-leader/civic-participation> (accessed on 07 August 2024).

commitment to facilitate it.²⁴⁴ Through earlier exposure to and greater familiarity with candidates, political parties have an opportunity to get an idea as to the needs of their newly elected Members before the House services and IPSA through observing them and campaigning alongside them during an election, though there is no consistent practice of doing so.²⁴⁵ Nonetheless, considering that accommodation whips are critical in securing appropriate – and where necessary, accessible – office space for Members, political parties and their early exposure to the needs of newly elected Members is a critical part of creating an inclusive and accessible working environment.

Members' Services play a critical role during the induction process, which also includes discussions regarding disability support and reasonable adjustments since the 2010s. However, under the competing pressures from other aspects of the job, these provisions are often delayed, especially if they require the sourcing of specialist equipment or software (which needs to be vetted for security too), making changes to physical spaces (in collaboration with the Estates and maintenance teams), or are outside direct control of the House services²⁴⁶. One of the core issues is that there is still a lack of coordination between different teams rather than a lack of willingness to accommodate disabled Members. In other words, while resources and staff are available, some responsibilities may fall between different staff and services, which adds complexity to coordination and logistics.²⁴⁷ For example, if an accessible way into a parliamentary building needs to be added, this responsibility falls between Members' Services who assess the need and the Estates team who are responsible for overseeing construction work. The scope of reasonable adjustments also depends on the personality of Members (and how hard they push for them),²⁴⁸ as well as the dynamic of power relations between them, their party whips and the House leadership.²⁴⁹ That said, the support and desire to help from the House and PDS staff have been noted to be outstanding,²⁵⁰ including in setting up and contributing to voluntary networks of PDS accessibility champions and ParliAble, and work of disability user groups.²⁵¹

As noted in section 2.1.2, triangulating assessment and support plans made by IPSA and the House services requires a certain extent of information sharing, which is currently regulated by the Data Sharing Agreement (DSA) with IPSA.²⁵² Despite progress in this area, there remain discrepancies in support plans for a constituency (the IPSA domain) and on the parliamentary estate (by the House services). While these areas of work are funded and expected to operate separately, keeping them separate in practice is difficult for Members who often merge their constituency and parliamentary offices for efficiency and cost-cutting reasons (for example, Members representing seats in London and surrounding areas). That said, Members have different appetites for data sharing (with some being quite supportive of the idea, while other being vehemently opposed to it)²⁵³ and data linkage, and this necessitates different approaches to data collection and sharing based on Members'

²⁴⁴ Interview 5 on 03 July 2023; Interview 6 on 18 April 2023; Interview 10 on 16 August 2023

²⁴⁵ Interview 10 on 16 August 2023

²⁴⁶ Interview 30 on 12 December 2022

²⁴⁷ Interview 30 on 12 December 2022

²⁴⁸ Interview 20 on 03 February 2023; Interview 40 on 13 April 2023; Interview 21 on 31 March 2023; Interview 14 on 24 April 2023

²⁴⁹ Interview 39 on 25 January 2023

²⁵⁰ Interview 7 on 24 May 2023; Interview 14 on 24 April 2023

²⁵¹ Interview 23 on 09 May 2023; Interview 24 on 04 April 2023; Interview 17 on 09 January 2023; Interview 19 on 16 March 2023

²⁵² ParliNet. N.d. *Data Sharing Agreements*, <https://parlinet.parliament.uk/information-resources/data-protection-freedom-of-information-and-information-security/data-protection/data-protection-for-commons-staff/data-sharing-agreements/> (accessed on 07 August 2024).

²⁵³ Interview 14 on 24 April 2023; Interview 7 on 24 May 2023

needs and priorities (with transparent communication being a key to keeping Members on side).²⁵⁴ While the Data Compliance team tries to enable good use of information, disability data is always a special and sensitive case – because of the nature of the data, and because persons with visible disabilities can be identified. Unsurprisingly, Members are particularly protective of such personal data, and even if their informed consent is sought and obtained, are more likely to withdraw it eventually because of mistrust, misunderstanding, or extra caution. Hence, while other data can be systematically shared under the framework of the DSA between the House of Commons and IPSA, this does not cover special category data such as on disability.²⁵⁵ Instead, informed consent is asked from each individual Member for their data to be shared (if necessary) between the House services and IPSA by either the former or the latter, depending on who received the initial contact.²⁵⁶ While understandable, this presents a challenge in developing a systematic approach to linking disability-related support and reasonable adjustments assessed and made by IPSA and the House services. This results in a more laborious and lengthy process. There is also a question of efficiency with regards to repeat assessments (by different agencies and over time) if there is clear medical evidence that disability is permanent (or expected to last for the duration of this Parliament at least).²⁵⁷

It is important to recognise that managing a Members' impairment or disability not done solely on the estate. Indeed, like other UK residents, Members are registered with their local GPs and, in addition to regular scans and tests, they are likely to have disability-specific scans and treatments that are not administered on the parliamentary estate but through their local health services.²⁵⁸ Considering pressures on these services, it is unlikely that Members have much choice with regards to the timing of such appointments, meaning that they must be factored into working schedules, even if they come at the expense of being present in the Chamber. This especially applies to Members representing Welsh and Scottish constituencies, that is, where healthcare is devolved. For example, as noted by one interviewee, there is an issue with prescriptions from Scottish/Welsh GPs being repeated by an English GP, so getting required medication may be difficult and require extra time.²⁵⁹

There are also two important caveats when it comes to identifying and making accessibility-related adjustments that both relate to the timing of such adjustments. Firstly, the induction for new Members in its current, more formal, form was introduced for the first time after the 2010 general election, Members elected before then did not have the same depth of training.²⁶⁰ While they may join induction for Members and/or follow up on it using other available materials such as the guides and handbooks summarising best practices and e-learning resources, most do not because of the time constraints discussed earlier and a perceived lack of need for such training. The latter is evident, for example, through a lack of engagement among Members in general with the House Services Fair, and the low uptake of Parliament-provided training on information governance and data protection (though they may engage with external training).²⁶¹ That said, ad-hoc engagement (that is, inquiries directly from Members) with services show a more encouraging picture. For example, Members' HR Advice dealt with 483 different Members between July 2022 and August 2023²⁶², while

²⁵⁴ Interview 33 on 08 June 2023; Interview 32 on 11 April 2023.

²⁵⁵ Interview 33 on 08 June 2023

²⁵⁶ Interview 32 on 11 April 2023

²⁵⁷ Interview 6 on 18 April 2023; Interview 14 on 24 April 2023

²⁵⁸ Interview 13 on 24 April 2023; Interview 14 on 24 April 2023

²⁵⁹ Interview 14 on 24 April 2023

²⁶⁰ Interview 18 on 17 July 2023; Interview 43 on 18 August 2023

²⁶¹ Interview 33 on 08 June 2023

²⁶² Interview 43 on 18 August 2023

the Information Compliance Service handled approximately 160 enquiries from Members offices in 2023.²⁶³ That said, with the introduction of IPSA, changes to data protection and equality legislation that affect information governance and HR practices,²⁶⁴ as well as procedural changes, induction for returning, in addition to new, Members would be valuable. Because of their seniority they are likely to hold either leadership roles or positions of esteem in the House, even though the presence of Members elected before 2010 is declining.²⁶⁵ Introducing and encouraging – including through party channels – all Members to take advantage of existing training provisions offered by Members’ Services and the Information Compliance Service among others, alongside brief repeat inductions for new Members after a few months in office, would keep MPs up to date with changes to services, working practices and statutory requirements.²⁶⁶

This would also help Members who may come to require reasonable adjustments to their working lives and practices while already in office because of the development of an impairment or disability, including through a life-changing injury or illness.²⁶⁷ Considering the longevity of service of some Members (just under 9 years in office on average, according to the Administration Committee 2023 report²⁶⁸), the relentless pace and pressure of the job – both professionally and personally, as well as external threats²⁶⁹ – it is possible that the health and wellbeing of Members is under considerable strain. As newly elected MPs, able-bodied Members are unlikely to pay close attention to health and wellbeing services and disability-related support if they do not need it at the time, and indeed interviewees have pointed out that they tend to forget/glance over any information that does not seem immediately relevant.²⁷⁰ However, if they develop an impairment while in office, their needs will be acute, immediate and coming on top of having to adjust for this change psychologically. Managing these needs and enabling them to continue serving as MPs to their fullest capacity, including by enabling a more phased return to work,²⁷¹ will require quick signposting to the available services (especially by their whips), as well as triangulating support and quick decision making by the House services. Members’ Services send out regular reminders to Members about available services, and IPSA do regular (monthly) phone-ins with Members and their offices to inquire about their needs and any funding-related issues, including funding of carers and other support. In addition to these services, input may be required from party whips (for example, if a change of accommodation is required) and the House and party leadership (for example, to consider adjustments that may be needed to facilitate inclusion of Members who may be less mobile, require rest breaks, etc.).

²⁶³ Follow-up email exchange on 05 January 2024

²⁶⁴ Interview 43 on 18 August 2023

²⁶⁵ Uberoi, E., Baker, C. and Cracknell, R. 2020. *General Election 2019: full results and analysis*. House of Commons Research Briefing CBP 8749, 28 January 2020, 7; Cracknell, R., Baker, C. and Pollock, L. 2024. *General election 2024 results*. House of Commons Research Briefing CBP-10009, 26 July 2024.

²⁶⁶ Interview 30 on 12 December 2022; Interview 18 on 17 July 2023; Interview 43 on 18 August 2023

²⁶⁷ Interview 7 on 24 May 2023

²⁶⁸ House of Commons Administration Committee. 2023. *Smoothing the cliff edge: supporting MPs at their point of departure from elected office – First Report of Session 2022–23*, HC 209, 8 February 2023.

²⁶⁹ Collignon, S. and Rüdiger, W. 2020. Harassment and intimidation of parliamentary candidates in the United Kingdom. *The Political Quarterly*, 91(2), 422-429.

²⁷⁰ Interview 30 on 12 December 2022; Interview 41 on 31 May 2023

²⁷¹ Interview 14 on 24 April 2023

3.1.3. Accessibility on the parliamentary estate

Adjustments to accommodate a disabled Member are contingent on the limited capacity and accessibility of the parliamentary estate, especially the Palace. For example, an office may be accessible for a Member with limited mobility, and yet too far from the Chamber to enable them to make it to the vote when a division is called. The issue of office space and accommodation is particularly complex amid concerns regarding the suitability of offices for certain Members, dependency between parliamentary spaces, and considerations of political status.²⁷² Hence, while accessibility of an office is crucial for Members who have mobility issues or other conditions that make getting around buildings difficult (for example, arthritis, visual impairment), this may come against capacity and legislative role-driven concerns, as well as inter-party dynamics. Negotiations regarding office space between and within political parties occurs under enormous time pressure, as not having an office on the estate delays everything else, especially staff recruitment²⁷³. There are many (often conflicting) considerations to account for, including limited amount of available office space (even less of it is accessible), the status and gravitas of political parties following the election that determines how much leverage they have in choosing more favourable spaces, keeping political parties together as much as possible, and individual considerations. The latter not only include the accessibility of offices for disabled parliamentarians, but also seniority of Members, especially whether they hold a ministerial or other leadership position meaning that they might be able to secure a better office and/or get one closer to the Chamber.²⁷⁴ Under competing pressures, accessibility-related concerns often give way to the needs of party and legislative roles. Proximity to the Main Chamber especially is at a premium,²⁷⁵ and yet there are no wheelchair accessible offices, for example, in its vicinity.²⁷⁶ Most accessible offices, for example, are in Portcullis House and 53 Parliament Street, which are often too far removed to enable a Member to move freely between their office and the Chamber during the day (particularly under the time demands of participating in a vote). It usually results either in a greater pressure to remain in the Chamber for longer (so as not to miss their turn to speak), or in a lack of motivation to take part in proceedings fully.²⁷⁷

Sourcing appropriate accessible office accommodation becomes more challenging as demands for parliamentary spaces increase because of greater concerns over the safety of some, especially more high-profile and visible, Members. Such demands have grown as more Members use their parliamentary office partially for constituency services, to cut costs of renting premises and extra commuting, especially in London,²⁷⁸ and if Members develop a serious illness or a disability while in office, and therefore have to relocate.²⁷⁹ This requires much collegiate thinking and negotiating, and also takes time, meaning that short-term acute accessibility issues (stemming from an injury, for example) may not get resolved promptly. Longer-term accommodation of an emerged disability or serious health issue too requires another Member to move – and for their party to give way.²⁸⁰ It may be somewhat easier for the Governing party, which tends to have the first pick of office space, with the Official Opposition coming second, but very difficult for smaller parties.²⁸¹ It is

²⁷² Interview 3 on 02 March 2023; Interview 6 on 18 April 2023; Interview 10 on 16 August 2023

²⁷³ Interview 18 on 17 July 2023

²⁷⁴ Interview 6 on 18 April 2023; Interview 10 on 16 August 2023

²⁷⁵ Interview 3 on 02 March 2023

²⁷⁶ Interview 10 on 16 August 2023

²⁷⁷ Interview 8 on 19 May 2023

²⁷⁸ Interview 10 on 16 August 2023

²⁷⁹ Interview 6 on 18 April 2023

²⁸⁰ Interview 14 on 24 April 2023

²⁸¹ Interview 6 on 18 April 2023

also worth noting that while having an office near the Chamber is more convenient for participating in parliamentary debates, such offices are often farther from accessible toilets and other facilities and have very limited (if any) accommodation for staff.

Limitations of office spaces that are located near the Chamber and Westminster Hall are, to a large extent, a result of the heritage status of the building: while functional for a 19th century Parliament, it is far less user friendly for a 21st century legislature.²⁸² This brings complexities around changing the physical environments of a protected site (for example, removing carpets to facilitate wheelchair movement, changing wallpaper from geometric patterns with optical effects that are tiring for the eye of visually impaired and older people to a sufficiently contrasted textured wallpaper to help blind and visually impaired people keep their bearings),²⁸³ making the aisles wider (to enable easier access for wheelchair users or persons using other mobility aids such as crutches), and to install a ramp for access to the Table (which at the moment is inaccessible to wheelchair users among staff).²⁸⁴ Tightness of seating in the Chamber is an issue for Members with autism and anxiety as well. Finally, in addition to ensuring accessibility of the debating Chambers, adjacent spaces for formal and informal political socialisation (for example, lobbies) need to be considered.

There are several caveats to this. Firstly, making parliamentary spaces accessible can mean different adjustments for people with different disabilities. For example, widening corridors and holding doors back to make them wheelchair accessible can create an environment that is challenging for persons with visual impairments, as it creates echoes making it harder to rely on hearing. It has been noted to be overwhelming for people on the autism spectrum too.²⁸⁵ Equally, while there has been a focus on improving accessibility of Committee rooms and public facing areas (for example, equipping them with hearing loops), many areas in the Palace (for example, reading rooms) do not have them,²⁸⁶ which is detrimental for the socialisation of Members that occurs there. Secondly, there is no appetite to change the layout of the Chamber.²⁸⁷ This means that the physical environment in which the House sits will remain largely unchanged after the Restoration and Renewal programme is complete, while accessibility around the Chamber and in the rest of the estate will improve.

At present, limited accessibility in parts of the estate (pointed out by interviewees, as well as campaigners²⁸⁸) has a knock-on effect for Members trying to get to the Chambers (depending on where their offices are located, and where meetings are held).²⁸⁹ Even in more accessible areas of Portcullis House and around the House of Commons, heavy doors that used to be clipped back are now shut based on the security audit, which is challenging for wheelchair users. Some of them have magnetic hold backs, while others are operated by passes that require wheelchair users to approach, reverse and approach again. It also concerns emergency response and the evacuation of Members with special needs that may require additional equipment (for example, to assist breathing) and particular types of refuge areas (for example, warm), and who are

²⁸² Interview 19 on 16 March 2023; Interview 37 on 03 March 2023

²⁸³ Interview 22 on 22 June 2023

²⁸⁴ Interview 3 on 02 March 2023; Interview 16 on 24 May 2023

²⁸⁵ Interview 40 on 13 April 2023

²⁸⁶ Interview 34 on 06 June 2023

²⁸⁷ Interview 22 on 22 June 2023; Interview 19 on 16 March 2023

²⁸⁸ Disability Policy Centre. 2022, June 13. *The Disability Policy Centre calls on the Speaker of the House of Commons and the Speaker of the House of Lords to Improve the Accessibility of Parliament through the Restoration and Renewal Project*, <https://thedisabilitypolicycentre.org/accessibility-of-parliament> (accessed on 07 August 2024).

²⁸⁹ Interview 1 on 13 July 2023; Interview 18 on 17 July 2023; Interview 16 on 24 May 2023

disproportionately dependent on assisting security staff.²⁹⁰ That is despite parliamentary and House staff (clerks, doorkeepers, security, etc.) being noted as universally helpful and doing their best to assist.²⁹¹ These challenges for physical accessibility around the estate, including the Chamber, feeds into the need for Members to have permanent assistance,²⁹² which while possible, is highly visible to colleagues, constituents and the media, which may make Members reluctant to request it. For the same reason, even aids as basic as infrared hearing loops (a device to be worn on a lanyard around one's neck that amplifies sound for those who are severely hard of hearing) are under-used by Members who do not want to display such a visible marker of disability.²⁹³ This brings us to challenges raised with regards to accessibility of the debating Chambers and Committees, as core areas where parliamentary politics occurs that are covered in sections 3.2 and 3.3.

3.2. Challenges for accessibility of the debating Chambers

The House of Commons wants to be inclusive and accessible to disabled Members, but it is a busy place where partisanship trumps collegiality, and it is difficult to organise.²⁹⁴

Considering the small number of visibly disabled Members and Members who self-identify as disabled, the House mostly adapts existing systems on a case-by-case basis (on demand) rather than designs one comprehensive system.²⁹⁵ This reinforces the need for individual Members to adapt to the ways of the House, not the other way around.²⁹⁶

Additionally, disability-related concerns are frequently outweighed by considerations of institutional efficiency and trade-offs with required resources and associated costs, as shown by discussions of retaining elements of remote participation and the Restoration and Renewal Programme.²⁹⁷

In interviews and written contributions to the Procedure Committee inquiries, the assessment of how procedures of the House, including the Chamber, impact on disabled Members is mixed. Some point out that they are 'incredibly hostile and quite frankly, ableist' and 'on occasion [prevent them] from representing ... constituents'.²⁹⁸ Others – while disagreeing with certain practices (for example, bobbing, conduct during PMQs, lack of allocated or reserved sitting) – pointed out that there is much good will in the House (and among the Speaker and his Deputies), once their attention is engaged and retained.²⁹⁹

Additionally, while issues of physical accessibility are being addressed (within the constraints of the heritage status of the building), concerns remain. The absence of allocated or reserved seating,³⁰⁰ for example, presents

²⁹⁰ Interview 1 on 13 July 2023

²⁹¹ Interview 1 on 13 July 2023

²⁹² Interview 1 on 13 July 2023

²⁹³ Interview 34 on 06 June 2023

²⁹⁴ Interview 13 on 24 April 2023

²⁹⁵ Interview 5 on 03 July 2023

²⁹⁶ Interview 7 on 24 May 2023

²⁹⁷ Interview 3 on 02 March 2023; Interview 27 on 15 December 2022

²⁹⁸ Procedure Committee. 2020. *Written evidence submitted by Daisy Cooper MP (CVR0077)*. Procedure under coronavirus restrictions inquiry, 8 June 2020.

²⁹⁹ Interview 14 on 24 April 2023

³⁰⁰ Interview 19 on 16 March 2023

a challenge for neurodivergent Members, as well as those who are hard of hearing.³⁰¹ The latter need to be able to see those speaking to be able to differentiate substantive content from background noise, meaning that they need to be seated immediately behind the frontbench.³⁰² To do that, they can either secure a seat at prayers (Standing Order No. 8³⁰³) or on a first-come-first-served basis. For a disabled Member, this means that they need to either negotiate access to these seats in advance (and on a regular basis), or they need to come into the Chamber early and (unless they secure their seat at prayers) stay late, thus, putting additional pressure on their stamina and other aspects of their schedules. Overall, organisation of parliamentary work in Westminster Hall and especially the Chamber is based on flexibility and fluidity that is meant to make it more efficient, but also makes it less accessible. On the one hand, it allows quick interventions and reactions to each other, keeping ministers on their toes by being able to request Urgent Questions, to make a Point of Order, to go head-to-head at PMQs, as well as sharing grievances with party leadership, and potentially building alliances in the lobbies.³⁰⁴ On the other hand, this set up makes being a Member a test of physical endurance, which is neither a pre-requisite (and a legally disqualifying factor) for this job, nor the main criterion on which the performance of a Member is assessed by their constituents.³⁰⁵

Concerns regarding the need for physical presence and ability to endure significant physical pressures to be able to fully participate in parliamentary business have been addressed differently in the House of Lords, including by retaining an option for remote participation and voting for disabled peers in the Chamber and in Committees.³⁰⁶ Considering the age profile of peers and their life-long presence in the House, it is partly a necessity and partly a reflection of the ethos of the House of Lords based on the equality of peers, appreciation of their personal experiences, and collegiality.³⁰⁷ In the House of Commons, however, such an option has been deemed inappropriate for ensuring effective scrutiny of the Government, legislative efficiency and high quality, dynamic parliamentary debate. From the perspectives of major parliamentary parties too, maintaining cohesion in the context of hybrid proceedings has been challenging. Finally, both newly elected (and many incumbent) Members find ‘doing politics’ on the estate more effective and a necessary part of the role of an MP.³⁰⁸

3.2.1. Accessibility of proceedings and technical challenges

There is a provision for individual adjustments in the debating Chambers in *Erskine May*, para 21.6,³⁰⁹ and making them on an ad-hoc rather than systematic basis is a preferred approach. Ad-hoc, case-by-case adjustments to etiquette and courtesies observed in the Chambers considered upon request are made more frequently, if there is support from the Speaker (or of the Deputy Speaker in Westminster Hall). This

³⁰¹ Interview 13 on 24 April 2023

³⁰² Interview 13 on 24 April 2023

³⁰³ House of Commons. 2023. *Standing Order No. 8*.

³⁰⁴ Interview 19 on 16 March 2023; Interview 7 on 24 May 2023

³⁰⁵ Interview 8 on 19 May 2023; Interview 14 on 24 April 2023

³⁰⁶ Interview 37 on 03 March 2023; Interview 32 on 11 April 2023; Interview 1 on 13 July 2023

³⁰⁷ Interview 32 on 11 April 2023

³⁰⁸ Interview 3 on 02 March 2023; Interview 27 on 15 December 2022; Interview 19 on 16 March 2023

³⁰⁹ UK Parliament. N.d. *Erskine May*, para 21.6.

approach does not require a collective buy-in of the House and a cost-benefit analysis that would accompany a more systematic, far-reaching adjustments, especially if they are reflected in Standing Orders and affect the working of the whole House.

While the House has expressed their support for improving accessibility, as one of the core priorities of the Inclusion and Diversity Strategy 2023-2027,³¹⁰ the practice of making such adjustments (and inevitably changing the ways of the House) is often controversial and seen as detrimental to the quality of deliberation and debate. This is evident when considering the case of a hybrid Parliament necessitated by the COVID-19 pandemic, which was swiftly reversed after the summer recess of 2021 (in sharp contrast with other legislatures that aim to embrace these initially enforced changes and integrate them into the fabric of parliamentary life³¹¹). In particular, the House decided to move away from hybrid parliamentary proceedings (for example, electronic voting, remote participation), which were noted as beneficial for accessibility, including for Members who are disabled or immunocompromised.³¹²

This shift aimed to preserve the fluid nature of parliamentary debate and protocols of the House, and to ensure the efficiency of its operation and effectiveness of its debating, scrutiny and legislative functions.³¹³ According to the Government's response to the Procedure Committee's Eighth Report on 04 May 2021 (p. 2), '*scrutiny of Government has been less effective with fewer opportunities for interventions; debates have been reduced to a succession of pre-prepared speeches read out one after the other; MPs have had fewer opportunities for collegiate cooperation to hold government to account; there are risks with technology meaning that members have sometimes been cut off mid speech or the House suspended; there has been less spontaneity and flexibility and backbenchers have had reduced access to ministers*'.³¹⁴ Likely, this has been particularly detrimental for Members who were first elected in the 2019 general election and whose early parliamentary tenure went alongside a series of national lockdowns and spending much time away from Parliament.³¹⁵

Interestingly, concerns of Members regarding the effects of remote participation on parliamentary proceedings and the effectiveness of the House is not mirrored by the House of Lords. It has retained some elements of remote participation since the pandemic, which suggests that having it as an option for small (and carefully vetted) number of parliamentarians does not necessarily harm the effectiveness and efficiency of the House. Standing Order No. 24a enables peers who may be physically unable to attend the House on grounds of long-term disability [to] apply for eligible member status (approximately 12 peers)³¹⁶ that allows them to participate virtually in proceedings in the Chamber or in Grand Committee, and to vote electronically or by telephone whether on or off the Parliamentary Estate.³¹⁷ The House of Lords' Committees too can hold their

³¹⁰ Parlinet. N.d. *The House of Commons and Parliamentary Digital Service Inclusion and Diversity (I&D) Strategy*, <https://parlinet.parliament.uk/working-here/culture-values/inclusion-diversity/house-of-commons/inclusion-and-diversity-strategy/> (accessed on 07 August 2024).

³¹¹ Inter-Parliamentary Union. 2021. *The World e-Parliament Report 2020*, <https://www.ipu.org/resources/publications/reports/2021-07/world-e-parliament-report-2020> (accessed on 07 August 2024).

³¹² Interview 6 on 18 April 2023; Interview 7 on 24 May 2023; Interview 14 on 24 April 2023

³¹³ Interview 27 on 15 December 2022; Interview 19 on 16 March 2023

³¹⁴ Procedure Committee. 2021. *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, 4 May 2021.

³¹⁵ Interview 19 on 16 March 2023

³¹⁶ Interview 37 on 03 March 2023; Interview 32 on 11 April 2023; Interview 1 on 13 July 2023

³¹⁷ House of Lords. 2024. *Standing Order No. 24a*.

formal and informal proceedings in a physical, virtual and hybrid format.³¹⁸ Contrary to the context of the House of Commons, there is no sign that peers take advantage of these accommodations and stop coming to the estate if they can do so (though the number of actively participating peers is relatively small).³¹⁹ There is a level of appreciation for the availability of facilities of the House (for example, the Library), as well as a desire to socialise and do politics on the estate, especially considering very limited staffing and supporting resources available to peers individually.³²⁰ Overall, having options for remote participation does not affect the number of usually active peers (which does not amount to the entire House). On the other hand, it does make disability more visible, which in the context of an elected House may be instrumental in bringing more disabled Members into the public eye as role models, or more challenging if there is a lack of support from political parties and/or the wider electorate.

Overall, aspects of parliamentary work that may be physically strenuous such as required presence in the Chamber³²¹ and reprimands for leaving the Chamber suddenly are further sources of grievance,³²² while limited access to restrooms, bathrooms and the ability to administer medication have been noted as detrimental for both the physical and mental health of disabled Members. The instances of actively restricting exit from the Chamber for prolonged periods of time are very rare (for example, the NHS Funding Bill debate on 04 February 2020³²³), but a need to leave urgently still hinders a Member's ability to fully participate in the Chamber. For example, if they leave (and urgency may prevent them from speaking to the Speaker on the way out), they may be moved down the speaking list, or risk a reprimand for breaking convention to stay for the two speakers after their contribution.³²⁴ Planning for medical and disability-related needs is infinitely harder under the system without a published list of speakers, and a lack of certainty as to when evening votes are called. The cumulative effects of long hours, physical activities such as bobbing, racing to vote and going through lobbies puts a disproportional amount of pressure on disabled Members.³²⁵ This pressure is exacerbated by a lack of accessible office space within 15-20 mins of the Chamber, with some Members pointing out that they could not get to the Chamber from their offices in that time, or if they are having a meeting at Portcullis House when a vote is called unexpectedly.³²⁶ In general, the relative unpredictability of the parliamentary schedule is a source of concern, especially for disabled Members, who often rely on advance planning to manage their disabilities.³²⁷ The parliamentary agenda has become busier in recent years, with more urgent questions and urgent statements. On the one hand, they empower backbenchers and increase opportunities for parliamentary scrutiny, but, on the other hand, this makes planning a day in the Chamber harder for disabled Members and MPs with acute medical needs.³²⁸

In addition to improving the accessibility of parliamentary proceedings through shaping physical environments, the utility of technical solutions can also be enhanced. For example, while the subtitling portal

³¹⁸ Interview 34 on 06 June 2023

³¹⁹ Interview 37 on 03 March 2023

³²⁰ Interview 32 on 11 April 2023

³²¹ Interview 14 on 24 April 2023

³²² Procedure Committee. 2020. *Written evidence submitted by Daisy Cooper MP (CVR0077)*. Procedure under coronavirus restrictions inquiry, 8 June 2020.

³²³ Legislative Grand Committee (England). *NHS Funding Bill*, 4 February 2020, vol. 671, cc. 212-277.

³²⁴ Interview 8 on 19 May 2023

³²⁵ Interview 8 on 19 May 2023; Interview 14 on 24 April 2023

³²⁶ Interview 13 on 24 April 2023; Interview 14 on 24 April 2023

³²⁷ Interview 13 on 24 April 2023; Interview 10 on 16 August 2023; Interview 19 on 16 March 2023

³²⁸ Interview 13 on 24 April 2023

is a helpful tool for recoding and following multi-Member conversations in the Chamber (for example, during PMQs), it requires technical aids, that is, laptop, tablet, or at least a smartphone. While laptops are still banned from the Chamber, the use of hand-held electronic devices is allowed during debates, '*provided that they are silent and used in a way which does not impair decorum*'.³²⁹ That said, there is reluctance in allowing too many individual devices (for example, iPads, phones) in the Chamber and a steer towards using paper copies of documents.³³⁰ While the use of hand-held devices is an excellent start, there is room to make it easier for Members to use specialised services such as closed captioning in real time, for which using laptops would be more appropriate. However, allowing all Members to use laptops would be unfeasible considering (1) tight seating in the Chamber, (2) the impact of their use on parliamentary debates (for example, bobbing would be difficult), and (3) disruption that typing may present for Members with hearing impairment. That said, the benefits of laptop use would outweigh the costs in individual cases, and this step ought to be considered.

Some elements of expected conduct and behaviours during debates and ministerial questions are seen as problematic, as noted in interviews and written evidence. The practice of bobbing – while allowing an estimate of the number and party distribution of Members interested in contributing/intervening quickly, thus, ensuring fluidity and fairness of a debate – continuously draws criticism from disabled Members.³³¹ It puts significant physical and psychological pressures on them, whereby they focus on the act of standing up rather than on the content of their contribution.³³² Additionally, its unpredictability and fast pace makes it harder to engage with both questions and answers for Members with hearing and visual impairments.³³³ Even when permission not to bob is given, in a highly visible environment of the Chamber, it draws attention to disabled Members and makes them stand out.³³⁴ Similarly, the rowdiness and performance-oriented focus of activities such as Prime Minister's Questions are off-putting and often unfeasible for disabled Members to participate in. This may be because of a personal preference, but often because of difficulties with separating background noises, and keeping on top of speakers, answers, and reactions, which is particularly hard for Members with hearing impairments.³³⁵

3.2.2. Diversity of disability-related needs and challenges of requesting adjustments

The approach of the House to accommodating the accessibility needs of Members on a case-by-case basis is reasonable, but controversial. On the one hand, it enables the accommodation of diverse needs of disabled Members stemming from different disabilities and demands on their legislative roles (for example, whether they are backbenchers or hold a ministerial role). Requesting individual accommodations also removes the need to presume what one's needs are, which is an approach that is often driven by respect for a Member's ability to identify and articulate their own needs, or desire to do

³²⁹ UK Parliament. N.d. *Erskine May*, para 21.36.

³³⁰ Interview 42 on 22-23 May 2023

³³¹ Procedure Committee. 2020. *Written evidence submitted by Daisy Cooper MP (CVR0077)*. Procedure under coronavirus restrictions inquiry, 8 June 2020.

³³² Interview 14 on 24 April 2023

³³³ Interview 13 on 24 April 2023

³³⁴ Interview 2 on 09 February 2023

³³⁵ Interview 13 on 24 April 2023

so, as some MPs push some accommodations away (for example, Robert Halfon, a former Conservative MP).³³⁶

On the other hand, there are negative consequences for an individual arising from a more ad-hoc approach. It relies heavily on a Member being able to request such an accommodation, while they may not be able to do so.³³⁷ A Member may also be constrained by concerns regarding their public image, whereby requesting reasonable adjustments may be seen as a sign of weakness or 'not being up for it', which may carry electoral penalties or harm their promotion prospects.³³⁸ However, they could be more likely to make use of existing accommodations rather than request special ones (even if it is for a proxy vote) on the grounds of anonymity and being able to not 'stand out'.

Such a request is also made in the context of competition both between and within political parties in Parliament. It reduces the likelihood of a disabled Member actively pursuing reasonable adjustments if they are done on an exceptional rather than systematic basis. Such adjustments may be perceived as a sign of weakness, which could be detrimental to their political career and/or public image, not just to other parliamentarians but to the constituents.³³⁹ More visible adjustments (for example, a more relaxed dress code) could also interfere with the performative nature of parliamentary politics and lead to public disapproval at the perceived lack of decorum. While there have been instances of such disapproval,³⁴⁰ equally, the public also considered unorthodox dress choices as eccentric and charming in the past.³⁴¹

That said, increasing the visibility of disabled Members is beneficial for normalising the presence of disabled Members in the House and for creating role models for disabled Britons with political aspirations (who often do not know that reasonable adjustments are possible and used).³⁴² This could also contribute to reducing bias against disabled politicians and make people more comfortable in the workplace.³⁴³ Approaching reasonable adjustments in a more systematic way would also enable the House to explore their costs and benefits in advance and consider how they might affect other Members (for example, typing on a laptop can be disruptive for Members who are hard of hearing and sit close by). Introducing adjustments on a case-by-case basis offers more flexibility, but it also increases the response time (thus, disadvantaging disabled Members) and does not allow full advantage of previously used practices to be exploited (thus, thinning institutional capacity to adapt by building on previous experiences).

There are similar concerns relating to adjustments to the courtesies and etiquette of the House. The Speaker has expressed support for improving working conditions and environments for disabled Members (and staff), increasing the visibility of the Health and Wellbeing services in the House and allowed for various adjustments

³³⁶ Interview 27 on 15 December 2022

³³⁷ Interview 14 on 24 April 2023

³³⁸ Interview 40 on 13 April 2023; Interview 28 on 03 July 2023

³³⁹ Interview 40 on 13 April 2023; Interview 7 on 24 May 2023

³⁴⁰ Petter, O. 2020, February 8. Labour MP Tracy Brabin says reaction to off-the-shoulder dress was 'like *The Handmaid's Tale* gone mad', *The Independent*, <https://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/tracy-brabin-dress-labour-handmaids-tale-shoulder-twitter-a9324701.html> (accessed on 07 August 2024).

³⁴¹ Carolyn Harris MP [@carolynharris24]. 2017, July 26. Official portrait from my swearing in... [Tweet/X], Twitter/X, <https://x.com/carolynharris24/status/890248134533709824> (accessed on 07 August 2024).

³⁴² Interview 7 on 24 May 2023

³⁴³ Interview 17 on 09 January 2023; Interview 39 on 25 January 2023

to Members on request.³⁴⁴ However, while there is good will on the principle of disability inclusion, there is room to codify its practices to reflect the evolving needs of the House membership (for example, taking babies and toddlers into the division lobby, including by passing through the Chamber³⁴⁵) and in recognition of social and political constraints that may limit individual Members' ability to request accommodations. Additionally, procedural adjustments do not necessarily travel across institutional settings such as the Chamber, the parallel Chamber (that is, Westminster Hall), legislative Committees, and Select Committees. That said, there are no discernible differences in perspective between the respective chairs of these settings.³⁴⁶

Overall, having to explain aspects of hidden or visible disability to many colleagues and officials repeatedly (or have it on public record), and implicitly having to justify the need for adjustments is daunting for Members.³⁴⁷ This connects to earlier points with regards to data sharing and data linkage, and while this practice in relation to special category data is complicated, there is clearly a need to consider enhancing data sharing and data linkage practices to address the needs of disabled Members. Having a single record that assesses the needs of Members in a holistic manner – that is, including their administrative and procedural needs on and outside of the parliamentary estate – would make the process of making reasonable adjustments faster and less siloed,³⁴⁸ while removing pressure from individual Members to push hard and repeatedly for them to be implemented, especially if there is medical evidence to suggest that their disability is a long-term or permanent condition.³⁴⁹

³⁴⁴ Interview 31 on 10 January 2023; Interview 19 on 16 March 2023

³⁴⁵ Procedure Committee. 2022. Proxy voting and the presence of babies in the Chamber and Westminster Hall – First Report of Session 2022–23, HC 383, 30 June 2022.

³⁴⁶ Interview 27 on 15 December 2022

³⁴⁷ Interview 32 on 11 April 2023; Interview 14 on 24 April 2023; Procedure Committee. 2020. *Written evidence submitted by Daisy Cooper MP (CVR0077)*. Procedure under coronavirus restrictions inquiry, 8 June 2020.

³⁴⁸ Interview 6 on 18 April 2023, Interview 13 on 24 April 2023

³⁴⁹ Interview 6 on 18 April 2023; Interview 14 on 24 April 2023

3.3. Challenges for accessibility of Committees

While Committees are considered more accommodating – and have more capacity for adjustments according to – individual Members’ needs, some challenges raised in interviews resonate with those observed in the debating Chambers. This especially refers to the limitations of physical spaces and limited resources that do not allow for greater use of remote participation in Committee work.

3.3.1. Limitations of physical spaces and resources

As it stands, there are no provisions for virtual or hybrid participation of Committee members in General Committee procedure (Standing Order No. 89³⁵⁰), though there is flexibility with regards to the time of meetings, as well as accessibility support with regards to producing and printing documents through the Vote Office.³⁵¹ That said, there have been multiple calls to extend arrangements made for select committees to meet remotely using Microsoft Teams (for private meetings) and Zoom (for evidence sessions in public) under the Temporary Order on Select Committees (Participation and Reporting)³⁵² on 24 March 2020.³⁵³ This includes keeping an option for remote meetings if the Committee so wishes, and if such meetings fit the criteria set out by the Speaker (for example, ability to hear, see and contribute, having a quorum, security safeguards) – with the latter being able to extend the order by notifying the House – beyond the pandemic and making it an optional feature of the Committee work on a permanent basis.³⁵⁴ It has been noted by the Procedure Committee that remote meetings (especially for deliberation) are not as effective as physical meetings, and that having meetings remotely must be weighed against concerns around staffing and necessary resources.³⁵⁵ That said, an option to have Committee meetings remotely – albeit on an exceptional rather than routine basis, with approval from the Liaison Committee – would increase flexibility in Select Committee work and improve the accessibility of (formal) meetings for disabled Members. It would allow inquiries to continue more easily during recess periods too if time sensitivity of the inquiry and/or availability of witnesses necessitate it, and they outweigh concerns over staffing, availability of rooms and other required resources. In addition to informal (and less reliable) ways of feeding in their views, they would be able to participate in and contribute to deliberation in formal meetings. While ‘[o]pinions differ on whether deliberative meetings held remotely can substitute for deliberations held in a committee room’,³⁵⁶ keeping it as an option, and with a view that it is used sparingly and by few, would improve the accessibility of Committee work for disabled

³⁵⁰ House of Commons. 2023. *Standing Order No. 89*.

³⁵¹ Interview 42 on 22-23 May 2023

³⁵² House of Commons. 2020. *Temporary Order on Select Committees (Participation and Reporting) on 24 March 2020* (Cm5801).

³⁵³ Fowler, B. and Fox, R. 2020. *Procedure under Coronavirus restrictions: written evidence to the House of Commons Procedure Committee*. Hansard Society, <https://www.hansardsociety.org.uk/publications/submissions/procedure-under-coronavirus-restrictions-written-evidence-to-the-house-of-commons-procedure-committee#g-select-committees> (accessed on 07 August 2024).

³⁵⁴ Fowler, B. 2020. *Remote select committee evidence-taking is a Coronavirus change that should be kept*. Hansard Society, https://www.hansardsociety.org.uk/blog/remote-select-committee-evidence-taking-is-a-coronavirus-change-that-should?utm_source=HansardSociety (accessed on 07 August 2024).

³⁵⁵ Procedure Committee. 2020. *Procedure under coronavirus restrictions: the Government’s proposal to discontinue remote participation – Third Report of Session 2019–21*, HC 392, 30 May 2020.

³⁵⁶ Procedure Committee. 2020. *Procedure under coronavirus restrictions: the Government’s proposal to discontinue remote participation – Third Report of Session 2019–21*, HC 392, 30 May 2020, 20.

Members. The effectiveness of this approach is evidenced by the House of Lords' Committees, which are allowed to decide whether they would like to adopt a remote, hybrid or physical format for their formal and informal meetings.³⁵⁷ If they choose a remote or a hybrid option, 'Members joining a meeting via telephone or video call... count for the purposes of a quorum',³⁵⁸ and PBU offers technical support for such meetings.³⁵⁹ In other words, there is a precedent for this built-in flexibility in Committee procedures in the UK Parliament, but not in the House of Commons.

3.3.2. Variations of practices

Integrating an option for remote Committee meetings could also reduce variation in the application of reasonable adjustments across Committees. For example, evidence sessions (for witnesses) are held on Zoom and informal³⁶⁰ Committee meetings on Teams, and this is another example of a trade-off between security and accessibility concerns. Teams is recommended for private meetings according to the Government's National Cyber Security Centre advice. However, the level of security guaranteed by Zoom Enterprise is regarded as acceptable for hosting public meetings, and Zoom is also more broadcasting-friendly and more accessible (less background noise, ability to enlarge and highlight speakers, better picture quality, screen layout and close captioning). There have been occasions where PBU have been asked to host private meetings on Zoom because a Member or Members have faced accessibility issues in using Teams. In those cases, special dispensation (with a sign-off from the Parliamentary Digital Service) has been made to use Zoom instead of Teams for private meetings. However, in some cases (in a very similar situation) such dispensation has not been requested, thus, reflecting variation in application of accessibility-friendly practices.³⁶¹ Such variability in the interactions between chairs and other involved in Committee work is one of the hallmarks of the system.³⁶² While this example refers specifically to the difference between Zoom and Teams as software solutions that are most used at present, the trade-offs between accessibility and security are a common feature of discussions around all videoconferencing software solutions. Unsurprisingly, the UK Parliament prioritises the latter over the former, especially when conducting inquiries and discussions of particularly sensitive nature (for example, in the areas of defence, national security). In this case, security concerns are paramount, which often leads to the scrapping of hybrid sessions for Members and witnesses alike and moving proceedings to the estate. That said, it remains important to strive for the balance between security and accessibility by reiterating their equal importance and, on a practical level, by insisting that software developers integrate necessary accessibility features based on their own and their competitors' best practices, as identified by user feedback and by PDS and its accessibility champions.

The second concern raised by participants regarding variations in accessibility of Committees to disabled Members relates to their varying levels of awareness of and sensitivity to disability needs that are managed by Committee chairs and clerks. For example, formally, there is no option for hybrid participation of Members, and formal Committee meetings are always held in person³⁶³. Depending on support from fellow Members

³⁵⁷ Interview 37 on 03 March 2023

³⁵⁸ House of Lords. 2024. *Companion to Standing Orders*.

³⁵⁹ Interview 34 on 06 June 2023

³⁶⁰ Note that this applies only to informal discussions, as formal meeting must be held in person.

³⁶¹ Interview 34 on 06 June 2023

³⁶² Crewe, E. and Sarra, N. 2019. Chairing UK Select Committees: Walking Between Friends and Foes. *Parliamentary Affairs*, 72(4), 841-859.

³⁶³ Interview 29 on 23 January 2023; Interview 13 on 24 April 2023; Interview 28 on 03 July 2023

and the Committee chair, however, holding informal meetings in a hybrid/online format are possible.³⁶⁴ There is also a rule for Members to attend evidence sessions in person, even if witnesses join remotely.³⁶⁵ There are also ways for Members to express their opinions in advance of a formal meeting directly to the chair. With support from the chair and the Committee, these opinions are accounted for in the formal meeting, even if the Member in question is absent.³⁶⁶ This practice relies on the implied collegiality of the Committee, which works if the issue discussed is not too divisive and controversial. However, there is always a risk that someone will cause an upset, which happens regardless of the mode of the meeting.³⁶⁷

Overall, having a sympathetic chair and clerk makes a difference to how well a Select Committee will go with regards to reasonable adjustments for disabled Members. Some chairs and clerks are both proactive and sensitive in this regard and may adopt a trial-and-error approach to find out what schedule and format of meetings works best for everyone, and what additional staff and technical support might be needed, including liaising with Members' Services and seeking solutions proactively.³⁶⁸ Others are less accommodating, however. Such discrepancies in application suggest that there is room to harmonise best practices in disability inclusion for Select Committees, with Committees in the Home Affairs cluster, in particular, having much experience to share.

³⁶⁴ Interview 13 on 24 April 2023; Interview 28 on 03 July 2023

³⁶⁵ Interview 28 on 03 July 2023

³⁶⁶ Interview 28 on 03 July 2023

³⁶⁷ Interview 28 on 03 July 2023

³⁶⁸ Interview 7 on 24 May 2023

SECTION 4. WHAT IS NEXT? FOOD FOR THOUGHT

There are several observations with regards to improving accessibility of the House of Commons for disabled Members that may be considered in future. They are based on reflections from the fieldwork – stemming from interviews with parliamentarians, the House and MPs' staff – as well as evaluations of parliamentary services and efforts to improve accessibility of the House. They do not reflect the position of the entire House but are essential for developing a better understanding of accessibility-related challenges, as they come from users of the relevant provisions and from those who deliver them.

The following observations, therefore, aim to raise awareness of the existing challenges and discuss routes to address them, as well as to deepen disability inclusion in the House of Commons, specifically with regards to elected Members, by building on examples of good practice.

4.1. Peer support networks and mentoring

Firstly, there is little guidance as to what the job of an MP entails; such flexibility can be a double-edged sword for disabled Members – enabling them to adapt the role, while heaping up pressures associated with more diverse and intense workload. Equally, while MPs hold much political power, there are few protections and safeguards in place for them.³⁶⁹ Constitutional concerns too do not allow the Procedure Committee to explore some potential options. For example, while job sharing to improve the descriptive representation of women, carers and disabled Britons has been explored in academic research³⁷⁰ and public discourse, the Procedure Committee cannot substantively engage with this option as it contradicts the Representation of People Act that does not allow for the possibility of multiple representatives from one constituency. While this practice existed in the 18th and 19th centuries, there is no political appetite for bringing it back. meaning that job sharing to reduce the workloads of Members is not a feasible option.³⁷¹ The flexibility of the job and limitations on job sharing/flexible working stem from constitutional constraints that, while important to recognise, are beyond the scope of this study. That said based on section 1, *sharing lessons learnt and examples of good practice between Members (within their peer network) would enable new Members to understand their role and develop coping mechanisms, thus, offering some remedial action.*

A lack of Member-specific peer networks (and where they exist, their limited alignment with House services) is one of the few gaps in administrative provisions for disabled Members examined in Section 3.1.1. The House (and the UK Parliament overall) do very well when it comes to administrative provisions that are mostly delivered by the House staff who are described as dedicated, professional, and warm³⁷². However, peer support for Members – that is particularly effective as part of mental health support – is limited. While they have access to ParliAble,³⁷³ concerns regarding anonymity and a lack of trust make them unlikely to engage

³⁶⁹ Interview 14 on 24 April 2023

³⁷⁰ Campbell, R. and Cowley, P. 2014. The representation of women in politics, addressing the supply side: Public attitudes to job-sharing parliamentarians. *British Politics*, 9, 430–449.

³⁷¹ Interview 27 on 15 December 2022

³⁷² Interview 13 on 24 April 2023; Interview 14 on 24 April 2023

³⁷³ Interview 17 on 09 January 2023

with this network. While some (mostly smaller) parties offer an alternative avenue – regular party and staff meetings and/or pairing up new and more established Members for mentoring³⁷⁴ – the main parties especially lack this support. *Setting up regular meetings within parties, and potentially nominating mental health champions from within political party ranks to signpost to and help their Members liaise with the House services and networks, would fill in the gap in provision in line with international best practices.*³⁷⁵

4.2. (Repeat) induction, including for returning Members

The continuous improvement of induction for new Members discussed in Sections 2.1 and 3.1.2 would be a welcome initiative. However, there is a notable gap in systematic provisions for returning Members. Not being part of formal induction for new Members, they can access information and training on demand (and as part of dissolution guidance). However, pressures of the job and a lack of time make it unlikely, and the uptake of such Parliament-provided training is relatively low.³⁷⁶ Considering that Members are employers, their responsibilities for staff management and as a data controller, *there is a need not only to provide training and resources for Members but to introduce repeat inductions for new and returning Members to ensure that they are familiar with the HR guidance, information governance, equality and employment legislation, etc.* This is reflected in changes to induction following the 2024 general election and resonates with their responsibilities as employers and increases their awareness of best practices with regards to accessibility and disability inclusion, which would also benefit them individually by familiarising them and keeping them up to date with practical and technical accessibility solutions.

4.3. Procedural adjustments

There are several areas for improvement with regards to the procedures and etiquette and courtesies of the House. Making them more inclusive is tricky, as this depends on political will and a lasting consensus among Members, whether such inclusivity is achieved formally or informally. Increasing inclusivity of House of Commons procedures through informal practices (for example, pairing) is often more appealing, as a more flexible tool that offers a swift and timely solution to mitigate for individual circumstances (for example, bereavement). Informal solutions resonate strongly with the existing systems of party management (for example, the whips) and the inherent reluctance of the House to expand written rules, and stem from the assumption of collegiality among Members.

As a result, while informal practices to improve the accessibility and inclusivity of parliamentary procedure offer flexibility and speed on response, they are by no means a silver bullet. Such practices are strongly influenced by the dynamic of party competition and the relationship between the Government and the Opposition parties. When they get along relatively well, such provisions are likely to be maintained and work better, compared to when their relationship is especially sour. At such times, informal agreements are more likely to break down (for example, at Report Stage of the Trade Bill 2017-19 on 17 July 2018) – even if they are maintained on less important divisions/debates.

³⁷⁴ Interview 10 on 16 August 2023

³⁷⁵ Commonwealth Parliamentary Association. 2022. *Mental Health Toolkit for Commonwealth Parliamentarians*, https://www.cpahq.org/media/cczlingr/mentalhealth_toolkit_final_web.pdf (accessed on 07 August 2024)

³⁷⁶ Interview 34 on 06 June 2023

It is, therefore, important to rely on written rules (for example, Standing Orders), as well as informal practices. This ensures flexibility and adaptivity of inclusivity and accessibility practices (and they must be able to evolve) and offers some guarantee that they will not break down under the political pressures of the day, thus, confirming *accessibility as a priority for the House of Commons*.

4.3.1. The House of Commons Chamber

On procedural adjustments and the etiquette of the debating Chambers, there are several areas for improvement that stem from the analysis in section 3.2. One of the major obstacles to making the Chamber (and to a lesser extent, Westminster Hall) more disability-friendly is the relative unpredictability of parliamentary business.³⁷⁷ It is exacerbated by the physical pressures of having to spend longer hours in the Chamber. This disproportionately affects disabled Members if they must come earlier to the Chamber to reserve a seat, if they desire to speak but are not sure when they will be called, and if they wish to intervene and need to bob. Additionally, tightness of seating arrangements, noise, and in rare instances the inability to leave the Chamber makes the working environment challenging for persons with neurodivergence, autism, mobility issues or any medical needs that require regular breaks or use of a restroom. As there is no appetite to change the physical layout of the Chamber,³⁷⁸ the seating will remain tight, and the Chamber will remain relatively noisy. That said, addressing the challenges outlined in section 3.2, *I would recommend introducing an option to reserve seating for disabled Members (for example, hearing impaired MPs who need to lip read, or Members who need to be located closer to the exit). Additionally, introducing lists of speakers would make the House proceedings more predictable and enable Members to plan around their medical needs, and I would recommend keeping it under review (as there is not enough support in the House to introduce it owing to the effects it may have on attendance, the quality of interventions and the flow of the debate).*

The House has made much progress with adapting technical solutions to increase the accessibility of parliamentary proceedings and improve the work experiences of disabled Members. However, some such facilities can be used more intensively in the Chamber, which is the most challenging of parliamentary environments. *Enabling the use of technology (laptops rather than hand-held devices only) in the Chamber on an individual basis would be helpful for disabled Members, as they would be able to make full use of assistive hard- and software such as the subtitling portal, immersive readers, digital copies of documents in accessible formats (which would also align with the House's sustainability goals).*

Finally, while welcoming the Government's decision to extend eligibility for a proxy vote to include serious long-term illness and injury until the end of the 2019-2024 Parliament, *I concur with the recommendations of the Procedure Committee's Third Report of the 2022-23 session (paragraph 7) that it should be made permanent,³⁷⁹ in conjunction with the practices of pairing and nodding through to manage ongoing medical needs of a less acute nature, as discussed in section 2.2.2.*

³⁷⁷ Interview 10 on 16 August 2023; Interview 14 on 24 April 2023

³⁷⁸ Interview 18 on 17 July 2023

³⁷⁹ House of Commons Procedure Committee. 2023. *Proxy voting: Review of illness and injury pilot: Government Response to the Committee's Third Report Third – Special Report of Session 2022–23*, HC 1325, 9 May 2023.

4.3.2. The House of Commons Committees

With regards to Committees, there are two observations based on the analysis of examples of good practice in section 2.2.3 and remaining challenges in section 3.3.

Firstly, *I recommend affording flexibility to Committees to re-introduce an option for remote participation for Members in formal Committee meetings by giving Committees an opportunity to pass a resolution to decide whether to hold formal and informal meeting (meetings) in a remote, physical or hybrid format.* This is based on the positive experiences of the House of Lords and the continuously improving technical capacity to achieve this – within the constraints of resourcing the work of such Committees – as discussed in section 3.3.1. That would enable full participation of all Committee members even if they are absent from the estate because of acute medical conditions, illness, or injury, without having to express their opinion informally, which relies on the implied collegiality of the Committee.³⁸⁰

Secondly, there is some variation in how Committees implement practices of hybrid and remote (for informal meetings) participation depending on the sensitivity of the Committee chair and clerks, and on how divisive the topic of the meeting/inquiry is, as discussed in section 3.3. This may advantage some Members but disadvantage others. Such discrepancies in practices suggest that *there is room to harmonise best practices for disability inclusion and support of disabled Members across Committees – perhaps using the Liaison Committee to collate and codify them.*

³⁸⁰ Interview 28 on 03 July 2023

APPENDIX 1: THE CONCEPT OF DISABILITY

A1.1. Conceptualising disability in a parliamentary context

In line with existing social surveys (for example, the Life Opportunities Survey) and practices of the House of Commons³⁸¹, this research uses the social model of disability to understand this concept. While ‘an impairment plays a role in causing the restricted activity that constitutes disability’,³⁸² the social model of disability moves away from focusing on impairment to its interaction with factors in the environment. In other words, disability is ‘not simply a medical issue but also a human rights concern... [with] emphasis on the material and structural causes of disabled people’s disadvantages’.³⁸³ Reflecting the health and social dimensions of disability, the study adopts the definition of the 2006 United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) – adopted by the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association – which defines disabled persons as ‘those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others’.³⁸⁴ This definition aligns with the International Classification of Functioning, Disability of Health (ICF) Model of disability, which conceptualises it as the interaction between impairments in body function and structure, activity limitation, and participation restrictions that are mediated by environmental, personal and contextual factors.³⁸⁵ Together, these definitions enable the development of practical solutions to address disability-related inequalities. In this report, they are applied to assess the accessibility of the House of Commons and its existing practices with regards to the inclusion of disabled Members.

There are differences between what constitutes a health condition (that is, a disease, disorder, injury, or trauma), an impairment (that is, a moderate, severe, or complete difficulty with physical or mental functioning which limits day-to-day activities), and a disability. For example, non-diabetic hyperglycaemia (often referred to as pre-diabetes) is a health condition that may lead people to develop type 2 diabetes, but it has only light effects on daily life. Diabetes (type 1 especially), on the other hand, can be classified as an impairment. It also puts one at a greater risk from diabetic retinopathy, a condition that can lead to sight loss, which is classified as a disability. While the Equality Act 2010³⁸⁶ does not explicitly mention health conditions, it defines disability as a physical or mental health impairment which has a substantial and long-term (approximately 12 months or more) adverse effect on their ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities, thus, accounting for the prolonged effects of an impairment on daily life.³⁸⁷

Accessibility requirements differ depending on specific disabilities, and each comes with a separate set of conditions that may or may not intersect or even contradict each other (for example, reduced lighting may be

³⁸¹ Interview 17 on 09 January 2023; Interview 19 on 16 March 2023

³⁸² Thomas, C. (2004). How is disability understood? An examination of sociological approaches. *Disability & society*, 19(6), 569-583, p. 580.

³⁸³ Barnes, C. 2019. Understanding the social model of disability: Past, present and future. In N. Watson, A. Roulstone, C. Thomas (eds.) *Routledge handbook of disability studies* (pp. 14-31). London: Routledge, p. 26

³⁸⁴ Commonwealth Parliamentary Association. 2023. *CPwD Strategic Plan 2021-2024*, 6, https://www.cpahq.org/media/mhzd5n1a/cpwd_strategicplan_2021-2024_final.pdf (accessed on 07 August 2024).

³⁸⁵ ICED. 2014. *International Center for Evidence in Disability*, <https://www.lshtm.ac.uk/research/centres/international-centre-evidence-disability> (accessed on 14 August 2024).

³⁸⁶ HM Government. 2010. *Equality Act 2010*.

³⁸⁷ In the context of this study, terms ‘impairment’ and ‘disability’ are used interchangeably owing to the wording of the Equality Act 2010. Some impairments are referred to as acute to indicate their severe, but relatively short-term effect, though they can be chronic too.

beneficial for some neurodivergent Members, yet challenging for visually impaired Members). These can be supplemented by individual needs that may stem from the previous experiences of Members. They are also dependent on the availability of information on disability of individual Members, which may be shared in the form of medical evidence (for example, a GP's note or a consultant's note), occupational health assessment, and/or rely on self-reported data from equal opportunities questionnaires and informal conversations. It also depends on one's willingness to self-identify as disabled, even if they have a visible, medically diagnosed impairment, as the threshold for doing so is particularly high in the context of the House of Commons. It is visible, relatively conservative and the most powerful political institution in the country, and the public expectations regarding the performance of its Members are high. Hence, some of them, such as a former Conservative MP Robert Halfon, dislike 'the tag' and prefer 'differently-abled',³⁸⁸ while others such as Marsha de Cordova MP self-identify as disabled.³⁸⁹ There is similar variation in self-identification between Members with less visible impairments (for example, dyslexia, dyspraxia, obsessive compulsive disorder), with some of them describing themselves as disabled³⁹⁰, and some talking about management of mental health conditions in a social context without referring to a disability.³⁹¹ Indeed, such conditions may or may not be disabling, according to the social model of disability.³⁹²

Complexity of the concept of disability – and how it manifests in a parliamentary context, especially among Members – manifests in a complex and often contradictory patchwork of remedial measures to improve work environments for disabled MPs. This is a challenge for developing a systematic approach to address issues around accessibility for Members, which makes a less consistent case-by-case approach to integrating remedial measures often more effective policies and institutionally preferred.

³⁸⁸ Wilkinson, M. 2015, July 14. *Top Tory Robert Halfon: 'If PM offered me Cabinet job because of my bad leg, I'd have said no'*, The Telegraph, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/politics/conservative/11740755/Top-Tory-Robert-Halfon-If-PM-offered-me-Cabinet-job-because-of-my-bad-leg-Id-have-said-no.html> (accessed on 14 August 2024).

³⁸⁹ Hossein-Pour, A. 2019, September 20. *Marsha de Cordova: 'Parliament should be inclusive for everybody. It's supposed to be the people's house'*, The House, <https://www.politicshome.com/thehouse/article/marsha-de-cordova-parliament-should-be-inclusive-for-everybody-its-supposed-to-be-the-peoples-house> (accessed on 14 August 2024).

³⁹⁰ Pring, J. 2019, February 14. *MP speaks of pride at being dyspraxic at launch of Neurodivergent Labour*, Disability News Service, <https://www.disabilitynewsservice.com/mp-speaks-of-pride-at-being-dyspraxic-at-launch-of-neurodivergent-labour/> (accessed on 14 August 2024).

³⁹¹ Sir Charles Walker on OCD, <https://www.charleswalker.org.uk/news/ocd> (accessed on 14 May 2023).

³⁹² Barnes, C. 2019. Understanding the social model of disability: Past, present and future. In N. Watson, A. Roulstone, C. Thomas (eds.) *Routledge handbook of disability studies* (pp. 14-31). London: Routledge.

APPENDIX 2: NOTES ON FIELDWORK

A2.1. Data collection

Starting with caveats, tension between more individual and systematic approach to accessibility and disability inclusion for Members is also driven by the difficulty with generalising lived experiences of Members to the whole House. While individual surveys implicitly treat the House as a population from which a representative sample can be drawn, this assumption may be hard to sustain. Once one accounts for the importance of variations between Members based on their parliamentary party, legislative roles, socio-demographic and constituency characteristics, it becomes apparent that designing a sampling frame to draw a generalisable sample of a 650-strong Chamber would necessitate surveying most of the MPs.³⁹³ As Sir Alan Haselhurst put it, ‘we are all extremely different animals, and we pursue different interests in different ways’.³⁹⁴ Additionally, considering a low uptake among Members when it comes to surveys, there is inevitably a selection effect that means only MPs interested in the topic of an interview agree to participate.³⁹⁵

This is further complicated by the fluidity of the House membership, especially following the change of Government or landslide elections. For example, this research draws on data from the researcher’s interviews with Members and their staff, with the House, PDS and IPSA staff, as well as the Hansard Society and PARTIREP surveys. Some these Members remained in the House until recently – with 74% of MPs having held their seat between the 2010 and 2024 general elections.³⁹⁶ However, the 2024 general election returned over 50% of Members – 335 MPs – who were elected for the first time.³⁹⁷ One also should be mindful of changes to MPs’ work patterns and daily experiences precipitated by institutional and societal changes in the last 10 years. This especially relates to security-related concerns, the rise in abuse and harassment of Members, their increasing online presence, and changes in guidelines to MPs’ work relating to information governance, equality, diversity and inclusion, and digital support. The analysis accounts for the former changes by engaging with research by the Representative Audit of Britain (especially by Sofia Collignon and Wolfgang Rüdig) and by the Institute for Government (using the Parliamentary Monitor, in particular). The latter changes are reflected in adapted materials for induction of Members elected in the 2015, 2017, 2019 and 2024 general elections. Handbooks and guides also illustrate some aspects of their work, especially as employers. Together these materials and guidelines enable the deduction of the key components of the duties and work patterns of Members, and how they have changed over the last 15 years.

The fieldwork for this project³⁹⁸ includes three main elements: (1) document analysis, (2) semi-structured interviews with members of parliamentary staff, the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority (IPSA), peers, MPs and MPs staff and (3) participant observation of parliamentary events.

³⁹³ Interview 20 on 03 February 2023

³⁹⁴ Modernisation of the House of Commons Committee. 2007. *Modernisation of the House of Commons – First Report*, 20 June 2007

³⁹⁵ Interview 21 on 31 March 2023

³⁹⁶ Uberoi, E., Baker, C. and Cracknell, R. 2020. *General Election 2019: full results and analysis*. House of Commons Research Briefing CBP 8749, 28 January 2020, 7.

³⁹⁷ Cracknell, R., Baker, C. and Pollock, L. 2024. General election 2024 results. House of Commons Research Briefing CBP-10009, 26 July 2024.

³⁹⁸ Approved by the University of Exeter’s Humanities and Social Sciences Faculty Research Ethics Committee (Ethics Application ID: 520201 given on 16 September 2022 and extended on 31 July 2023 for fieldwork between 16 September 2022 to 31 December 2023)

The document analysis focusses on the UK Parliament's engagement with disability and the ways in which disability support is organised, resources and provided by using most recent iterations of relevant documents. They include:

- Rules and guidelines that guide behaviours of Members and staff on the estate (guides and handbooks for parliamentarians and their staff, MPs Code of Behaviour, IPSA guidelines, induction materials);
- The House of Commons and House of Lords Standing Orders that set and regulate procedural norms for both Chambers;
- Surveys of Members that show how their professional lives and routines are organised (for example, 'A Year in the Life: From member of public to Member of Parliament' survey data reports; The PARTIREP MP survey of Members from fifteen countries reports).

These data are supplemented with the Inter-Parliamentary Union and Commonwealth Parliamentary Association reports on disability inclusion and gender-sensitive parliaments. While they do not apply to the UK Parliament specifically, they set the norms and standards, as well as give examples of best practice with regards to disability inclusion in legislatures across the globe.

Secondly, I have interviewed forty-five members of parliamentary staff and IPSA, as well as peers, MPs and their staff, including staff from the following services:

- Culture Transformation Team
- Health and Wellbeing
- Members' Services
- Members HR Advice Service
- Parliamentary Digital Service
- Parliamentary Broadcasting Unit
- Chamber and Participation Team
- Information Compliance Service
- Communications Team
- House of Commons Committees and Library
- House of Lords Committees and Library
- The Speaker's Counsel
- ParliAble

With regards to MPs, I have been talking to Members who actively campaign on accessibility and MPs in leadership positions and/or with particular interest in parliamentary procedure. Overall, I have input from three Labour, two Liberal Democrat, two SNP and two Conservative MPs. I have spoken to three peers (Conservative, Labour, and crossbench), two of whom used to sit in the House of Commons and who have been campaigning on disability and accessibility too.

While there is a balanced representation of parliamentary political parties, as well as of parliamentarians holding frontbench and backbench roles, there is a strong gender imbalance, especially among MPs. While two out of three peers approached were men, all but one Members interviewed were women. To mitigate for that and ensure that the study engages with and accounts for both men's and women's positions, I used parliamentary debates (Hansard), including evidence submitted to Committees and debates on the floor of

the House and in Committees, to collect and examine the positions and experiences of men and women parliamentarians on such prominent issues that influence the accessibility of the House of Parliament as:

- Restoration and Renewal, that is, the Parliamentary Buildings (Restoration and Renewal) Act 2019, debates and votes on Restoration and Renewal and relating evidence sessions by the Public Accounts Committee in 2018-2023;
- Debates and votes on proxy voting, leave of absence and remote participation;
- Debates and votes on the Government- and IPSA-provided financial assistance, technical support by the Parliamentary Broadcasting Unit and Parliamentary Digital Service.

Finally, the fieldwork included observing and participating in formal and informal events:

- Parliament Services Annual Fair in May 2023,
- Launch of the House of Commons House Administration Strategy 2023-27 in April 2023,
- MPs' staff Teams meeting (organised by Members' Services) in May 2023, and
- Parliament Christmas Carol Service at St Margaret's Church in December 2022.

A2.2. Data Analysis

While most of the data are texts, some survey data are used as well, including ‘A Year in the Life: From member of public to Member of Parliament’ surveys of the 2005 and 2010 intake of Members,³⁹⁹ and the PARTIREP MP survey of Members from fifteen countries in 2010-2011.⁴⁰⁰ These surveys were conducted by the Hansard Society and the PARTIREP programme funded by the Belgian Federal Science Policy. The resulting evidence and publications are used to get a general understanding of Members’ transition from a member of the public to an MP, their work patterns, and their self-described priorities while in office.

Text data (from parliamentary documents and interviews) is analysed qualitatively using interpretive approaches to unveil core themes and their interpretations by interviewees based on their personal and professional experiences and to account for the clustered structure of the data. Parliamentary documents (for example, guides and handbooks, Code of Behaviour and Conduct, Standing Orders) provide background information and are the ‘base layer’ of data. They demonstrate what should happen and are triangulated with and contextualised by interviews with parliamentary and House staff. Their interpretations are further enriched by reflections of the target service users, namely Members of Parliament, given through interviews and both written and oral contributions.

This approach – while not the fastest or most efficient – is the most appropriate for a systematic, in-depth analysis of multi-layered data, as it offers different angles to the interpretation of how Parliament works that are expressed in official documents and in reflections of parliamentary staff and of parliamentarians. The approach enables, therefore, a more effective and holistic analysis of the operation of the House of Commons as a workplace for disabled Members, both in terms of its design and practical manifestations.

³⁹⁹ Rosenblatt, G. 2006. *A Year in the Life: From Member of Public to Member of Parliament*. Hansard Society, <https://www.hansardsociety.org.uk/blogs/publications/archive/2007/10/17/A-Year-in-the-Life.aspx> (accessed on 06 August 2024); Korris, M. 2011. *A Year in the Life: From Member of Public to Member of Parliament*. Hansard Society, <https://www.hansardsociety.org.uk/publications/briefings/a-year-in-the-life-from-member-of-public-to-member-of-parliament-report> (accessed on 06 August 2024).

⁴⁰⁰ Deschouwer, K. and Depauw, S. eds. 2014. *Representing the people: a survey among members of statewide and substate parliaments*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.