Thank you. Philip, for your kind introduction. And thank you to the Study of Parliament Group for inviting me to give this year’s Michael Ryle Memorial lecture.

This event, where we are celebrating 40 years of the departmental select committee, is also an opportunity to pay tribute to the contribution of Michael Ryle, who spent his whole career here as a House of Commons Clerk, ending as Clerk of Committees – in charge of the staff of all the select committees.

Michael was not only committed to this place, but to making it more vital and effective. Along with the academics Bernard Crick and John Griffith, he established the Study of Parliament Group, and the Group is one of our hosts at this marvellous event.

And one of the greatest achievements of the SPG was its influence on the reforms of the select committee system which happened in 1979 and which we are celebrating at this conference.
In this lecture, I want to thank Michael, and many others, for creating and developing our departmental select committee system. As Chair of the Liaison Committee, as well as Chair of the Health and Social Care Committee, select committees are a key part of my parliamentary life, for very many MPs, myself included, they are the forum in which they can make the most effective contribution, often drawing on their previous lived experience and expertise.

At a time when politics can feel exceptionally fractious and tense, select committees show Parliament’s more human and humane side. These are less about grandstanding and adversarial performances, although we can do that too if necessary...

And more about evidence and enquiry with MPs engaged on a joint enterprise. Select committees are at their best when tribal Party politics are left outside the room and MPs seek areas of agreement and where they can make a positive difference.

They not only hold Ministers and government departments to account, but increasingly, other powerful institutions, arm’s length bodies and individuals. They can take Parliament out around the country, in effect holding a series of mini national conversations and visits to engage with views and experiences from outside the Westminster bubble. And the range of the work taken on is increasing in its breadth and depth.
This evening I want to show-off the work of committees and all those who make that possible. I want to discuss what they can achieve when they are at their best and to explore what the “good select committee”, looks like. What would it do? And how would it measure success?

There are examples from across the length and breadth of select committee activity and many have been highlighted by the current Liaison Committee inquiry into select committee effectiveness.

Over the last few months, the Liaison Committee has been asking whether select committees are doing the best job they can on behalf of the public. We’ve been asking what isn’t working ...as well as what else we could or should be taking on and if so how best to expand the role.

Many of you in this room will have contributed to this work, so thank you for that.

Three things have become clear during this inquiry.

First of all, there is an abundance of good practice, of interesting, challenging and innovative work by select committees.
That said, second, that we can do more to spread best practice and replicate success across committee teams, and to communicate our work to the wider public.

Select committees have not been around for centuries – they are flexible and adaptable. As Tony Wright told us, “Select Committees are a work in progress; they are not the finished article”. We have room for further reform and improvement.

There have been notable leaps forward over the last forty years, where those who have an eye to reform have sought and taken opportunities to strengthen the system.

During the last panel discussion, Greg Power and Tony Wright provided the narrative of select committee reform to date.

That story so far shows us a system that allows for careers to be forged in scrutiny as opposed to ministerial office... We also see select committees with access to far greater levels of expertise and resources compared to 40 years ago.

Committees have felt less bound to restrict themselves to considering only the policy, administration, and expenditure of their relevant government departments. They have expanded their horizons on behalf of the public to call to account those who command great concentrations of power beyond the public sector.
The Liaison Committee’s report, which will be published later this Summer, will set out some ways in which we think our processes and procedures could be changed to allow committees to respond to the challenges of scrutiny, communication and engagement in the twenty-first century, including whether we need more effective powers to compel attendance and the submission of papers.

Progress cannot be taken for granted. There is an inherent anxiety in any government or organisation about close scrutiny. It’s much easier to draw the curtains.

Select Committees are at their most effective when MPs leave tribal party politics at the door, focus on the evidence and work constructively to build consensus. They have tended to attract the more independent minded.

I have spoken out before about attempts to remove members who have resigned their party whip. Whilst the overall allocation of members is determined at the start of a Parliament, roughly based on the results of the general election, MPs are voted onto Select Committees by their peers to serve a full term. I believe that it sets a worrying precedent if, irrespective of the quality of their work or their contribution to holding the powerful to account on behalf of the public, their posts are retained only thanks to party whips. It is a
short step from there to politicising and undermining the cross party ethos of select committees.

But back to my theme. What makes for good scrutiny, and what would the good committee do? Of course, the answer will depend on who is asking the question. For a Minister, a committee which focuses on chasing ambulances and the latest headlines rather than a forensic examination of government policy and its implementation may look like a good one.

For a civil servant, it’s much more comfortable to face a committee that acts as a cheerleader for the department rather than a critical friend.

For a chief executive, a committee that knows its place, sticks to its brief and doesn’t poke its nose into the affairs of private businesses. And for a lobby group, a committee that swallows its story... hook, line and sinker may be just the ticket.

But this should be viewed from the perspective of the citizen who wants to know that Parliament is doing its job making sure that public money is well spent where it makes a real difference, that policy is well administered in a humane and fair way, that the powerful are being held to account. The public want Parliament to
protect them from the threat of an over-mighty executive or irrational, ill-considered and ineffective policies dreamed up on the basis of hubris and prejudice rather than evidence.

First of all, our committee system should look like the society it is representing, broadly equal in gender and reflecting the diversity of our modern United Kingdom. It should follow good employment practice and allow parental and caring leave to its members and have arrangements to provide maternity and perhaps paternity cover. Unsurprisingly, our evidence told us yes, the make up of a committee does matter. Interviews with witnesses to some committees have shown a degree of discomfort for female witnesses being faced with questioning from all male, or nearly all male panels of Members. Having only one woman on the International Development Committee will shock overseas witnesses, or at the least, fail to inspire confidence.

The good committee would also make sure that those it heard from were more representative of society as a whole. Great strides have been made by many committees and their secretariats in seeking out witnesses beyond the “usual suspects” who tend to be a fairly culturally homogeneous group. The good committee looks at the
balance of witnesses and might reject evidence from the Chief Executive, but instead ask organisations instead to consider the importance of opportunities for representation within their own organisation.

The good committee will act as a team – it will not be the chorus for its Chair. It will engage all its members, giving them opportunities to develop areas of interest and expertise, drawing strength from the fact that it is a committee working across party lines and reflecting a wide range of views.

A good committee will want to be influential and respected, an active and visible contributor to the national debate. It will make time to step back from the hurly burly of day-to-day politics and reflect on its work. It will need to think ahead. To do so, it will need to plan. And in forming its plan, to engage with the widest possible range of stakeholders – remembering that it is part of an ongoing national conversation.

The good committee will not just be reactive and driven by events – it will engage with policy formation and development upstream – scanning the horizon so as to ensure it can engage early in the
process, helping shape policy in a way which has a better chance of winning both Parliament’s and the wider nation’s assent.

And if we are in a time where minority government or governments with narrow majorities become the norm, the good committee will be part of the process of finding consensus and compromise rather than stirring up conflict. There are opportunities here for governments to embrace the potential for cross party select committees to build consensus around otherwise controversial policy areas.

Plans developed by the good committee will be consulted on, drawing in those from civil society. It will have its ear to the ground and will be ready to tap into new ways of thinking. Many committees do this to some degree or another already.

Many committees hold away days and seminars where stakeholders are invited to discuss key areas for committee activity. Some committees spread the net wider.

The Science and Technology Committee’s ‘My Science Inquiry’ invited the public to suggest potential inquiries for their future work programme in 200 words or a short video, describing the nature of the issue, why it deserved attention, and how Government policy
could be developed or improved. 86 written and video submissions were received and ten invited to come to Westminster to pitch directly to the Committee. Four of these were then used as the basis for new inquiries to be held over the next 12 months. Similar processes have been used by the Scottish Affairs Committee and the Transport Committee to “crowdsource” inquiries, but many other examples abound of committees trying to ask the public what they think they should be doing, and the post-2015 e-petitions system has proved another fruitful source of ideas.

Because it plans ahead, the good committee will engage early with the vast bank of knowledge held by the UK’s research community. Committees not only see further ahead by standing on the shoulders of the research community but ensure that they are relevant and evidence based.

Because it is committed to leveraging and multiplying its modest resources, the good committee will work alongside the academic research bodies and institutions, and encourage them to be part of the scrutiny process.

For example the Economic and Social Research Council, ESRC-funded UK in a Changing Europe project (conceived before the referendum I
should note, but of immense value since). Its senior fellows have submitted oral and written evidence to select committees over 100 times since 2015.

The "impact agenda” in the Research Excellence Frameworks have incentivised higher education institutions to think much harder about the real world effect of their research. The good committee will make itself open to those institutions and welcome and encourage collaboration.

I am delighted that, partly as a result of work from within Parliament, the Research Excellence Framework 2021 has acknowledged influencing public debate and scrutiny as a key indicator of impact. The various research hubs which are seeking to develop links between policy makers and academia need to interact in a more systematic way with select committees to help identify academic witnesses who can provide a greater diversity and range of perspectives, as well as building long term links with committees.

With good forward planning, committees are better able to commission new research and consult on the use of evidence and how to balance this alongside the views of those with lived-experience. Many committees work with the charitable funding
foundations to gather and commission new research from those close to the communities they work with, and help give a public voice to those they are seeking to empower.

The good committee will think carefully about how best to engage those with that lived experience. For their inquiry into sexual harassment in schools, the Women and Equalities Committee invited the public’s views on DfE’s assessment of the scale of sexual harassment in schools. They used a web forum tool to crowdsource this scrutiny, and heard from teachers, academics and charities. The participants disagreed with the Department’s assessment of the scale, arguing that they had significantly underestimated how widespread it was. The Government was then forced to rescind their original submission and resubmit with larger figures. This practice was named a global pioneer in digital democracy.

On sensitive issues that evidence may be taken in private, as for example the Work and Pensions Committee which did so to engage with women relying on “survival sex” to explore the links between that and their experience of the benefits system.

The good committee will be prepared to travel, to hear from people outside the Westminster bubble and those who cannot get to
London. And sometimes those committees which travel further afield need to check they are in touch with those closer to home.

The Foreign Affairs Committee, has, for example, been travelling around the UK to ask representatives from different local communities about what they think about the UK’s future place in the world.

The good committee will be aware of its own power to intimidate and will be sensitive to the needs of different kinds of witnesses. If appropriate, it will turn off the cameras, to allow people to speak openly. It will not look like a trial and it will not act like a court, except when it has to. Looking to the future, we need more flexible spaces where furniture is easily adapted so that we can adopt round tables for witnesses and MPs sit together. It might be an improvement to the witness experience if we were able to sit and listen uninterrupted, rather deal with the uncertainty of the timing and number of divisions. I’ve asked for electronic voting posts as part of the Restoration and Renewal project so that we don’t build in obsolescence and entirely avoidable delays for our hearings.

In the fusty old language of parliamentary procedure, select committees are said to “deliberate” rather than “debate”. It may be
ancient but it’s a good word. The good committee will be a champion of deliberative democracy.

As Chair of the Health and Social Care Committee I’ve been involved jointly with the Housing Communities and Local Government Committee with a Citizens’ Assembly on the funding of adult social care –

Over two weekends in April and May last year, a representative sample of 47 members of the public from across England came together in Birmingham.

Involve organised, designed and ran the citizens’ assembly, supported by two expert leads – Professor Martin Knapp and Professor Gerald Wistow – from the London School of Economics and Political Science.

Two charitable foundations – Esmée Fairbairn and Omidyar Network – provided additional funding to support the Assembly but had no involvement in its design or delivery.

Assembly members received briefings from a range of experts including those with lived experience in social care before deliberating and voting on options for reform.

For controversial areas of policy where there have been serious roadblocks to reaching decisions, citizens assemblies can be
particularly helpful as a means of exploring informed public opinion. Understanding preferences on the options for long term funding helped us to produce a set of recommendations to Government that I believe were much more credible in considering the balance of what would be acceptable and fair. It is a matter of deep regret that the government has not used the opportunity to build on the work of two cross party select committees, a citizens’ assembly and widespread support from across the backbenches for reform to take forward a long-term sustainable solution to social care funding.

The good committee will listen to feedback. The International Development Committee recently put itself through what could be, for some, an uncomfortable experience. They ran a ‘reverse select committee’ - whereby a ‘scholars committee’ questioned them on engagement with scholarly research, particularly that produced in the Global South. The good committee needs to engage with and understand those it asks to give evidence better, and to open itself to and act upon criticism. It needs to be accountable – a topic I will come back to.

Words matter. We call those who come to talk to us on the record “witnesses”, and we describe the information they provide to us as “evidence”. This terminology may seem correct when select
committees are in an investigatory mode, but the good committee will vary its mode to match its task. There may be times when it would be more appropriate to describe those that we listen to as “guests”, and the information they provide as “testimonials” or “submissions”.

And we should be asking ourselves why those submissions need to be in writing. In order to submit formal evidence to a select committee, and gain the committee’s attention, interest and legal protection that comes with it, you must submit a Word document. People are told to use as few pictures as possible and cannot submit audio or video files. There has been little change to this process since digital documents began to be formally accepted over 20 years ago. Can that be right? How would our “good committee” respond? Surely the House’s procedures and the law can change to keep pace with the times?

The good committee will know, nonetheless, that sometimes a different and more inquisitorial mode is required. Those sitting around the horse shoe will be well briefed, and will be actively listening to proceedings (not staring into their phones following the latest developments in a party leadership contest).
When their time for questioning comes, they will inquire, rather than ask witnesses to affirm. Questions should be short. Answers will be followed-up. Witnesses will be treated with respect and fairness, but difficult issues will not be avoided.

We have seen large multinational corporations, Facebook, Google, Amazon, and the like, subjected to detailed scrutiny on their payment of taxation, by incisive questioning from our Public Accounts Committee.

The example of the Citizens’ Assembly on social care that I mentioned earlier illustrates another important aspect of the good committee – collaboration and working together.

Joint working is a growing feature of select committee practice. Last year four committees worked together on a major inquiry into air quality.

The Work and Pensions and Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committees have worked together on issues like the collapse of BHS. For nearly twenty years four committees have been working together to examine and try and keep honest the UK’s system of licensing arms exports.
Since the introduction, at the Liaison Committee’s request, a few months ago of the power for committees to invite guests from other committees to participate in their inquiries, the level of inter-committee working has increased dramatically. It also allows committees to increase the level of expertise around the horseshoe if members can bring experience from their own previous inquiries. I would like to see it grow further, with more joint working with committees of the UK’s devolved legislatures (something that will be vital if we do end up leaving the EU) and with the Lords.

And recently, the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee blazed a trail with an “international Grand Committee” to look at the issue of fake news and the responsibility of internet publishers and platforms for its control. These international behemoths do not really fit into the concept of national state boundaries, and the DCMS Committee showed that we need to collaborate with legislators across the globe to find common solutions to the challenge they present.

Forty years ago, in the pre-digital era, a select committee announced an inquiry and then pretty much disappeared into a tunnel. In its journey through the tunnel it collected written evidence that it
mostly did not publish until it reported, took oral evidence in front of a small audience of people, physically present in the committee room, and published a transcript weeks later (in expensive hard copy) and finally emerged from the tunnel to publish a doorstopper report (often to become a work of reference). Before the Freedom of Information Act select committees had unrivalled access to government information. Now, select committees operate in a highly competitive and crowded field of think-tanks, APPGs and the world of (relatively) open government. They publish evidence instantly, every oral evidence session is webcast, their correspondence with Ministers and others is online for all to see, they have twitter accounts, Instagram accounts, web forums, visits and many other forms of participation. The whole inquiry is the story, not just the report.

The good committee is willing to be held to account, as it holds others to account. It should be easier to find out what a committee is doing: the majority of our work is publicly accessible, but we need to do more to connect with the public – to press home the difference between Parliament and Government and show-off the cross-party constructive work that select committees do. Communication is improving - if we look at our social media following – our statistics on Twitter look positive: committees have gone from 45k total followers
in 2015 to 287k followers in 2019. Every month, 6,000 new people follow a select committee. The reach of our webpages has increased from 1 million impressions per month to around 10 million.

But more could be done to improve our public engagement. Difficulties navigating the Parliamentary website are well-known; not only do you need to know what a select committee is to begin your journey, you need to know what the one that deals with children with special needs is called. This needs to get better and we are working on it.

One of the spin-offs from the process of Brexit has been to force us to look at how we can co-ordinate our messages more effectively and signpost our pathways more clearly.

The good committee makes people care about politics not because of what it is but because of what it does. People do not come to the Parliament website because they are interested in the Health and Social Care Committee but because they want to find out what Parliament is doing about issues that they care about whether that’s paying for social care or cutting down on plastic pollution.

We have quite some way to go to get our online story sorted. We need to invest more in our website. And do we do ourselves any
favours in how we describe ourselves? The media insists on calling us “influential groups of MPs” rather than “select committees”. Rather than berate the media, we should take this as feedback: is there something else that we should be called? Given we are elected rather than selected, is there enough to tie us to that title? If it were to change, what would it be to? And for that matter, what exactly do people understand by the term “Liaison Committee”. The term was used before 1979 to describe the informal chair’s liaison group and it stuck when the new departmental select committees were established, and with them our Liaison Committee. What else might we more usefully be called? The Committee of Chairs? We would be pleased to hear your views.

But the good committee is not just accountable to the public – it is accountable to the House of Commons. The good committee will want to demonstrate that it is discharging its duties effectively. The practice of the Liaison Committee producing annual reports on select committee work has petered out, for no clear reason. I would like to see it revived.

Nearly twenty years ago the House sketched out and the Liaison Committee filled out the “core tasks” of select committees. They certainly need revising, but they can provide some kind of yardstick to measure the performance of committees.
My committee has tried to use the toolkit developed by the Institute for Government to measure our impact, but it is not always easy to find time for this kind of self-analysis. The good committee should make the time to reflect on how others see us.

Our connections to the Chamber have been strengthened over time. We have the opportunity of select committee statements. There is currently a pilot arrangement for swapping previously rigid arrangements for certain types of debates. This has seen debates led by select committees on the floor of the House on topics from the future trading relationship with the EU, to Plastic bottles and coffee cups.

Together with our regular debate slots in Westminster Hall we try to keep the House informed on select committee business. But would the good committee not just seek to inform the House, but to be accountable too? I would like to see more opportunities for committees, and particularly their Chairs, to be held to account by the House. A ten or fifteen minute slot each sitting day (perhaps replacing some of the ten minute rule bill slots) in which select committee chairs could be questioned on a recent report? Question times for select committee Chairs in Westminster Hall? Debates on substantive motions in backbench time to approve recommendations?
The good committee doesn’t just make a report and pass on – it follows through and continues to hold Ministers’ feet to the fire. Eight years or so ago, Meg Russell and Meghan Benton published their ground-breaking research seeking to quantify select committee impact. Some of it, they told us, was invisible to the naked eye, but plenty of it was measurable. The good committee monitors the progress of government and others in responding to its recommendations, and continues to press them home, but not enough committees do this systematically or force their departments to produce an annual account of their actions. Increasingly, committees are prepared to challenge the quality of government responses to reports as well as to correspondence but we could do more to spread best practice in this area. In a phrase that might be recognised by my colleagues on the Defence Committee, committee reports should not be “fire and forget” missiles. The good committee follows through and follows up and continues to press its case using all means available.

As part of that accountability, we must remember that accountability is not a free good, though it can often pay for itself. The cost of the House’s select committees, at around £15m a year is a relatively modest call on public resources. There is always a temptation to ask
for more, but we must be able to justify the request. With reports running at around an average of one per working day, and the pace of select committee work seeming to quicken continually, the good committee needs to be able to judge and make choices about its priorities just as it asks those it scrutinises to do. If we ask for more resources we must use them for the public good, not for our personal entertainment or to pursue our private obsessions. I have talked quite a lot about evidence-based scrutiny this evening. In an era of fake news and dishonest politics, of distrust and disengagement, where we are constantly threatened with the victory of ignorance and deliberate deceptions over truth, Parliament must justify itself by speaking truth to power and by sharing the best that can be known with the public who elect and pay for it –

Perhaps what the select committees need to support their work is an independent Office of Public Evidence, perhaps modelled on the NAO with a dash of the Commons Library to be a resource for everyone to be an effective scrutineer of public policy.

For Michael Ryle and his fellow reformers, the key task of select committees was to enable the House of Commons to hold the Executive to account across the whole range of government activity, consistently and in depth. Forty years on, it is impossible to imagine a House of Commons without its departmental select committee
system. But the work of select committees has broadened and deepened beyond that original mission, and rightly so. To ensure its continuing strength and influence it is important to reflect and challenge ourselves to do even better, and continually ask what good looks like and whether we can move closer to that ideal. This conference, and the detailed examination of how we got to here and where we might go next, are a crucial part of that process.

So on behalf of all select committees Thank you.

And in closing can I pay especial tribute to the expertise and guidance of the committee clerks and their wider teams who directly support select committees...without whom none of what we do would be possible.

Thank you for everything you do.