



**Report for the House of Commons Administration Committee on the findings
of the interview study with Members on women's experience in Parliament**

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1. Foreword

The research underpinning this report was conducted towards the end of the 2010-2015 Parliament. It was undertaken on behalf of the Administration Committee of that Parliament, under the Members' Interview study programme of engagement and research. The first tranche of that study, the initial review of House services and how well they meet Members' needs, had indicated particular issues that might affect gender representation in Parliament.

During the design stage, the Women in Parliament All Party Parliamentary Group report [Improving Parliament Creating a better and more representative House](#) was published.¹ Some of the APPG's recommendations have since been implemented, such as the formation of a Women and Equalities Select Committee, and we did not want to repeat work or recommendations. The current study was therefore carefully designed with the support of the APPG to focus on what the House authorities could do to address issues. We are especially grateful to Mary Macleod MP, chair of the APPG, for her advice and support.

Also during the last Parliament, the BBC documentary *Inside the Commons* was broadcast, highlighting to a wider audience some of the challenges facing Members with young children, and women Members. Sarah Childs, Professor of Politics and Gender, University of Bristol, has also been seconded to the House of Commons with the aim 'To make the UK Parliament a more gender-sensitive institution'.

The Parliament elected in May 2015 includes 29% women Members. While of course this is not yet representative of the population as a whole, it is nevertheless the highest ever percentage for the UK Parliament. This makes it even more pressing to see what the House authorities can do to address issues for those women who are elected already, and to make it easier for women to contemplate a career in Parliament.

At the request of the Administration Committee of the previous Parliament, this work adopted a qualitative approach, using in-depth interviews and focus groups as its methods. Previous engagement with Members had adopted a quantitative statistical survey approach, which has the strength of giving confidence in the proportions that believe or experience things, but through which it can be less easy to explore the meanings and importance that people attach to issues. A qualitative approach typically means that fuller and richer data are obtained but that the results cannot be said to be 'statistically' significant or representative. Qualitative work is particularly strong at bringing to life the 'lived experience' of participants, and can help others understand the experiences of others more fully. Although a considered approach was taken to sampling for this study, those 23 Members out of 70 approached who agreed to take part were not representative of the House in terms of party composition. Further, participants were invited to discuss those areas of most importance to them, or those where they had strong praise or criticism. They were not asked to discuss every aspect of House service, or each of the APPG recommendations. As such, the lack of data on some areas cannot be taken to mean that they are or are not important: the data were not collected in such a way as to allow assessments of this kind to be made. But they do give a real sense of some of the issues experienced by women, particularly as a result

¹ Women in Parliament APPG, July 2014



of living and working in two geographical centres. The findings are analysed and presented to show the issues which are important to those who took part.

This report was drafted by Abbi Hobbs (social sciences adviser, Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology, Department of Information Services), and Patsy Richards (Head of Customer Services, DIS). Abbi Hobbs and Nitin Mehta (customer insight co-ordinator, Customer Services Team, DIS) analysed the findings. We thank the members of the House-wide trained interview squad, listed at section 7.2, who conducted the interviews. Most of all we thank the Members, both men and women, who spoke to us or took part in a focus group.

2. Executive Summary

Participants in this study explained the fundamental tensions of the role of being a Member of Parliament. Some of these challenges were felt to be more difficult for women or minority groups, either directly or indirectly, because of roles or responsibilities that women were more likely to hold (such as caring for young children or elderly relatives).

Members whose constituencies are outside London, many far outside, have to balance working and living in two places. Members attend Chamber, committee and other business at Westminster for part of the week, travelling back to deal with constituency matters towards the end of the week and at weekends. Of course the two aspects of the role are in reality indivisible, and for example constituents seek help facing urgent issues at all times. While based at Westminster, parents or carers may not have the support networks that exist at home, and the unpredictability of Parliamentary business remains an issue for those who need to pick up children in the week from the nursery or school at fixed times.

Participants in this study reported that progress has been made in terms of the experience of being a woman MP, associated with an increasing number of women MPs as well as initiatives such as the nursery, and allowing children into the division lobbies. Yet even so, participants described a model of service provision that assumes a male MP with a supportive partner in the constituency.

Elements of the culture at Westminster remain challenging and those mentioned included a general lack of diversity among Members and staff, behaviour in the Chamber during PMQs, and networking in bars.

Some of these areas lie outside the House administration's influence. However, there are some areas where respondents suggested some practical improvements which could be made. This report highlights these areas; they may seem relatively modest suggestions. But together with the APPG recommendations, and future work in this area, they may start to form a basis for change.

The main points raised by Members in this study, particularly relating to what the House authorities could do to improve things practically, are collected below.

Reflecting on the APPG report on women in Parliament, many participants highlighted the APPG recommendations around rebalancing parliamentary and constituency priorities, and improving the predictability of the Parliamentary calendar. There was widespread agreement that these two aspects of working as an MP were the most challenging – to both men and women – but particularly for those with caring responsibilities. However, there were differing perspectives as to whether this could be addressed, and if so how best to do so.

The culture of Westminster was frequently raised as challenging to female MPs, or MPs from minority backgrounds, and in addition was thought to give the public a negative image of Parliament.



Not all Members are comfortable asking other Members for advice, or know which House officials to ask. Some would prefer to refer to online written guidance, if it was easy enough to navigate, covering both procedural advice and practical information.

Members would like more guidance from IPSA, such as on which office goods can be requested when Members are caring for a young child.

Some Members suggested that the family room could be staffed in the evenings by a qualified child minder as an alternative to extending nursery hours.

Several Members thought the rule about the age limit of children in the lobbies should be reviewed, with a view to raising this.

A small number of Members who used the nursery raised its scale of charges, during recess periods.

Members recognised the cost implications of keeping catering outlets open. But they considered that the reduced opening hours of the Debate canteen had removed the option of obtaining hot, whole meals for children and themselves in a suitable canteen environment while working evenings when the House was sitting. This may be disadvantaging some groups, such as parents, those with medical conditions, or those with caring responsibilities.

Members would welcome a kiosk for 'essential sundries' (or at least a means of purchasing these at one of the catering outlets).

Members showed a high degree of concern for the safety and well-being of their staff, particularly those working in constituency offices. They require well-advertised sources of security advice for themselves and their staff, including personal briefings whenever requested. (All such advice would need to be provided in a joined-up manner by IPSA, SAA, the Parliamentary Security Director and the Metropolitan Police Service.)

Members would welcome clear guidance, or briefing if there is sufficient demand, as to the support available to them if they have concerns about or are experiencing problems related to on-line abuse.

Members wondered whether IPSA had taken sufficient account of the equality issues (through an equality assessment for example) surrounding its rules around travel and taxis, including the implications for those travelling with children.

3. Introduction

In May 2012 the Administration Committee recommended to the House of Commons Management Board that it replace the annual survey of Members and Members' Staff with a detailed series of interviews of Members and their staff conducted by specially trained House staff. These interviews took place in 2013/14.² A report based on interviews of Members and their staff was submitted to the Committee. The Committee published that report on its website and also asked a number of senior House officials to appear before it so that the Committee could review its conclusions. On 12 May 2014, the Committee endorsed the approach of seeking qualitative research on House services and agreed that two smaller-scale interview projects should take place in 2014/15 focusing on women's experience in Parliament and separately, the experience of MPs standing down. This report presents the findings on women's experience in Parliament.

This work was commissioned by the Administration Committee of the 2010-2015 Parliament, but is reporting to the new Administration Committee in the 2015-2020 Parliament.³

4. Methods

The study was designed to enable Members of Parliament to share and explore their own experiences and perceptions about women MPs' experience in Parliament and how the House might best support their needs. A qualitative approach was taken to allow participants to focus on those issues of most importance to them, and to obtain more nuanced and complete accounts than would be possible using a survey with closed questions. A standard interview schedule (see Appendix 7.1) was developed to explore a number of key areas including:

- The nature of their work and any specific barriers or challenges for women MPs or minority groups;
- House services and how effectively they support women MPs and MPs from minority groups, building on the recommendations of the APPG for Women in Parliament report.⁴

Data collection was carried out by a small group of House staff (see Appendix 7.2). Interviews lasted between thirty minutes and one hour and were conducted at a location that was convenient for the participant. Most interviews were conducted in pairs, with one interviewer taking the lead on questions and another serving as primary note-taker. Interviewer pairing provided a good opportunity for validity checks on the accuracy of written transcripts. Participants were assured that the data would be held securely and treated confidentially, with access restricted to the study team, and that individuals would not be identified in the reporting of data. In addition, one focus group was conducted and one paired interview was conducted, because these allowed

² <http://www.parliament.uk/documents/commons-committees/admin-committee/Members-and-Members-staff-interview-project-doc.pdf>

³ Some readers of this report may not be aware that House committees cease to exist when the House 'dissolves' for a general election. They re-form afterwards, and may have only limited overlapping membership.

⁴ Women in Parliament All Party Parliamentary Group *Improving Parliament Creating a better and more representative House* July 2014

issues to be contested or negotiated through group interaction, and highlighted shared experiences and consensus in relation to a specific topic. Participants were assured that the findings of the study and the considerations of the Administration Committee would be reported back to them.

The interview transcripts were analysed independently by two coders (Abbi Hobbs and Nitin Mehta). The coding was then compared to identify recurring themes, based on implicit and explicit ideas within the data. Section 5 describes the nature of the work of MPs and any specific barriers or challenges for women MPs or other minority groups. Section 6 describes the dominant issues for the study participants in terms of House services and how effectively they support women MPs, building on the recommendations of the APPG for Women in Parliament report.⁵ Some indication of the frequency with which issues were raised is given, although high frequency does not necessarily equate to the issues that have most positive or negative impact on women MPs. As such, less frequently cited concerns have also been outlined below, where participants have indicated that these are having a major impact on their working practices and are likely to have wider relevance.

4.1. Sampling and participant characteristics

To ensure that different groups of Members were included, the sampling frame for Member interviews was stratified according to gender, political party, age and ethnicity. Participants were then selected at random from within these strata. Female Members were intentionally heavily over-represented to ensure that their perceptions were captured. The resulting sample also over-represents Labour MPs, likely due to the higher number of Labour women MPs in the previous Parliament and a number of other factors that influence decisions on whether to respond, including existing time commitments in the pre-dissolution period. Although the number of non-Labour MPs interviewed was relatively low we did not discern any party differences in response. Those interviewed varied in length of service, with 5 years being the most common, but with some interviewees having been Members for up to 18 years.

In total, between November 2014 and March 2015, 17 one-to-one interviews, one paired interview, and one focus group (with four MPs) took place, involving a total of 23 Members. Table 1 shows the number of Members selected in the sample and invited to be interviewed/ participate in a focus group alongside the resulting number of Members that participated in the study and the associated response rate.

Table 1: Members in the sample and response rate by Party

	Members sampled	Agreed to interview	Response rate (%)
Conservative	20	4	20
Labour	35	14	40
Lib Dem	8	2	25
Others	7	3	43
Total	70	23	33

⁵ Ibid.

Table 2 shows the distribution of Members who were interviewed broken down by party and gender. A breakdown of interviewees by age or ethnicity is not provided as this might enable Members to be identified.

Table 2: Members interviewed by gender and party

	Females	Males	Total
Conservative	2	2	4
Labour	14	0	14
Liberal Democrat	1	1	2
Others	3	0	3
Total	20	3	23

One of the three male MPs had children, and 13 of the 20 female MPs had children.

4.2. Limitations

Although a considered approach was taken to sampling for this study, there were challenges in recruitment as outlined above and the sample was not representative of the wider House in terms of party composition. Further, owing to the qualitative nature of this study, participants were invited to discuss those areas of most importance to them, or those where they had strong praise or criticism, and were not asked to discuss every aspect of House service, or each of the APPG recommendations. As such, the lack of data on some areas cannot be taken to mean that they are or are not important: the data were not collected in such a way as to allow assessments of this kind to be made. However, the strength of the qualitative approach is that the real experiences of women Members are brought to life, and a greater understanding possible of the particular barriers by them in their work as an MP.

5. Perceptions of women MPs' experiences

Overall, most participants thought that progress had been made in terms of the experience of being a woman MP, either drawing on their own experiences over time if they were a long-standing MP, or based on hearing about the experiences of others where they had joined Parliament in 2010.

For example, one female MP felt that when she had joined in 1997 it was a "deeply male organisation, run as a public school" and that she received sexist comments from male MPs as well as House staff, such as doorkeepers. However, she thought that the culture changed within 6 months due to the sheer increase in numbers of women MPs. She felt, for example, that the Members' Tea Room now felt like an inclusive place in a modern workplace. Another noted that when she had joined in 2005 male MPs had treated her as either a "secretary, daughter or mistress", but similarly felt that the culture had since improved. A minority of participants, largely long-standing, did not consider gender to be a challenge at all in the current Parliament compared to how it had been when they had first joined the House. A few highlighted that some female Members do not wish to be associated with the woman/sexism issue and avoid it at all costs.

Others felt that Westminster offered support and services using the model of an older male MP with a supportive wife in the constituency, largely because Westminster is still run by older men. Many perceived gender to remain one factor that made working as

an MP more difficult, and stressed that further improvements needed to be made. For example, one MP who entered the House in 2010 said that “It’s only since I became an MP that I realised I’m a woman”, and that she didn’t feel she used to be a ‘feminist’ but now she felt she was back in the 70s and had to be. The majority of participants also mentioned other factors, such as regional accents, class and disability as key challenges. Most felt that there was a need for more diversity across the whole of Parliament, and a few noted this was also desirable for House staff.

Two key challenges to working as an MP were described, which were felt to be more difficult for women or minority groups, either directly or indirectly, because of roles or responsibilities that women were more likely to hold (such as caring for young children or elderly relatives). The first of these relates to the culture of Westminster, and the second to the unpredictability of Parliamentary business and the need to balance work and life in their constituencies with their work and life in Westminster.

5.1. The culture of Westminster

The culture of Westminster was frequently raised as challenging to female MPs, or MPs from minority backgrounds, and was thought to give the public a negative image of Parliament. Some participants said that it felt like a public school, and could be experienced as very unwelcoming to people from different backgrounds, including women, especially where they came from other professional backgrounds that were not hostile. One MP described the Palace as more like a museum than a functional office, and welcomed the more modern atmosphere of Portcullis House. Another MP highlighted the antiquated tone of language used in the chamber, such as “My Right Hon friend”, “the Hon member for ...” etc., as a problem, considering that a less formal approach and simply referencing Members as Mr/Mrs/Ms etc. would be less intimidating.

Participants described other manifestations of this including being asked for their pass more often if they were female or from an ethnic minority, mimicking of high voices or other gender-specific distracting actions in the Chamber, and comments about what they are wearing. Others highlighted that the allocation of roles was still largely by patronage, with networking conducted in male-dominated bars across the estate, which worked against Members who did not frequent those spaces. Some also considered that there was a lack of clarity over the administrative rules and procedures in Parliament, such as what equipment they could request in their offices, stationery and postal allocations and so forth. Interviewees considered that although staff were generally helpful when asked, women may be less confident at demanding information from staff, and at navigating a system based on knowing who and what to ask. They felt that having staff explicitly available to ask, or more written or on-line information that they could browse themselves, would be more helpful.

Not all Members are comfortable asking other Members for advice, or know which House officials to ask. Some would prefer to refer to online written guidance, if it was easy enough to navigate, covering both procedural advice and practical information.

5.2. Unprofessional behaviour

A slight majority of participants felt that the House does not have a professional culture, and for some this was considered to perpetuate a public-school boy ethos. In particular, MPs pointed to unprofessional behaviour in the Chamber, including during Prime Minister's Questions. Most emphasised that 'banter' and 'passion' were acceptable and that they would not want it to change beyond recognition. There was not agreement as to whether this was a gender-specific issue, as it made many men uncomfortable too, with much mocking directed towards Members with regional accents, and even disabilities. There was wide agreement that offensive behaviour, abuse and heckling should be addressed, as having to shout in order to be heard above the noise did not appear to be in keeping with a modern democracy.

Participants suggested that in order to eliminate this, the Speaker, his Deputies, the party whips and the House Authorities needed to work together. Suggested actions included expelling Members from the Chamber if their behaviour is unacceptable. One participant felt that care would need to be taken to ensure that any kind of green/red card warning system didn't become a badge of honour like issuing a warning has become. Suggestions included that the Speaker should write to the Member's constituency party and that education of Members on this issue would be desirable, as would be establishing a contract between each party and the Administration Committee about standards of behaviour in the Chamber. It is worth noting that one MP did not think that creating a zero tolerance response to unprofessional behaviour in the Chamber was the responsibility of the House on the basis that she considered interactions between Members in the Chamber to have their own "corrective mechanism". If party colleagues or others felt that a Member had behaved badly this could be dealt with outside of the Chamber (in the tea room for example) rather than in the Chamber itself.

It lies beyond the scope of this report to suggest remedies but participants noted the contrast between the behaviour in the Chamber during PMQs and the more constructive atmosphere in Committees. One participant suggested more visibility during PMQs through different camera angles showing the behaviour of those not contributing directly. **The hours and predictability of the Parliamentary timetable and the balance between work and life in constituencies and Westminster**

Similar to the findings of our first interview study on House services, participants emphasised the multiple conflicting demands on the time of MPs.⁶ For example, participants outlined that while many jobs that entail long or unsociable hours were challenging for everyone to balance work and family life, whatever their profession, Members have the additional complication of having to do this in two locations: Westminster and their constituency. Many MPs described how moving between their constituency and Westminster, often at unsociable hours, had caused difficulties for them, especially in terms of managing childcare and accessing healthcare.

The key issue here was that because MPs were working away from home, they did not have access to the informal networks of support that they had in their constituencies for when last-minute changes or issues arose. Further, some women had young children with them full-time while older school-aged children were with their partner in

⁶ <http://www.parliament.uk/documents/commons-committees/admin-committee/Members-and-Members-staff-interview-project-doc.pdf>



the constituency, meaning that they had to operate substantially as a single parent for the time that they were in London. One MP felt that this could result in Members making inappropriate calls on their staff. Although it was stressed that caring for children or elderly relatives could apply to both female and male MPs, often women were the lead caregivers and so faced particular challenges as a result.

Reflecting on the APPG report on women in Parliament, many participants highlighted the APPG recommendations around rebalancing parliamentary and constituency priorities, and improving the predictability of the Parliamentary calendar. There was widespread agreement that these two aspects of working as an MP were the most challenging – to both men and women – but particularly for those with caring responsibilities. However, there were differing perspectives as to whether this could be addressed, and if so how best to do so.

For example, while many supported the improved predictability of the Parliamentary calendar, and some felt that this should be possible to address, others were unsure how this might work in practice or perceived it as unfeasible given that the scheduling of business was used as a key political tool. Most (but not all) participants viewed the recent changes to the sitting hours positively, but some did not feel that further changes should be made to this. For example, many stressed that earlier finish times were undoubtedly helpful for Members who lived in London, but were not that useful to those who lived elsewhere. Those Members would prefer to make their time in London as productive as possible and then travel back to their family – and that this applied equally to women and men.

Of those that raised it, there was disagreement as to whether electronic voting may help MPs with caring responsibilities; some disliked the thought of electronic voting. One participant suggested that any votes after 3pm could be deferred to the evening, and then voted on in bulk, to enable Members to collect children from school. There was also a lack of clear agreement around the balance of duties between Westminster and constituencies. Some participants felt that the weekly timetable should be altered to enable MPs to return to their constituencies earlier in the week, others felt that more sitting time in Westminster may be necessary, depending for example on the amount of legislation.

A few participants, including a male MP, thought that the perceived culture and challenges of working as an MP deterred some women, including some excellent candidates, from standing for election. One described being encouraged to stand when she had young children, but then deciding to wait until they were 18 because of the difficulties. A number of participants stressed that being an MP was a way of life rather than a job, and that difficult choices had to be made, such as whether to move one's family down to London, especially given property prices in the capital. Many MPs, male and female, felt that they had missed out, especially when they had had young families. They thought that candidates should be well aware of this when they stand for election. Nonetheless, the majority felt that everything possible should be done to improve working conditions – including for Members' staff.

6. House services and support

Most participants felt that the challenges described above could not be overcome by the House Authorities alone. Rather, there was a large role for the parties in encouraging a more diverse group of people to stand as candidates, to put women forward to the media, and to support their Members more effectively when they were in challenging circumstances - for example with commitments in respect of young children or elderly relatives. Further, participants acknowledged that many of the key challenges around the unpredictability of the Parliamentary timetable and the balance between constituency and Westminster duties are largely out of the hands of the House Authorities.

That said, overall, whether participants felt that gender was a particular issue or not, the vast majority of participants (including the male ones) felt that there were a number of specific issues that could be addressed by the House Authorities. These would likely mean that the work of all MPs, but especially women and other minority groups in terms of the proportion of MPs, were more effectively supported. A number of suggestions were put forward surrounding general aspects of House service that required improvement, but which were not specific to women MPs. Many of these related to induction and ongoing training opportunities, and most were closely in line with the findings of the previous interview study and therefore not covered again here. A number of participants specifically highlighted the need for media training - both in relation to traditional forms and social media. Key areas not previously discussed are outlined below.

6.1. Support for those with childcare or caring responsibilities

A few participants found the lack of understanding of some issues parents and carers in Westminster face “shocking” in the modern age. Many participants referred to a lack of flexibility in the rules surrounding expenses for those with caring responsibilities (see section 6.4 below). One MP suggested that if a greater number of the informal rules and processes were written down, and Westminster was treated as a modern workplace, that it may also help to ‘open-up’ the Commons and would encourage more diversity and culture change. The majority of participants considered that clearer guidance on what support was available to any Member with caring responsibilities (including care for children and relatives) would be beneficial. For example, a few Members said that they had been unaware whether they could request a cot, bathing equipment or a fridge in their office when they were caring for a young child.

Members would like more guidance from IPSA, such as on which office goods can be requested when Members are caring for a young child.

Many participants highlighted that no formal maternity leave exists for MPs, and that maternity leave cover could not be put in place, although the whips have informal arrangements in place to excuse MPs from voting after 6pm if they have a baby. The pressure to come back after having a child was therefore great, particularly in relation to constituency surgery duties. Many Members who had children felt that although the duties of an MP (including voting) could not be readily conferred on someone who was unelected, funds could have been provided to pay for extra staff to deal with constituency and other matters during a period of maternity leave. This could include

money for extra office support to attend meetings on the MP's behalf to at least monitor and keep track of progress on cases and particular issues.

This was especially the case as it was felt not always appropriate to have office staff attend meetings in place of an MP – but it was suggested that perhaps a local councillor or other senior person could do so, take notes and ensure that these are fed back to the office staff to enable them to continue working effectively in the MPs absence. This would need to be flexible so as to enable the MP to dip back in as necessary – for example some matters could not be resolved by anyone else – and if the MP worked for one day, it should not be taken to mean the end of maternity leave. Some participants highlighted that women MPs are often criticised for taking any time off for having babies and a formal cross-House policy would send a message that it is acceptable.

The second relates to the hours of the Parliamentary calendar, and the need to vote in person. All participants who raised it praised the change in rules to allow Members to take a child through the division lobby, which was considered a step towards modernising the workplace. However, especially for those MPs with children, the cut-off age of one year old was considered arbitrary and unhelpful, as Members may well have children of two/three years with them when they needed to go and vote. Those Members that used the nursery praised it very highly, although a couple found it expensive, because they had to continue paying for a place in recess when they were also paying childcare costs in their constituency. In addition, those who used the nursery emphasised that it has fixed hours and closed at 6pm, which did not match the House's sitting hours. Consequently, Members had to leave very young children either in the whips office or with staff or colleagues, when they would prefer to keep them with them.

Some Members suggested that the family room could be staffed in the evenings by a qualified child minder as an alternative to extending nursery hours.

Several Members thought the rule about the age limit of children in the lobbies should be reviewed, with a view to raising this.

A small number of Members who used the nursery raised its scale of charges, during recess periods.

6.2. Catering and facilities

A key issue for a number of participants was around catering facilities. It was noted that there was not a suitable venue for feeding children after 6.00pm when they had collected them from the nursery, following the change in opening hours for the Debate.

After that time only the Adjournment was open, and participants felt this was unsuitable for young children, both in terms of food choices and atmosphere. It was intended to be a fine dining experience and was stressful for them and other people when they were looking after a child. By contrast, they had favoured the Debate as it was light and airy and had more suitable food choices. This was a key issue for Members with young children as they needed to feed their children before keeping them with them in their office for the evening – especially when there was a late vote.

Members recognised the cost implications of keeping catering outlets open. But they considered that the reduced opening hours of the Debate canteen had removed the option of obtaining hot, whole meals for children and themselves in a suitable canteen environment while working evenings when the House was sitting. This may be disadvantaging some groups, such as parents, those with medical conditions, or those with caring responsibilities.

With regard to the facilities available to Members, such as the families' room, and the Lady Member rooms, there was very positive feedback, with participants that raised this noting that they used these and found them pleasant spaces. Many participants highlighted the lack of women's toilets in the Palace, especially around the Chamber. A few Members thought that it would be helpful to have a pharmacist on the estate, or somewhere to purchase tights, painkillers, sanitary products and so forth (the Scottish Parliament has such a small kiosk in the Garden Lobby, as a result of an earlier Members' interview study). Three participants felt that even though they were not employed by the House, there should be better welfare support and counselling services provided, both to MPs and staff.

Members would welcome a kiosk for 'essential sundries' (or at least a means of purchasing these at one of the catering outlets).

6.3. Security

Security was raised as a key concern by many participants; this related both to their constituency offices and their accommodation in London and largely related to what expenses they could or could not claim under IPSA rules (see section 6.4 below). In line with the findings from the previous interview study, it was felt that the limitations of the office allowance that could be claimed meant offices could often only be situated in out of town areas, or deprived areas of town, where rentals were below premium. This had potential implications for the security of staff, who were often women working alone or in pairs. Participants also stressed that security is important as staff can be at risk due to the number of constituents they deal with that have mental health issues. MPs as employers have a duty of care for their staff, and they stressed that IPSA rules must allow them to fulfil this. As a result of the earlier study, the House authorities now run regional and country constituency events at which security briefings are provided. IPSA also attend and advise what can be claimed.

Others raised concerns about safety in their London accommodation. Although there is a separate allowance for security measures in their constituency offices, most participants understood that they had to pay for security measures for their London home from the London accommodation budget, which because of the very high rental prices in London was very difficult to do. One Member thought that IPSA would pay for this if there was evidence of a credible threat, but was unsure what constituted a credible threat. A few MPs gave examples of incidents involving stalkers, and those with knives and guns, which although not just issues for women, were ones where some women felt they were more vulnerable. A few were aware that concerns could be reported to the Police or via the Sergeant at Arms; but others did not know this and referred to difficulties in getting advice and support. Additional issues around travel are raised in the next section.

Members showed a high degree of concern for the safety and well-being of their staff, particularly those working in constituency offices. They require well-advertised sources of security advice for themselves and their staff, including personal briefings whenever requested. (All such advice would need to be provided in a joined-up manner by IPSA, SAA, the Parliamentary Security Director and the Metropolitan Police Service.)

A separate concern raised by a few Members related to online abuse, which they felt disproportionately affected women. Although it was not discussed in detail, a few participants thought that the House could provide training around dealing with traditional and online media, and provide clearer guidance as to the support available to Members if they have concerns or are experiencing problems.

Members would welcome clear guidance, or briefing if there is sufficient demand, as to the support available to them if they have concerns about or are experiencing problems related to on-line abuse.

6.4. IPSA

Members were aware that this study was focused on House services, and that IPSA is independent from the House. Although this was frequently emphasised by interviewers, some of the key actions surrounding security, flexibility and guidance related to IPSA and so have been incorporated into the discussion.

Overall, the key issue raised by participants relating to IPSA was the need for flexibility for Members with caring responsibilities, especially where their constituency was not within easy reach of London. Some felt that IPSA, much like Parliament itself, ran on the model of a male MP with a supportive partner in the constituency. A few noted that IPSA do allow some 'work-arounds' but that they don't advertise this, instead encouraging Members to get in touch. This was felt to be laborious, could lead to inconsistent decision-making, creating more work for everyone, and meant that some people do without because they are unaware of what to ask for. Rather, participants called for clearer and more specific guidance – as well as more flexibility around travel in particular, but also accommodation.

In relation to travel there were two restrictions that were felt to impact disproportionately on women. One related to travel budgets for spouses/partners and children. Participants noted that there was a lack of clarity as to the rules around travel expenses for spouses and children, but most highlighted that the allowance only covered travel for children if they were under a certain age and that it did not include travel for spouses/ partners, or another adults travelling with them, unless the MP was travelling with them. Consequently, if the MP was in London, the allowances did not cover expenses for their partner to travel down from their constituency with their child. Although this applies equally to men and women, it was felt to be a particular problem for women MPs with young children.

The second issue related to expenses to cover taxis. Many women stressed that if they were travelling between Westminster and their London accommodation, or back to their constituencies when it was dark, they would prefer to take a taxi as they felt it was safer. They were concerned that this was not allowed under IPSA guidance unless it was past a specific hour, and that even then it was subject to disclosure under the Freedom



of Information Act, which deterred many women from so doing. In addition, some participants stressed that where they were travelling with a young child they would find it helpful to be able to take a taxi rather than public transport at any hour, as they tended to have lots of luggage as well as a child to carry. Others noted that when they travelled to their constituency there was no public transport, so there was no other option but to take a taxi. Most emphasised that clear and specific guidance from IPSA would benefit all MPs, but especially women with children, who may be unnecessarily worried about claiming additional expenses due to the continued fallout from the expenses scandal.

Members wondered whether IPSA had taken sufficient account of the equality issues (through an equality assessment for example) surrounding its rules around travel and taxis, including the implications for those travelling with children.

A few participants also highlighted a lack of flexibility around accommodation for all MPs with children. MPs are now allowed only a one bedroom home in London, which means that MPs with families struggle with children sleeping on sofas, in particular when children visit in school holidays. One highlighted that MPs need to live in two places and that their expenses should reflect this. One male MP stressed the importance of being able to create a good environment for a happy family, and felt that if they had children, IPSA should permit them to have some room for them in their second home.

7. Appendices

7.1. Interview template

Interview Guide - Members (30 mins)

Interviewer introduction (2 mins)

Thank you so much for seeing me. At the request of the Administration Committee, we are interviewing MPs about the quality of services that the House provides. Last year, we asked Members and their staff to tell us about which services they most use/value and any suggestions for improvements. We have already undertaken a number of actions as a result of this research. For example, we have now started undertaking regional constituency events to better assess and meet the needs of staff in constituency offices.

This year, the Administration Committee has asked us to focus in part on women's experience in Parliament. This builds on the work of the APPG for Women in Parliament report 'Improving Parliament - creating a better and more representative House.'

[NB. Please ensure that you are familiar with the APPG report. Show the Member the report and ask them if they have already come across it. If not, explain that the aim of the inquiry was to act as a catalyst for positive change for the existing and future generation of female MPs to allow women to achieve their potential in politics, and to achieve a representative and diverse Parliament. If the Member asks for more info, please note that we have consulted Mary Macleod MP, the chairman of the APPG Women in Parliament, on our plans. A list of the key recommendations from the report is attached in the Annex. However, there were additional recommendations around training and other areas it may be useful to mention].

The APPG report is extremely timely because it provides much needed evidence that we would otherwise have wanted to gather. It gives us the opportunity to focus in our work on how House services can be improved to better support women Members, taking into account their recommendations

We wish to approach this interview in a very open way so that you can tell us what is important rather than presenting you with a long list of narrow tick-box questions. The interview will take about 30 minutes and during it I/my colleague will be taking notes. All the information will be treated confidentially and when we report back to the Administration Committee, we will anonymise all comments and suggestions. We will take great care to protect your confidentiality. Of course, you don't have to talk about anything you don't want to and you may end the interview at any time.

Please let me know if you would like to know more about this exercise or, are you happy if I start off?

About you and your work (~10 mins)

The aim of this section is to get a better understanding of what MPs' views are towards their job, how they feel that the House supports them in their work, and whether they think that there are specific barriers or challenges for women MPs/ other minority groups.

- So to start off with, what have your experiences been since joining the House? In what ways has the House supported/ not supported you to achieve what you wanted to in your work?



- Do you think that there are any specific barriers or challenges for women MPs?
- Are these the same across women with/without caring responsibilities [NB. To include children and older relatives/ friends]? What about for men with caring responsibilities? Or other minority groups?

About improving House services and support (~15 mins)

The aim of this section is to get a better understanding of what more the House could do to provide effective support for women MPs, picking up on the recommendations of the APPG report.

[NB. Please offer the MP the list of key recommendations to inspect. If they noted at the start that they had not heard of the report previously, please outline a couple of these to give them time to glance over the page].

These are the key findings of the APPG report. For example, they recommended that there needed to be a zero tolerance response to unprofessional behaviour in the Chamber, and that Members need more flexibility so that they can better balance their work in the House, with being visible in their local communities.

- Looking at these recommendations, are there any that you feel strongly about? Either because you agree or don't agree?
- What more do you think that the House administration can do to better support women MPs - either in relation to these recommendations or in regard to other aspects of House Administration?
- For example, are there any other new services/ facilities that you think should be provided to better support women? Or changes to existing services/ facilities?

Additional comments, next steps and thank you (~5 mins)

- Find out whether there is anything more they would like to add about how they think that the House could better support women MPs, or any other aspects of the interview.
- We will be analysing the information you and others have given us and submitting a draft report to the Administration Committee in February 2015.
- Thank you for your time.

Member's Name:

Interviewer's Name:

Date:

7.2. List of House staff involved in study

John Benger, Director of Service Delivery, DIS
Myfanwy Barrett, Director of Finance, DFin
Patsy Richards, Head of Customer Services, DIS
Abbi Hobbs, Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology, DIS
Judith Boyce, Table Office, DCCS
Louise Butcher, Business and Transport Library Section, DIS
Tara Cullen, Department of Human Resources and Change, DHRC
Katy Gray, Work and Pensions Committee, DCCS
Rachael Harker, Social and General Statistics Library Section, DIS
Caroline Kenny, Parliamentary Office of Science & Technology, DIS
Nitin Mehta, Customer Services Team, DIS
Catherine Meredith, Indexing & Data Management Section, DIS
Alison Penman, Customer Services Team, DIS
Sarah Petit, Public Accounts Committee, DCCS
Djuna Thurley, Business and Transport Library Section, DIS