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**COMMUNICATION**

by

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on

**“Parental leave in the United Kingdom House of Commons”**

**Geneva Session**  
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## **THEME: Parenthood and parliament**

### Parental leave in the United Kingdom House of Commons

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As of March 2024 there are 226 women in the UK House of Commons, the highest ever. This remains an all-time high at 35% and is the first time that female representation in the House of Commons is at more than a third.

Provision for mothers, and also for fathers, remains rather incomplete.

The House of Commons normally meets on four days a week for about 33 weeks a year. With 650 single-Member electoral districts, Members are normally expected to reside in their constituencies and travel to London in sitting weeks.

In practice parents of small children can find it hard to meet expectations from their voters and from party group managers (“Whips”).

For many years the House of Commons has operated a limited form of proxy voting called “nodding through”. A gentleman’s agreement between the two Chief Whips allows a Member’s vote to be recorded on their behalf if for any reason they were incapable of walking through the lobby (voting corridor) but only if they were physically present on the Estate.

More widespread is the Whips’ practice of allowing Members permission (a “slip”) to miss votes. Slightly more formally, Members may register with their party Whips a “pair” so that their absence from a vote is matched by the absence of another Member who would have voted on the opposite side. These informal Whips’ arrangements are not formally recorded in the proceedings of the House.

None of these practices (nodding through, slips or pairings) is specifically designed to assist parents of young children but they may help Members responsible for the care of small children.

During the pandemic, proxy voting was permitted as a public health measure to allow hundreds of votes to be recorded even when very few Members were present.

Currently, a Member of the House of Commons is eligible for a proxy vote only by reason of—

- (a) childbirth;
- (b) care of an infant or newly adopted child;
- (c) complications relating to childbirth, miscarriage or baby loss; and
- (d) serious long-term illness or injury.

A proposal is currently being considered to extend proxy voting to Members if they are excluded from the precincts of Parliament during the investigation of a serious allegation against them relating to a violent or sexual offence.

In the official guidance on Rules of Behaviour and Courtesies in the House of Commons, Members are advised that they may take babies or toddlers with them into the division lobby, and – if necessary to get to the division lobby – take them through the Chamber. For safety reasons, Members are asked to carry their child and not to bring pushchairs through the lobby. Members should not take their seat in the Chamber when accompanied by a child, nor stand with a child at either end of the Chamber, between divisions.

In June 2022, the Procedure Committee reviewed the guidance and recommended that the current guidance should be retained.

During 2023, 9 children of MPs (4 mothers, 5 fathers) had places at the House of Commons nursery, which provided places to 40 children in total. The nursery, which was established in 2010, also provided 25 places to children of House of Commons staff and 10 places to children of staff in central government departments.

The Ministerial and other Maternity Allowances Act 2021 provides for the Prime Minister to appoint a current Government Minister to the position of ‘Minister on Leave’ for a time-limited period for six months, in order to enable the Minister in question to take paid maternity leave.

The Parliamentary Standards Act 2009 created a separate body to set the amounts, conduct payments and regulate the salaries, travel, accommodation and office costs of MPs and also the salaries and office costs of their personal parliamentary staff.

The Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority (IPSA) does not provide for parental leave for Members of Parliament.

IPSA has provided funding for an additional senior member of staff to support constituency duties, while a Member is absent on informal maternity leave. The additional employee cannot vote or speak in the Commons Chamber, and may also be excluded from representing the Member at meetings with Ministers.