



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

Achieving a Parliament For All A dh'ionnsaigh Pàrlamaid do na h-uile

Report of the Gender Sensitive Parliament Advisory Group 2026
Aithisg na Buidhne Comhairleachaidh air Pàrlamaid a tha
mothachail air gnè 2026



parliament.scot



Contents

Foreword	04
1 Introduction	06
A Parliament for All	
2 Governance and Delivery	07
Establishing Ongoing Ownership of Change	
2.1 The enabling recommendation	07
2.2 Establishment of the Gender Sensitive Parliament Advisory Group	07
2.3 How the work was progressed across the Parliament	08
2.4 Why this governance model matters as a legacy	08
3 Progress Across Session 6	09
3.1 Gender Sensitising Procedures and Processes	09
3.2 Equal Representation	12
3.3 Equal Participation	14
3.4 Parliamentary Culture	16
3.5 Gender Equality Mainstreaming	17
4 Impact and Learning from Session 6	20
4.1 Moving from recommendations to embedded practice	20
4.2 The role of parliamentary scrutiny in shaping outcomes	21
4.3 Progress achieved and areas where change takes longer	21
4.4 Lessons for future parliamentary reform	22
5 Looking Ahead to Session 7	23
6 Conclusion	24

Foreword

When the 'A Parliament for All' report was published in 2023, it was against a backdrop of the highest percentage of women elected to the Scottish Parliament since 1999. Something to be celebrated of course, but history has shown us that progress toward equality cannot be taken for granted.

Ensuring that women's voices can be heard at the heart of Scotland's democracy is vital. Research has shown us that, across the globe, women's representation in parliaments is not always reflective of their representation in society, and that they can be denied real power in those parliaments.

Undertaking a 'gender sensitive audit' allowed us to explore what was happening at the Scottish Parliament and look at our rules, practices and cultures to see how these supported equal representation and participation.

Reflecting on this work, four enduring lessons stand out:

- Institutional ownership is essential - reform must be led, coordinated and sustained.
- Evidence supports change - robust data strengthens transparency and accountability.

- Guidance alone is insufficient - leadership, training and shared experience embed reform.
- Reform is iterative - progress develops over time and must be reviewed and strengthened.

The audit made it clear that change was needed and the Report included a number of recommendations to deliver this change. These included:

- Proxy voting
- Better data collection
- Rule changes to improve representation on key bodies and committees

But the Report was just the beginning of work which must last beyond this Parliamentary session and my time as Presiding Officer. While we have seen real change and, I hope, made an impact to those women in Parliament today and those who come in the future, there is still more to do.

We know that other legislatures are looking to the Scottish Parliament and view our work as leading the way in this area. And it is vital that this work continues.

This report is an opportunity for the cross-party Gender Sensitive Parliament Advisory Group to pass this work on to those who will be elected following the 2026 election. It has been a privilege to lead this work and see the real impact this has had. It will be for those who follow to ensure that this progress continues.

I want to thank all of those who have been involved in this work, from the elected Members who served on the cross-party Gender Sensitive Audit Board and Advisory Group, to the fantastic external experts who have supported our ambitions to make a real difference, and the Parliament staff, many of whom volunteered to work on this project.

Change doesn't happen by itself. It is because of the work of everyone involved that we have started to see transformation happen in the Parliament. It must continue and I look forward to seeing how this progresses.



Rt Hon Alison Johnstone MSP

Presiding Officer and
Chair of the Gender Sensitive
Parliament Advisory Group



1

Introduction

A Parliament for All

In February 2022, the Presiding Officer announced that the Scottish Parliament would undertake a Gender Sensitive Audit. The purpose was to examine **barriers to the equal participation and representation** of women in parliamentary life, and to assess whether parliamentary rules, practices, and culture supported gender equality in practice as well as principle.

The Audit was overseen by a Board involving MSPs from each party, parliamentary staff and external experts. Its findings and recommendations were published in March 2023 as A Parliament for All: Report of the Parliament's Gender Sensitive Audit. The report concluded that the Parliament had made progress, but that **equal representation and equal participation were not yet embedded** and required sustained, institutional action.

The Audit recommendations were designed to move beyond one-off initiatives and towards durable change - through improvements to parliamentary procedure, strengthening the conditions for equal representation and equal participation, supporting a healthier parliamentary culture, and embedding gender equality mainstreaming across scrutiny and parliamentary business.

This legacy report records the work taken forward during Session 6 in response to the Audit. It sets out:

- what was delivered;
- how change was implemented and overseen;
- where progress has been achieved; and
- The work that needs to continue in Session 7.

The intention is to support continuity and learning, ensuring that progress made during Session 6 is not time-limited, but as the foundation for continued development of a more gender sensitive Parliament.



2

Governance and Delivery Establishing Ongoing Ownership of Change

2.1 The enabling recommendation

Recommendation 1 of the Gender Sensitive Audit recognised that meaningful institutional change requires sustained leadership, coordination and accountability. It recommended the creation and resourcing of a Gender Sensitive Parliament Advisory Group, tasked by the Presiding Officer with overseeing delivery of the Audit recommendations and supporting continuous review and improvement, including through an intersectional lens.

2.2 Establishment of the Gender Sensitive Parliament Advisory Group

Following publication of A Parliament for All in March 2023, the Presiding Officer established and chaired the Gender Sensitive Parliament Advisory Group. The Advisory Group's membership brought together MSPs from across parties represented in the Parliament, alongside external expertise in gender and democratic participation. The Members of this group were:

- Rt Hon Alison Johnstone MSP, Presiding Officer (Chair)
- Maggie Chapman MSP, Scottish Green Party

- Ruth Maguire MSP, Scottish National Party
- Carol Mochan MSP, Scottish Labour Party
- Sue Webber MSP, Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party
- Beatrice Wishart MSP, Scottish Liberal Democrats
- Professor Sarah Childs, Personal Chair of Politics and Gender, University of Edinburgh
- Hannah Johnson, Senior Gender Adviser - INTER PARES
- Professor Meryl Kenny, Professor of Gender and Politics, University of Edinburgh
- Femi Otitoju, Diversity and Inclusion Consultant

and helped ensure the work was driven across parliamentary systems rather than located in one area of the organisation.

2.3 How the work was progressed across the Parliament

The Advisory Group provided the mechanism for:

- monitoring **delivery against recommendations** and sequencing work realistically across the session;
- enabling **coordination between MSP-facing governance** (e.g. committees and parliamentary business) and parliamentary services (e.g. SPICe, committee office, corporate body functions);
- promoting the use of **evidence and data**, including member diversity and experience work published as part of the Parliament's equal representation and participation programme;
- supporting **institutional engagement with committees**, including through formal correspondence and committee consideration of Audit recommendations;
- ensuring the Parliament's work remained **connected to international learning** and practice on gender sensitive parliaments, including through publication of Gender Sensitising Parliaments: A Practical Guide in February 2025, drawing on established international frameworks and experience.

2.4 Why this governance model matters as a legacy

The Advisory Group was not simply an implementation vehicle - it represented a deliberate shift towards ongoing institutional ownership of gender sensitivity, rather than time-limited "project" activity. It created continuity across workstreams that cut across parliamentary responsibilities - representation, participation, procedure, committee scrutiny, culture and wellbeing - and established a platform for sustaining momentum into Session 7.

As the Parliament approaches Session 7, the governance approach established under Recommendation 1 provides a practical legacy: a model for maintaining leadership, evidence-based oversight, and cross-parliament coordination - so that progress continues to be reviewed, strengthened and embedded over time.



3

Progress Across Session 6

The Gender Sensitive Audit identified that progress towards a more gender sensitive Parliament required change across a number of interconnected areas. These included parliamentary procedures and processes, equal representation and participation, parliamentary culture, and the mainstreaming of gender equality considerations within scrutiny and decision-making.

During Session 6, work was progressed across each of these areas through coordinated action involving the Advisory Group, parliamentary committees, the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body (SPCB), SPICe, and parliamentary officials. While individual recommendations addressed specific issues, the overall objective was to embed gender sensitive practice within the Parliament's normal way of working.

The sections below summarise the principal areas of progress during the session.

3.1 Gender Sensitising Procedures and Processes

A central finding of the Audit was that progress towards equal representation and participation requires institutional frameworks that support continuous improvement. As a result, early work during Session 6 focused on strengthening procedures, guidance and shared understanding of what constitutes gender sensitive parliamentary practice.

Developing practical guidance and shared standards

In February 2025, the Scottish Parliament published *Gender Sensitising Parliaments: A Practical Guide*. The Guide brought together internationally recognised standards and learning, including work undertaken by the Inter-Parliamentary Union and the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association, and translated these into practical considerations for legislatures seeking to improve equal participation and representation.

The publication of the Guide marked an important step in moving from audit findings to practical implementation. It provided a shared reference point for Members, officials and committees, and supported a more consistent understanding of gender sensitive practice across parliamentary activity. The Guide has also been used as part of the Parliament's wider engagement with other legislatures and parliamentary organisations, contributing to knowledge exchange and reinforcing the Scottish Parliament's reputation as an active contributor to international work in this area. Engagement activity following publication included events hosted by CPA UK and the Scottish Parliament, bringing together parliamentarians, clerks and officials to discuss how gender sensitive principles can be applied in practice. The work has also informed wider academic and parliamentary discussion through conference participation and engagement with visiting parliamentary delegations.

International Leadership and Influence

The publication of *Gender Sensitising Parliaments: A Practical Guide* in February 2025 marked an important evolution in the Parliament's work. **The Guide did not simply document Scottish reform, it translated the learning from the Gender Sensitive Audit into a practical framework designed for use by other legislatures.**

Developed in the context of established international standards, including those of the Inter-Parliamentary Union and the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (CPA), the Guide has been actively promoted through international parliamentary networks. Through engagement with CPA and Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians (CWP), and through participation in international parliamentary conferences, the Scottish Parliament has shared its methodology and practical tools with legislatures across the Commonwealth and beyond.

This work has coincided with, and contributed to, a growing international movement of legislatures undertaking structured gender-sensitive self-assessments. Recent examples include:

- The **Australian Capital Territory Legislative Assembly**, which completed a CPA Gender Sensitive Parliament self-assessment and published recommendations for reform in 2024.
- The **States Assembly of Jersey**, which conducted a CPA Gender Sensitive Parliament self-assessment in 2024 and published a comprehensive report.
- The **Parliament of Botswana**, which undertook the first joint CPA Benchmarks and Gender Sensitive Parliament self-assessment in 2023.



These developments reflect a wider institutional shift: legislatures are increasingly recognising that gender equality requires structured review, evidence-based reform and sustained oversight. Scotland's work forms part of this international reform ecosystem and has contributed practical tools and lived experience to it.

The Parliament has also used international platforms - including Commonwealth Parliamentary Conferences and regional CPA networks - to disseminate its learning, reinforcing its position as an active contributor to global parliamentary reform.

The significance of this international engagement is twofold. First, it demonstrates that the Gender Sensitive Audit was not an isolated exercise, but part of a broader democratic reform agenda. Second, it underscores that **Scotland's approach has helped shape practical reform beyond Holyrood**, strengthening the Parliament's reputation as a legislature willing to examine itself and share its learning openly.

Embedding considerations within parliamentary processes

Alongside the development of guidance, work during Session 6 focused on ensuring that gender sensitivity was reflected within existing parliamentary processes rather than treated as a standalone initiative.

This included committee consideration of Audit recommendations, integration of gender sensitive considerations within participation and diversity workstreams, and improved coordination between parliamentary services responsible for data, scrutiny support and procedural development.

The Audit also highlighted the importance of building an evidence base to support procedural change. As a result, a number of recommendations progressed during the session focused on improving the availability of data relating to representation, participation and Member experience. This work has supported more informed consideration of procedural change and enabled the Parliament to better understand where structural barriers may remain.

Supporting ongoing institutional change

Taken together, these developments represent a shift from identifying issues to embedding gender sensitive considerations within the Parliament's ongoing work. Rather than creating new parallel structures, the approach taken during Session 6 has sought to ensure that gender sensitivity is reflected in how existing procedures are developed, reviewed and applied.

The establishment of shared guidance, improved evidence and strengthened coordination across parliamentary structures provides a foundation for continued progress in Session 7.

3.2 Equal Representation

A central theme of the Audit was that improving gender sensitivity requires sustained attention to who is able to stand for election, who is elected, and how representative the Parliament is of the population it serves. While decisions on candidate selection rest with political parties, the Audit identified a role for the Parliament in improving transparency, strengthening the evidence base, and supporting informed discussion about representation and barriers to participation.

During Session 6, work in this area focused on improving understanding of representation through enhanced data collection, parliamentary scrutiny, and engagement with external organisations working to increase diversity in political participation.

Strengthening scrutiny of candidate diversity

In response to the Audit's recommendations, the Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee held an evidence session in November 2024 examining diversity among MSP candidates and elected Members. The session brought together representatives from political parties alongside organisations with expertise in women's political participation and representation.

This work provided an opportunity to consider how parties approach recruitment and selection processes, the extent to which candidate diversity reflects wider society, and what actions may be required to improve representativeness at future elections.

The Committee subsequently agreed a short report setting out its findings and recommendations, contributing to a wider parliamentary discussion on the structural and cultural factors affecting representation.

The evidence session represented an important step in creating transparency and accountability around diversity and representation, and in establishing this as an issue of continuing parliamentary interest.

Improving diversity data and evidence

The Audit highlighted limitations in the availability of consistent, longitudinal data relating to MSP diversity and experience. During Session 6, SPICe developed and expanded the collection and analysis of diversity data, including issuing diversity monitoring forms to MSPs and improving the presentation of publicly accessible information relating to representation.

This work has supported a more evidence-based understanding of representation within the Parliament, while ensuring that data collection and publication comply with data protection requirements and respect Members' privacy. The approach taken reflects an understanding that improving representation requires reliable data over time, enabling trends to be identified and progress to be assessed across parliamentary sessions.

Further work undertaken during the session included the collection and publication of information relating to caring responsibilities among MSPs. This has helped to broaden understanding of the range of experiences and responsibilities held by Members and how these may interact with parliamentary participation.

Engagement with Political Parties on Candidate Diversity

Recognising the critical role of political parties in shaping parliamentary representation, the Presiding Officer wrote formally to party leaders in early 2026 on behalf of the Advisory Group.

The correspondence invited parties to outline the steps they were taking to promote equal representation within their candidate selection processes and to share anticipated gender balance within their candidate slates for the forthcoming Scottish Parliament election.

This engagement reflected a core principle of the Audit: **while the Parliament cannot determine candidate selection processes, it can encourage transparency**, facilitate dialogue and promote accountability in relation to diversity.

Responses to the Presiding Officer's letter will be published as part of the Parliament's record.

Understanding experience beyond election

Recognising that representation is influenced not only by entry into Parliament but also by retention and experience, work was also initiated to develop approaches to gathering information from MSPs leaving Parliament. The introduction of exit data and interviews is intended to improve understanding of the factors influencing decisions to stand down and to identify any structural or cultural issues that may affect participation over time.

Establishing the framework for gathering this information represents an important step in developing a more comprehensive understanding of representation across the parliamentary lifecycle.

Supporting pathways into parliamentary participation

Alongside data and scrutiny work, the Parliament continued to support initiatives designed to encourage participation from under-represented groups, including engagement with internship schemes and outreach activity highlighting the range of roles available within the Parliament. This work contributes to widening awareness of parliamentary careers and supporting future participation both as elected representatives and as part of the wider parliamentary workforce.



Progress and next steps

Progress during Session 6 has strengthened the Parliament's understanding of representation and improved the evidence base available to inform future action. While changes to representation ultimately depend on party processes and electoral outcomes, the work undertaken during this session has established mechanisms for continued scrutiny, monitoring and learning. Maintaining this focus will be important in ensuring that improvements in representation achieved to date are sustained and built upon in future parliamentary sessions.

3.3 Equal Participation

The Audit recognised that **representation alone does not ensure equal participation**. The ability of MSPs to contribute fully to parliamentary work is shaped by parliamentary structures, allocation of roles, working practices, and the predictability of parliamentary business. The Audit therefore identified a range of measures intended to ensure that participation within the Parliament is fair, transparent and inclusive.

During Session 6, progress in this area focused on improving the evidence base around participation, strengthening expectations around gender balance in parliamentary roles, and considering how parliamentary procedures and working patterns affect Members' ability to participate effectively.

Improving understanding of participation

A key element of the Audit's recommendations was the development of more systematic data on participation within the Parliament. During Session 6, SPICe expanded the collection and publication of information relating to gender balance across committee membership, convenerships, party spokesperson roles and cross-party groups. Publishing this information on a regular basis has improved transparency and enabled trends in participation to be monitored over time.

In parallel, work was undertaken to develop more detailed participation data relating to Chamber activity, including questions, debates and statements. The intention of this work is to support a better understanding of participation patterns and to provide an evidence base for future consideration of whether procedural or cultural factors may affect participation differently across groups of Members.

The development of participation data represents an important step towards ensuring that discussions about equality of participation are informed by evidence rather than perception, and supports ongoing scrutiny by committees and parliamentary bodies.

Gender balance in parliamentary roles

The Audit identified that access to influential parliamentary roles - including committee convenerships, membership of the Parliamentary Bureau and the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body (SPCB) - plays a significant role in shaping participation and influence within the Parliament.

During Session 6, the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee considered a number of Audit recommendations relating to gender balance in these roles. While the Committee did not support the introduction of fixed quotas in Standing Orders, it recommended strengthening existing provisions to ensure that due regard is given to achieving gender balance when nominations are made. These proposed rule changes are intended to increase transparency and reinforce expectations around gender balance from the start of the next parliamentary session.

The Committee also recommended changes to Standing Orders to ensure that there are no single-sex committees and that committee membership should normally reflect the gender balance of the Parliament as a whole.

In addition, changes were proposed to formalise existing practice in relation to the election of the Presiding Officer and Deputy Presiding Officers, ensuring that gender balance is maintained among those office holders. Together, these developments reflect a significant shift towards embedding consideration of gender balance within the Parliament's rules and expectations rather than relying solely on informal practice.



Predictability of parliamentary business and sitting patterns

The Audit also identified that unpredictability in sitting patterns and decision times could have a disproportionate impact on Members with caring responsibilities. During Session 6, the Parliamentary Bureau considered data on sitting times and the factors contributing to later decision times, including pressures on Chamber business.

Discussions between the Bureau and the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body considered ways in which predictability might be improved while maintaining the Parliament's scrutiny function. This included consideration of earlier starts on certain sitting days and efforts to limit the number of late sittings where possible. While recognising the competing demands on Chamber time, this work represented an important acknowledgement of the relationship between working practices, wellbeing and inclusion.

Progress and next steps

Progress during Session 6 has strengthened both the transparency and the procedural framework surrounding participation in parliamentary work. The development of participation data, combined with changes to Standing Orders and increased attention to working patterns, has established a stronger foundation for monitoring equality of participation in future sessions.

The Audit recognised that participation is shaped not only by formal rules but also by parliamentary culture and expectations. Continued monitoring and review will therefore be required to ensure that procedural changes translate into sustained improvements in practice during Session 7 and beyond.

3.4 Parliamentary Culture

Alongside procedural and structural change, the Gender Sensitive Audit identified **parliamentary culture as a critical factor in enabling equal participation**. The Audit recognised that formal rules alone cannot ensure inclusion, and that the day-to-day experience of Members - including working practices, expectations and support structures - plays a significant role in shaping whether participation is sustainable over time.

During Session 6, work in this area focused on strengthening support for Members with caring responsibilities, reinforcing expectations around behaviour and conduct, and embedding gender sensitive considerations within induction, professional development and peer support arrangements.

Supporting Members with caring responsibilities

One of the most significant cultural changes during Session 6 was the introduction of permanent Standing Order provisions for proxy voting. Following a trial period, the Parliament agreed rule changes in December 2023 to place proxy voting arrangements on a permanent footing. Eligibility criteria were incorporated directly into Standing Orders, including provision for parental leave, illness, bereavement and caring responsibilities.

The introduction of permanent proxy voting arrangements represents an important step in recognising that participation in parliamentary decision-making must be compatible with family life and caring responsibilities. It also reflects a wider shift towards normalising arrangements that support Members to balance parliamentary duties with personal circumstances.

Further work was undertaken to clarify the application of the Members' Expenses Scheme in relation to parental leave. Updated guidance made explicit reference to parental leave as a basis for claims for additional staffing support, providing greater clarity and consistency for Members taking leave and helping to align parliamentary practice more closely with expectations in other workplaces.

The Parliament also contributed to wider reform discussions through the publication of practical guidance on equal participation and representation, **including consideration of job-sharing arrangements and family-friendly parliamentary practice**. This guidance provides tangible examples of how legislative institutions can adapt working practices to support participation across diverse life circumstances, reinforcing the principle that parliamentary service should be compatible with family life and caring responsibilities.

Induction, professional development and safe working

The Audit highlighted the importance of ensuring that new and returning Members are supported to understand expectations around behaviour, inclusion and workplace culture from the outset of a parliamentary session. In response, work during Session 6 sought to embed issues raised by the Audit within induction and continuing professional development (CPD) provision.

Plans for Session 7 induction include dedicated sessions addressing online safety, social media, bullying and harassment, alongside wider work on inclusion and respectful working practices. The intention is that these issues are addressed as part of mainstream parliamentary development rather than as optional or standalone training. This reflects an understanding that culture change requires shared expectations across the institution.

The Presiding Officer's Guidance on Conduct in the Chamber was also revised during the session to make explicit reference to avoiding discriminatory language relating to protected characteristics, reinforcing expectations around respectful debate and conduct.

Strengthening peer support and networks

The establishment of a Women's Caucus during Session 6 provided a new forum for women MSPs to discuss shared experiences, exchange learning and provide mutual support.

The Caucus has met regularly and engaged with external speakers and representatives from other legislatures, contributing to wider international exchange on supporting women in parliamentary life.

While informal in structure, the Caucus represents an important cultural development, providing a mechanism through which experiences can be shared and fed into wider discussions on participation and inclusion. Its continuation into Session 7 will support ongoing reflection on how parliamentary practices affect Members' experience.

Progress and next steps

Progress during Session 6 reflects a growing recognition that parliamentary culture evolves through a combination of formal change and shared expectations. Measures such as proxy voting, clearer parental leave provisions and strengthened induction arrangements have helped to create a more supportive environment for participation.

The Audit recognised that cultural change takes place over time and requires continued reinforcement. Maintaining momentum in this area will depend on embedding these changes within everyday parliamentary practice and ensuring that future sessions continue to review how the working environment supports all Members to participate fully.

3.5 Gender Equality Mainstreaming

A core objective of the Audit was to move beyond individual initiatives and towards embedding gender equality considerations within the Parliament's core functions - in particular, scrutiny, policy consideration and decision-making. The Audit recognised that achieving this requires changes not only to procedures, but also to skills, guidance and institutional expectations.

During Session 6, progress in this area focused on developing guidance, building awareness and beginning to establish the conditions necessary for gender sensitive scrutiny to become part of normal parliamentary practice.



Developing guidance for gender sensitive scrutiny

Work during the session sought to provide committees and officials with practical tools to support the consideration of gender equality within scrutiny activity. Guidance on gender sensitive scrutiny was incorporated into internal clerking guidance, drawing on international best practice and existing work in other legislatures. This provided committee staff with practical advice on how gender considerations may be reflected in evidence gathering, questioning and reporting.

The development of this guidance represented an important first step in moving from principle to practice. It **recognised that committees already possess the procedural powers necessary to undertake gender sensitive scrutiny**, but that additional support and awareness are required to enable consistent use of those powers.

Building capability and awareness

Experience during Session 6 demonstrated that guidance alone is not sufficient to embed new approaches. As a result, training and awareness-raising activity formed an important part of the work undertaken. Sessions led by external experts were delivered to committees as part of business planning activity, helping Members and officials to consider how gender perspectives could be incorporated into scrutiny work in practice.

This work highlighted both the opportunities and challenges associated with mainstreaming. Competing demands on committee time and varying levels of familiarity with gender analysis mean that progress is likely to be gradual. The experience of Session 6 has reinforced the importance of building internal expertise alongside the provision of guidance.

Leadership through the Conveners Group

The Conveners Group agreed to take responsibility for progressing gender equality mainstreaming as part of its Participation, Diversity and Inclusion strategic priority. Regular updates have been provided to the Group, ensuring that mainstreaming work remains connected to wider committee development and scrutiny improvement activity.

Positioning mainstreaming within existing committee leadership structures reflects the intention that gender sensitivity should become part of routine scrutiny considerations rather than an additional or separate requirement.

Improving understanding of diversity in scrutiny

The Audit also identified the importance of understanding whose voices are heard during parliamentary scrutiny. Work undertaken during Session 6 explored approaches to collecting diversity information relating to committee witnesses, with the aim of improving understanding of the range of perspectives informing committee work.

Initial work demonstrated challenges in achieving sufficient response rates to support robust analysis. As a result, alternative approaches to gathering information have been piloted, including changes to how and when surveys are issued to witnesses. Early results from this pilot work have been encouraging and will inform future decisions on how witness diversity data may be collected and published.

Progress and next steps

Progress during Session 6 has established the foundations for gender equality mainstreaming within parliamentary scrutiny. The Audit recognised that this work would extend beyond a single parliamentary session. The experience of this session has demonstrated that embedding new approaches requires sustained leadership, training and the gradual development of institutional confidence.

The next stage of this work will involve building on the guidance and training already developed, supporting committees to apply gender sensitive approaches more consistently, and strengthening the evidence base available to support scrutiny. Continued leadership through committee structures and parliamentary services will be important in ensuring that mainstreaming becomes an embedded feature of parliamentary practice in Session 7 and beyond.



4

Impact and Learning from Session 6

The work undertaken during Session 6 in response to the Gender Sensitive Audit **represents one of the most comprehensive programmes of institutional change** undertaken by the Scottish Parliament since its establishment. While many individual recommendations have been progressed or completed, gender sensitive considerations have also become significantly embedded within ongoing parliamentary reform, scrutiny and organisational development.

This section reflects on the impact of that work and the lessons arising from its implementation.

4.1 Moving from recommendations to embedded practice

A key achievement of Session 6 has been the transition from identifying barriers to establishing mechanisms capable of addressing them over time. The creation of the Advisory Group provided sustained oversight and coordination across workstreams that cut across parliamentary structures, ensuring that gender sensitivity was not treated as a discrete project but as an ongoing institutional priority.

Progress has been most evident where changes have been incorporated into existing parliamentary systems. Examples include the integration of proxy voting arrangements into Standing Orders, new rules on committee membership and strengthened gender balance rules for leadership positions, the inclusion of gender sensitive considerations within induction and professional development programmes, and the incorporation of guidance on gender sensitive scrutiny within clerking practice. These changes reduce reliance on informal arrangements and help ensure that progress is maintained beyond individual parliamentary sessions.

The experience of Session 6 has also demonstrated the importance of evidence in supporting change. Improvements to diversity and participation data have enabled more informed consideration of representation and participation, supporting a move away from anecdotal evidence towards a more consistent and transparent understanding of parliamentary experience.



4.2 The role of parliamentary scrutiny in shaping outcomes

A number of recommendations arising from the Gender Sensitive Audit required detailed consideration by parliamentary committees, particularly where changes to Standing Orders were proposed. The Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee considered evidence, correspondence with the Presiding Officer, and the practical and legal implications of proposed rule changes before reaching conclusions.

This process highlighted the complexity of translating audit recommendations into durable procedural change. In several areas - including proposals relating to gender balance in parliamentary roles - the Committee concluded that strengthening existing provisions or expectations was more appropriate than introducing prescriptive requirements. The resulting approach reflected both the objectives of the Audit and the need to ensure that changes could be sustained within the Parliament's wider procedural framework.

The Committee's consideration, and the exchanges between the Committee and the Presiding Officer, formed an important part of the Parliament's response to the Audit. The evidence gathered and the reasoning set out during this process provide a foundation for future committees or advisory groups to revisit these issues in light of further experience. This reflects the Parliament's iterative approach to procedural development, in which reform is informed by scrutiny and practical experience over time.

4.3 Progress achieved and areas where change takes longer

The experience of Session 6 demonstrates that different types of change progress at different speeds. Procedural and structural changes - such as rule amendments, guidance updates and improvements to data collection - can be implemented within a single parliamentary session. Cultural change, by contrast, develops more gradually and requires continued reinforcement through leadership, shared expectations and experience.

Work relating to parliamentary culture, gender sensitive scrutiny and equality mainstreaming has therefore been characterised by incremental progress rather than immediate transformation. The introduction of new guidance and training has begun to build awareness and capability, but embedding these approaches consistently across parliamentary activity will require sustained attention in future sessions.

The Audit also highlighted areas where progress remains dependent on factors beyond the direct control of the Parliament, including candidate selection processes and electoral outcomes. In these areas, the Parliament's role has been to improve transparency, strengthen the evidence base and support informed discussion rather than to determine outcomes directly.

4.4 Lessons for future parliamentary reform

Several key lessons emerge from the work undertaken during Session 6:

- **Institutional ownership is essential.**
Sustained progress depended on clear leadership and coordination across parliamentary bodies rather than isolated initiatives.
- **Evidence supports change.**
Improved data and analysis enabled more constructive discussion of representation and participation.
- **Guidance alone is insufficient.**
Training, leadership and practical experience are necessary to embed new approaches.
- **Reform is iterative.**
Committee scrutiny and parliamentary debate strengthened the final outcomes and created a basis for future development rather than final resolution.

These lessons provide an important foundation for future work, both within the Scottish Parliament and for other legislatures seeking to undertake similar programmes of reform.



5

Looking Ahead to Session 7

The **work undertaken during Session 6 has established a strong foundation** for the continued development of a gender sensitive Parliament. Many of the recommendations arising from the Audit have been progressed through changes to procedures, guidance and practice, while others have begun longer-term programmes of work that will extend beyond the lifetime of a single parliamentary session.

As the Parliament moves into Session 7, the challenge will be to ensure that progress achieved to date is sustained and embedded within everyday parliamentary activity. This includes maintaining the use of evidence and data to inform discussion about representation and participation, continuing to develop gender sensitive approaches to scrutiny, and ensuring that cultural and behavioural expectations established during Session 6 remain visible and understood by new and returning Members.

A number of areas of work will continue into the next session. These include the further **development of participation data**, the **continued embedding of gender equality mainstreaming** within committee scrutiny, and the **evaluation of new approaches to gathering information on witness diversity and Member experience**.

The implementation of Standing Order changes agreed towards the end of Session 6 will also require monitoring in practice to assess their effectiveness and to inform any future consideration of procedural reform.

The experience of Session 6 has demonstrated that progress towards gender sensitivity is iterative. Many of the changes introduced during this period represent the beginning of longer-term institutional development rather than an endpoint. Continued leadership from the Presiding Officer, parliamentary committees and parliamentary services will remain important in maintaining momentum and ensuring that gender sensitive considerations remain integrated within wider parliamentary reform and participation work.

The Gender Sensitive Parliament Advisory Group was established to provide continuity and oversight of this work. The legacy of its work in Session 6 is not only the delivery of individual recommendations, but the establishment of structures and expectations that support ongoing review and improvement. As a new Parliament is elected, the opportunity exists to build on this foundation and to continue strengthening the Parliament's approach to equal representation, participation and inclusion.

6

Conclusion

The Gender Sensitive Parliament Audit set out a clear ambition: to ensure that equal representation and equal participation are not aspirations, but embedded realities within the Scottish Parliament.

Session 6 demonstrates that **institutional change is possible when it is deliberate, evidence-led and collectively owned.**

Significant progress has been made - through amendments to Standing Orders, the permanent introduction of proxy voting, strengthened rules and expectations around gender balance in parliamentary roles, improved participation data, and the development of practical guidance for gender sensitive scrutiny.

Yet progress of this kind must never be regarded as self-sustaining. History demonstrates that gains in representation can recede. Cultural change can stall. Institutional focus can drift. Gender sensitivity is not a one-time reform, it is an enduring commitment requiring vigilance and leadership.

The structures created in Session 6, including the Advisory Group, strengthened data systems, procedural reforms and mainstreamed guidance, provide a durable foundation. But their impact will depend on whether Session 7 and future Parliaments choose to actively maintain and build upon them.

This work has also positioned the Scottish Parliament within a wider international movement of legislatures undertaking structured gender-sensitive reform. By translating learning into practical guidance and sharing it through international networks, the Parliament has contributed to a growing body of global democratic practice.

The legacy of Session 6 is therefore twofold:

- It has strengthened equality within this Parliament.
- It has contributed to reform conversations beyond it.

The next Parliament now inherits both the responsibility and the opportunity to ensure that this progress continues. **Gender sensitivity is not a destination. It is a continuing democratic obligation.**





The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba