

Inclusive Parliament Review: Review of our Dignity at Work Arrangements

Strengthening a culture of safety,
dignity, courtesy and respect
within Parliament.



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The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

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Foreword

This review highlights a strong commitment across the Scottish Parliament to maintaining a workplace founded on dignity, courtesy, and respect.

Staff consistently described positive team cultures, constructive leadership behaviours, and a shared focus on sustaining a safe and professional working culture. These strengths reflect the high standards demonstrated across the Parliament.

The review acknowledges the many colleagues who contributed their experiences, whether confidentially or anonymously. Support remains available for anyone who has not felt able to speak up, and colleagues can raise concerns through established routes, including anonymous channels offered by a range of organisations and support services. The Parliament's Independent Support and Advocacy Service (ISAS) is also available to provide assistance.

Because employment laws have recently changed, and more changes are expected, feedback was gathered from both SPCB

and MSP staff to identify what needs to be improved. This allowed us to look closely at how well the current arrangements work in practice and whether they meet the standards employers are now required to follow.

Alongside positive findings, the review identifies systemic and cultural barriers that affect the effectiveness and consistency of current dignity at work arrangements. These include challenges linked to multiple employment models, inconsistent reporting routes, variable levels of support, and cultural factors that may reduce confidence in speaking up. These issues have persisted over time and now require coordinated and sustained action to address them effectively.

The review also identifies concerns within a small number of MSPs' offices, including reports of inappropriate behaviour and, in a very few cases, conduct that may amount to serious sexual misconduct. These disclosures are deeply concerning and highlight the need for clear, reliable systems that ensure concerns are addressed promptly and consistently, in line with employers' legal and moral responsibilities to maintain safe workplaces.

Leadership remains central to maintaining a positive workplace culture. This includes modelling respectful behaviour, intervening early when concerns arise, and ensuring issues are not minimised or overlooked. Staff rely on organisational and political leaders to set clear expectations and provide dependable frameworks of support that reinforce safety and wellbeing.

As the findings of this review are likely to attract public attention, any response must prioritise the protection and wellbeing of those who contributed their experiences. This review presents an opportunity to reset expectations, modernise policies, strengthen support arrangements, and embed the standards the public rightly expect of those who represent and serve Scotland.

Director of People, Communications and Inclusion



The privilege of being elected to Parliament comes with responsibility, not only to those you represent but also to those that work with you. Occasionally I have seen that responsibility being abused and unacceptable behaviour raising its ugly head.

Member of the Scottish Parliament (MSP)

The results of the dignity at work survey are deeply frustrating for the Network members, but at the same time not surprising. SPCB staff and MSP staff on the Network have shared their concerns about behaviours going unchallenged, a lack of clear organisational culture, and the need for consistent and accessible support to ensure all colleagues and MSP staff feel safe and respected.

This concern amongst the Network members about the cultural and structural uncertainty needs swift and definitive action. We want tangible change. But more than this, we need leadership across the organisation, and MSPs, to recognise that we all have a role to play in addressing unacceptable behaviour in whatever form it takes.

Scottish Parliament Women's Network

There are many positive aspects to the Parliament's culture, and in most day-to-day interactions I feel respected and supported. But everyday behaviours that make people feel uncomfortable or excluded are often minimised or normalised, and inappropriate conduct is sometimes dismissed because 'it wasn't meant that way', when the real issue is its impact.

A lack of visible challenge from managers and senior leaders – including in response to poor behaviour from Members – undermines confidence in speaking up. A more inclusive culture with less hierarchy would encourage people to raise concerns and feel that their voices can positively shape how we work.

SPCB staff member





I am very fortunate to be in an office with an incredibly supportive and respectful MSP. However, not all my MSP staff colleagues are in the same situation. It is incredibly difficult for MSP staff members to raise complaints about MSPs due to the nature of the inequalities of power.

MSP staff member

Having considered the detail, our initial view is that the key challenge is less about the investigation process itself and more about the overall coherence and effectiveness of the system, particularly in cases involving MSPs.

From the recognised unions' perspective, the priority is ensuring that staff, particularly SPCB staff, have access to a system that is clear and easy to navigate, demonstrably independent in both investigation and outcome, and capable of delivering consistent and meaningful outcomes, including in cases involving MSPs.

SPCB staff unions

We must address systemic risks from 'long-service' cultures that excuse inappropriate conduct. By prioritising psychological safety and actively empowering staff networks, we can foster a workplace where every member of the parliamentary community, particularly women, is safe and protected from disparaging conduct.

SPCB staff member and member of internal staff network



Executive summary

In anticipation of strengthened legal duties under the Employment Rights Act 2025, the Clerk/Chief Executive commissioned this review last year to examine the Scottish Parliament Corporate Body's (SPCB) and MSP staff Dignity at Work arrangements and the wider organisational approach as part of the Inclusive Parliament Review Programme.

The Terms of Reference (Annex A) set two core objectives:

- to ensure Dignity at Work arrangements reflect best practice and align with Parliament's commitment to dignity, respect and courtesy for all who work in and visit Parliament; and
- to support the SPCB, MSPs and Parliamentary Group Pools to take a preventative approach to bullying, harassment and sexual harassment and misconduct in line with new duties under the Worker Protection (Amendment of the Equality Act 2010) 2023 and the Employment Rights Act 2025.

While SPCB staff have been surveyed regularly over the years, this is the first report since 2018 that has included feedback obtained from a survey of MSP staff.

The review was underpinned by the Equality and Human Rights Commission's (EHRC) [8-step Guide: Preventing sexual harassment at work](#), which was used to identify risks and shape a clear, evidence-based set of recommendations. Grounding the work in this established methodology ensured rigour and supported the development of a comprehensive and robust set of actions.

There has also been recognition in parliamentary debates that MSPs may engage with people in vulnerable groups in carrying out different aspects of their parliamentary and representative roles. The extension of the Protection of Vulnerable Groups scheme to MSPs is expected to be included in a future consultation on electoral reforms.

Executive summary

The review highlights clear and consistent evidence of positive and healthy team cultures across Parliament, with the majority of staff reporting that they feel valued, supported and respected within their teams.

This reflects the strong emphasis placed on dignity, courtesy and respectful working relationships that underpin parliamentary standards and expectations. MSPs who contributed to the review demonstrated strong leadership and a shared determination to strengthen the working environment. Their input underscored a collective commitment to ensuring that all staff, regardless of who employs them, should experience a workplace where they feel safe, respected, and able to perform at their best.

This strong foundation of respectful relationships, positive intent, and shared responsibility represents a notable strength across Parliament. It provides a solid platform on which to implement the review recommendations.

However, alongside these strengths, the review also finds some structural and cultural weaknesses that undermine safety, dignity, and respect – particularly for MSP staff.

Evidence from the 2026 Dignity at Work survey, confidential Independent Support and Advocacy Service (ISAS) feedback, and extensive engagement shows persistent barriers to speaking up, unclear and fragmented reporting routes, inconsistent induction, and low trust in how concerns involving MSPs are handled.

These issues are compounded by enduring cultural patterns, including under-challenge of poor behaviour, normalisation of inappropriate conduct, and a long-standing perception of unequal standards between MSPs and staff. Some MSPs expressed deep concern and genuine dismay at the behaviours described through this review. They were appalled that a small minority have abused their power and authority in ways that cause harm to others, recognising that such conduct not only undermines individual safety and wellbeing but also damages trust in the wider parliamentary community. Their reflections reinforce a central finding of this review: while positive team cultures are widespread, the actions of a minority create significant risk and place an unfair burden on those who

work hard to uphold the highest standards across Parliament.

MSP staff face the greatest risks due to small-office power dynamics, limited Human Resources (HR) support, inconsistent office cultures, and fear of career or reputational consequences. There is evidence that MSP staff have chosen not to seek advice due to fear of repercussions or concern that raising issues could damage political relationships or future career prospects. Some individuals also described being actively discouraged from speaking up.

SPCB staff reported a clearer understanding of processes and how to access advice but raised concerns about inconsistent leadership challenge of poor behaviour, lower psychological safety for some groups, and a perceived “two-tier culture” in how MSP behaviour is addressed. Staff highlighted enduring issues relating to inclusion and belonging, particularly for colleagues from under-represented groups or those outside long-standing informal social networks. Across both groups, staff emphasised the need for safer early-resolution options, greater visibility of behavioural expectations and stronger leadership modelling.

Executive summary

The complexity of Parliament as a workplace, bringing together more than 129 small employers alongside the SPCB and contractors, the Scottish Parliament Police Unit, Scottish Government and media outlets, means that issues do not impact all staff groups uniformly.

This creates uneven protections and accountability gaps. The public may ask why Parliament cannot simply require MSPs and their staff to comply with specific standards, but MSPs are elected officeholders accountable to the electorate, and the SPCB has no mandate to direct their employment practices. These legal and democratic arrangements explain the differing levels of protection and reinforce the need for reforms that strengthen consistency while respecting distinct employment relationships.

Power dynamics in Parliament are complex and often situational. Unlike typical workplaces, where authority is usually shaped by formal hierarchy or management structures, power imbalances at Holyrood can also arise through political and party influence, role specific responsibilities, and the unique relationships between MSPs and those who support them.

Evidence from the review shows these imbalances can surface not only between MSPs and MSP staff, but also where MSP staff hold senior roles within local political branches; between Committee Conveners and other members of the Committee and SPCB staff; between staff and contractor staff; and between SPCB and MSP staff, some of whom described feeling “second class” in comparison.

These dynamics reinforce the wider power imbalances outlined in this report, highlighting how situational authority and political context can intensify vulnerability, shape confidence in speaking up, and contribute to inconsistent experiences across the parliamentary environment.

New duties under the Employment Rights Act 2025 increase the urgency for action, placing stronger preventative and whistleblowing responsibilities on all employers, strengthening duties to prevent sexual harassment, including third-party harassment, and introducing new rules on the voiding of confidentiality clauses that restrict individuals from disclosing harassment or discrimination¹.

¹ It is noted that further regulations are expected to be introduced in this regard, which may permit specific exceptions.



Summary of key findings

- **Strong team level cultures:**
Strong team level cultures are evident across Parliament, with most staff reporting that they feel valued, supported and respected in their workplaces. The vast majority of MSPs and managers also demonstrate a clear personal commitment to treating colleagues with dignity, courtesy and respect.
- **System level weaknesses and fragmented reporting routes:**
Reporting arrangements are complex, emotionally demanding and difficult to navigate. Individuals frequently receive contradictory advice and may need to recount their experience multiple times. These conditions discourage early reporting and undermine confidence that concerns will be addressed fairly and consistently.
- **Significant divergence in confidence between SPCB staff and MSP staff:**
MSP staff report substantially lower clarity, weaker induction, and markedly lower confidence that policies will protect them or that concerns involving MSPs will be taken seriously. Only 28% of MSP staff believe policies are adequate, compared to 54% of SPCB staff. These differences reflect deeper structural vulnerabilities within MSP offices.
- **Evidence of serious but often unreported harmful behaviour:**
Confidential feedback given to ISAS at the start of this year recorded 84 incidents of experiencing and/or witnessing bullying, harassment and sexual harassment, including allegations of sexual misconduct going back to 2021. These incidents were not reported at the time but were shared for the first time in 2026 as part of this review and includes feedback from SPCB and MSP staff. Many individuals did not seek advice at the time of the incident due to fear of consequences, reputational harm, or concern that reporting could damage political relationships or career prospects.
- **A persistent “two-tier culture”:**
Staff perceive that poor behaviour by MSPs is less likely to be challenged or addressed effectively, contributing to a longstanding trust gap in MSP related processes. This perception is reinforced by power imbalances and inconsistent accountability.
- **Gaps in support for both MSP staff and MSP respondents:**
MSP staff lack access to consistent HR support. Equally, MSPs who are respondents to complaints currently receive no structured pastoral support other than access to the Parliament’s Employee Assistance Programme. This was a gap highlighted by both feedback and in the recent independent review of the Members of the Scottish Parliament Complaints Sanctions Process conducted by Rosemary Agnew.
- **Inclusion and psychological safety require strengthening:**
Staff from underrepresented groups and those outside longstanding informal social networks, report lower psychological safety and less confidence that inappropriate behaviour will be challenged consistently.
- **A changing legal landscape increases the urgency for reform:**
New duties under the Employment Rights Act 2025 – especially strengthened requirements to prevent harassment, whistleblowing protections and the voiding of NDAs that prevents staff from disclosing workplace harassment, discrimination or related complaints – require Parliament to modernise systems, improve preventative measures and ensure consistent employer responsibilities across the Parliament.

Summary of recommendations

- **Parliament-wide zero-tolerance statement and unified standards and clarify expectations:**
Work with the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments (SPPA) Committee to introduce a Parliament-wide Zero Tolerance Statement and align all codes, policies and procedures, including the Code of Conduct for MSPs to ensure consistent expectations, protections, and processes.
- **Introduce a Parliament-wide employer pledge:**
Establish clear, shared expectations of dignity, courtesy and respect across all employers and others in Parliament. The Pledge will provide a positive, unifying framework for behavioural standards and support consistent messaging during induction and ongoing communication.
- **Modernise and simplify reporting routes:**
Commission a review of the complaints system to identify opportunities to create a single, accessible complaints and support hub. Identify opportunities to streamline processes for complainants and respondents, including opportunities to strengthen the independence in MSP related cases, and embed trauma-informed practice to ensure clarity, fairness and confidence in the system.
- **Embed a Parliament-wide speak up culture:**
Introduce a clear Speak Up culture that encourages early reporting and is supported by visible anti-retaliation protections. Provide practical tools to help leaders and managers maintain psychologically safe working environments.
- **Strengthen risk prevention:**
Implement a Parliament wide risk assessment framework for bullying, harassment, and sexual harassment, including third-party harassment. Provide practical tools for early identification of risks and proportionate intervention in higher risk settings.
- **Strengthen training, awareness and induction across Parliament:**
Deliver tailored development for MSPs, MSP staff and SPCB staff. Ensure consistent induction, better understanding of roles and responsibilities, and improved capability in preventing harm, responding to concerns, and managing teams safely.

Summary of recommendations

- **Expand support for MSP staff:**
Establish a dedicated, confidential HR service providing advice on employment matters, early resolution guidance and clear, accessible information on rights and reporting options for MSP staff.
- **Enhance early resolution support for SPCB Staff:**
Create a confidential early intervention function offering independent triage, anonymous logging, and proportionate informal resolution pathways, helping issues to be addressed at an earlier stage.
- **Ensure fair and consistent pastoral support for MSP respondents:**
Engage with the SPPA Committee and the Commissioner for Ethical Standards to understand gaps and ensure support is equitable and transparent across all parties involved in the complaints system.
- **Strengthen leadership visibility and accountability:**
Set clear behavioural expectations for senior SPCB leaders and increase their visibility across the organisation. Relaunch and support equalities networks to improve inclusion and ensure lived experience informs leadership decisions.
- **Improve independence and welfare in MSP-related cases:**
SPCB should write to the SPPA Committee to invite them to undertake an options appraisal for fully independent decision-making and sanctioning in cases involving MSPs and exclusion measures to manage welfare risks during ongoing investigations.
- **Strengthen monitoring, transparency and continuous improvement:**
Introduce a Parliament wide monitoring framework, supported by regular and transparent reporting, culture checks and thematic reviews. Use data to track progress, promote accountability and inform ongoing prevention activity.



Introduction

1. Parliament is a uniquely complex workplace that brings together staff working for various employers under one roof. These staff members have differing responsibilities, accountabilities, and channels for voicing concerns. The overlapping systems lead to uneven protection, variable standards, and inconsistent support. As a result, staff often work closely together without sharing the same employment frameworks, which can blur boundaries, create accountability gaps, and leave certain groups more vulnerable.
2. Wider work across the parliamentary and democratic environment reinforces the importance of strengthening dignity, courtesy, and respect. National discussions such as those highlighted by the Jo Cox Civility Commission emphasise the need for more respectful political cultures, and the Parliament has already taken steps to contribute to this, including support for MSPs' safety and welfare. These developments form part of a broader commitment to promoting a culture grounded in safety, respect, and accountability.
3. Staff working within Parliament continue to navigate distinct risks arising from small office employment models, power imbalances, variable induction, inconsistent access to HR support and fragmented routes. These factors are particularly acute for MSP staff, whose employment relationships and working conditions create heightened vulnerabilities. MSP offices are highly personalised workplaces characterised by concentrated employer power, employment insecurity, and variable managerial capability. Staff often work unusual hours, attend social or political events where alcohol is present, and may depend heavily on their employing MSP for future career prospects. These conditions create pronounced power imbalances and can make raising concerns feel especially risky. Evidence gathered for this review shows that many MSP staff remain unsure where to seek advice, fear detriment, or reputational damage, and in some cases, report being discouraged from speaking up.
4. These risks are exacerbated by the particular responsibilities placed upon MSPs in their role as employers. MSPs are subject to the Code of Conduct, which includes a duty to comply with policies set by the SPCB. Additionally, the Reimbursement of Members' Expenses Scheme obliges them to implement minimum terms and conditions for their employees. When MSPs neglect these obligations, for instance, by breaching Scheme requirements, they may lose eligibility to claim reimbursement for staff costs. Crucially, in such circumstances, it is the staff who suffer the consequences, potentially going unpaid, rather than the MSP. This outcome is clearly unjust, as failures by an MSP to fulfil their responsibilities should not result in detriment for the staff whom the protections are intended to safeguard. This structural imbalance accentuates the vulnerability of MSP staff and underscores the pressing need for more robust safeguards and clearer lines of accountability.

Introduction

5. The wider parliamentary estate presents additional structural risks. Individual employers have control over their own staff but no direct authority over others working at or visiting the Parliament, limiting their ability to prevent or address harmful behaviour involving third parties. Informal interactions in shared spaces, coupled with longstanding cultural dynamics, can weaken accountability, and contribute to underreporting.
6. This review was undertaken at a time of heightened scrutiny of workplace culture in public institutions and against the backdrop of evolving legislation. New duties under the Employment Rights Act 2025, including strengthened whistleblowing protections, enhanced employer responsibilities to prevent sexual harassment, and the voiding of confidentiality clauses that silence disclosures, create a clear statutory imperative for change. Together with recent scrutiny of MSP conduct and increased focus on safety in public life, these developments underscore the need for a coherent, Parliament-wide approach to prevention and support. In this context, strengthening a culture in which everyone feels safe, respected, and able to speak up without fear of detriment is essential to Parliament's ability to function as a modern, inclusive, and responsible workplace.
7. The purpose of this review is to determine whether Parliament's current arrangements provide the clarity, protection and confidence that everyone working here should reasonably expect and, where they do not, to set out a practical, evidence-based programme of reform capable of strengthening safety, dignity, courtesy and respect across the whole parliamentary environment. It aims to deliver a clearer, more consistent, and more independent system, reduce avoidable risks, and provide support to SPCB staff, MSP staff, and SPCB and MSPs as employers, and build on wider efforts to promote a culture where everyone feels safe, respected and able to speak up.
8. The section that follows outlines the strengths of the current system, the areas where improvements are essential, and the reforms required to rebuild trust and ensure consistent protection across Parliament.
9. The review recommends a number of different elements that reflect the range of employment relationships within the Parliament. However, these elements are all being proposed to coalesce around a clear point of access through which anyone experiencing or witnessing conduct that does not meet the standards of dignity, courtesy and respect is supported to raise issues or complaints that allow appropriate actions to be taken.

Detailed evidence and findings

10. The evidence base for this review is extensive and consistent. Consultation with MSPs, MSP' staff and SPCB staff (Annex B & C – communications) including survey findings (Annex D), confidential ISAS feedback, staff engagement sessions (Annex E – stakeholder briefing), discussions with MSPs and benchmarking with other legislatures (Annex F) all point to the same underlying issues. While team-level cultures are generally strong, system-level arrangements are unclear, fragmented and experienced very differently by SPCB staff and MSP staff. The following themes summarise the core findings across all sources.

11. It also includes findings from Rosemary Agnew's 2026 Independent [Review of Members of the Scottish Parliament Complaints Sanctions Process](#).

Team cultures are strong, but system clarity and confidence diverge sharply between SPCB and MSP staff

12. Survey data show that both SPCB and MSP staff report strong team level relationships, feeling valued, supported and respected in their immediate teams. However, they diverge markedly on system knowledge and confidence. Among MSP staff, only 30% report receiving clear induction (53% disagree), 43% understand the underpinning policies, 28% are confident that policies are adequate, 47% believe a report would be taken seriously, and 39% believe they would be supported. By contrast, SPCB staff report higher practical knowledge (82% know how to access advice and 77% know how to report), but lower understanding of detailed policy (68%) and weaker confidence in policy adequacy (54%), with induction also identified as a weak area (40%). Qualitative evidence reflects these differences: MSP staff describe office-level variability and employment-based power imbalances, while SPCB staff emphasise the need for clearer policy navigation and safer early-stage options.

Induction and navigation are weak across both groups, but problems are acute for MSP staff

13. Both SPCB and MSP staff call for clearer, more accessible policy information and straightforward route maps. Navigation is widely perceived as fragmented. For SPCB staff, induction and understanding of policy detail are not universally strong. For MSP staff, the problem is significantly more pronounced: lower policy understanding, weaker induction and limited clarity on how independent routes apply to them combine to create practical and emotional barriers to raising issues. These factors amplify the risks inherent in the MSP-employee relationship and contribute to underreporting.

MSP staff require access to clear, consistent HR support

14. Evidence across the survey, confidential feedback and stakeholder discussions indicates that MSP staff lack access to consistent HR support, resulting in uncertainty and heightened vulnerability within MSP offices. This pattern is reflected in weaker induction, limited understanding of policies and procedures

Detailed evidence and findings

and substantially lower confidence that concerns will be handled appropriately. MSP staff report being unsure where to seek advice, particularly where a concern involves the employing MSP, and describe the absence of centrally available guidance on terms and conditions, employment rights, early problem-solving and how to approach a manager safely. Confidential feedback indicates that many individuals do not seek advice at all, while those who do value having a confidential space, suggesting that support exists but is not sufficiently accessible or designed for MSP staff needs.

Multiple, unconnected reporting routes are confusing, emotionally costly and deter speaking up

15. Across all evidence sources, staff describe having to navigate a patchwork of parallel reporting options, including ISAS, line management, employing MSPs, the Commissioner for Ethical Standards and political party processes. They frequently receive contradictory advice about which route to use and, in many cases, must recount their experience several times across different channels.

Boundaries between informal discussions, internal procedures and, for MSP staff, party mechanisms, are often unclear, contributing to inconsistent handling of similar behaviours and perceptions of unfairness. This complexity creates emotional burden, heightens vulnerability and discourages reporting, weakening confidence that concerns will be addressed promptly and consistently.

There is clear demand for a person-centred, trauma-informed model

16. Consultations with staff, networks and equalities groups consistently emphasise the need for a complaints system that is compassionate, transparent and aligned with trauma-informed practice. Key features include prioritising safety, confidentiality and welfare at every stage; allowing individuals to give their account once where possible to avoid re-traumatisation; providing clear explanations of rights, options and protections; and treating witnesses fairly and professionally. People view these elements as essential to rebuilding trust, enabling informed decision making and encouraging earlier reporting.

Concerns about the independence of complaints against MSPs are a core driver of low trust for MSP staff

17. A distinct trust gap emerges in relation to MSP-related complaints, especially for MSP staff. Compared with 2018, MSP staff show marked declines in both knowing how to report and believing that a report would be taken seriously, indicating reduced confidence in the system's ability to handle concerns involving MSPs fairly and effectively. Qualitative survey evidence links this to the power imbalance in small offices where the MSP is the employer, and the confidential ISAS feedback reinforces the picture of underreporting driven by personal risk. Most individuals who experienced or witnessed harmful behaviour did not seek advice or support, citing fears that raising concerns could harm their working relationships or career, or that their complaint would not be taken seriously – reasons that align closely with MSP staff's lower confidence in the survey. These accounts frequently describe MSP and MSP staff power dynamics and, in some cases, explicit discouragement from escalating concerns. Together, the ISAS data and the survey trends show that fear

Detailed evidence and findings

of career repercussions and low perceived independence are central to MSP staff caution about reporting and to their lower trust in outcomes when a complaint relates to an MSP. These issues reflect unresolved questions about structural independence highlighted by the [2018 Joint Working Group on Sexual Harassment](#).

Gaps in pastoral support for MSPs

18. Evidence from the Agnew review and stakeholder feedback identifies significant shortcomings in pastoral support for respondents, including MSPs. While staff may access established support mechanisms such as ISAS, there is no equivalent structured offer for MSPs who are respondents to complaints. This asymmetry is experienced as inequitable and undermines confidence in the fairness and legitimacy of outcomes. The Agnew review stressed the need for Parliament to make clear that existing pastoral support mechanisms should also be available to MSPs, and the SPPA Committee, having considered the report's recommendations, has written to the Presiding Officer to express its concern about the level of pastoral support currently available to MSPs who are facing a complaint.

Evidence of serious concerns, low advice seeking and MSP-staff power dynamics

19. Confidential feedback given to ISAS at the start of this year recorded 84 incidents of experiencing and/or witnessing bullying, harassment and sexual harassment, including allegations of sexual misconduct going back to 2021. These incidents were not reported at the time but were shared for the first time in 2026 as part of this review and includes feedback from SPCB and MSP staff. Many individuals did not seek advice at the time of the incident due to fear of consequences, reputational harm, or concern that reporting could damage political relationships or career prospects. Proportionately, the highest number of anonymous disclosures related to MSPs. Most individuals did not seek advice, citing fear of consequences, concerns that they would not be taken seriously or anxiety about the impact on careers and relationships. Accounts from the ISAS feedback, the survey, and discussions with staff and MSPs, indicate serious allegations of sexual misconduct, sexual harassment affecting women and men, incidents linked to alcohol and behaviour described as intended to “keep women

in their place”. Some MSP staff reported being discouraged from raising concerns on the basis that doing so would “harm the party”. These patterns indicate misuse of power by a small number of individuals and a gap between lived experience and official reporting volumes. Where individuals did seek help, they consistently valued having a confidential space to consider options, indicating that support is effective when accessed even though many do not come forward at all.

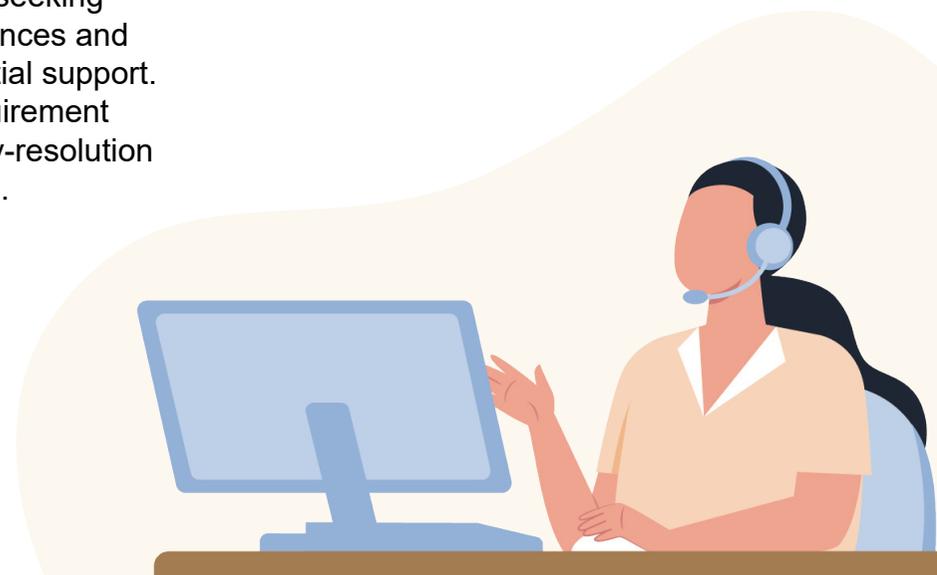
Detailed evidence and findings

Leadership visibility and consistent challenge need to improve for SPCB staff

20. For SPCB staff, the survey indicates a clear gap between strong team culture and weaker confidence that leaders will challenge poor behaviour, with only around 60% agreeing that leaders will act. Free-text comments refer to under-challenge, hierarchy effects, and a perceived two-tier culture where MSP behaviour is not addressed with the same rigour as staff behaviour. Staff also highlight concerns about inclusion, noting that those outside longstanding informal social networks can feel less psychologically safe and less confident that inappropriate behaviour will be challenged consistently. Across the evidence sources, staff call for clearer behavioural standards, more visible leadership presence and follow through, and stronger signals that inclusion applies equally to all groups.

SPCB staff require safer, supported early resolution options

21. Survey and qualitative evidence show that while SPCB staff have strong practical awareness of how to access advice and report concerns, they lack confidence in having safe and proportionate early-stage options to address issues before escalation. Staff note that current arrangements provide limited scope for raising concerns informally, particularly where approaching a line manager may feel inappropriate or unsafe. They highlight the need for clearer informal routes, confidential ways to log concerns and more consistent support in holding early conversations. ISAS feedback reinforces this, with many individuals not seeking advice due to fear of consequences and those who do valuing confidential support. This demonstrates a clear requirement for trusted and accessible early-resolution options within SPCB structures.



Detailed recommendations

22. The recommendations reflect both the evidence gathered and upcoming statutory duties. They aim to strengthen consistency across Parliament, improve clarity and independence in reporting routes, ensure parity of support, reduce risk, and embed prevention and early-resolution approaches. These recommendations sit alongside those stemming from Rosemary Agnew’s independent review – including on pastoral care for MSPs who are respondents to complaints – which the SPCB has already committed to implementing where they fall within its remit, while engaging with the SPPA Committee on those out-with or shared.

23. Taken together, these actions provide a whole-system reform package capable of restoring trust and improving safety, dignity and respect for everyone who works within Parliament.

24. There are fewer recommendations here than in the high-level section because several of the high-level recommendations have been grouped together.



Recommendation 1:

Parliament-wide zero tolerance statement and unified codes, policies and procedures

Strategic intent

Although Parliament adopted a zero tolerance position many years ago, the absence of a clear and shared explanation has led to uncertainty about what this means in practice. Evidence from this review shows that inconsistent policies, variable standards, and unclear expectations contribute to uneven protections and reinforce perceptions of a “two tier culture.” A refreshed Zero Tolerance Statement supported by aligned behavioural codes, policies and procedures will create clarity, consistency, and a unified standard across the parliamentary environment.

Recommendation

A revised Zero Tolerance Statement has been drafted to align the expectations, protections and consequences set out in Parliament’s and the SPCB’s codes, policies, and procedures (Annex G). This alignment will ensure that all staff, regardless of employer, experience the same high standards of safety, conduct, and support. A paper outlining alignment options, implications and next steps should now be prepared for SPCB consideration.

Pending this work, it is recommended that the Presiding Officer write to Party Leaders inviting them to reaffirm their commitment to a zero-tolerance approach to all forms of unacceptable behaviour. The draft statement will support this engagement and provide a shared reference point for political parties and employers.

Purpose

To provide clarity, consistency, and confidence that harmful behaviour will be addressed promptly, proportionately, and fairly, wherever it occurs and whoever is involved. A unified approach strengthens trust in the system and supports cultural change by ensuring everyone understands expectations and consequences.

Recommendation 1:

Parliament-wide zero tolerance statement and unified codes, policies and procedures

Practical actions

- Finalise a clear Zero Tolerance Statement that explains what zero tolerance means in practice, what behaviours it covers, and who it applies to across Parliament.
- Update and unify behavioural policies, including Prevention of Bullying and Harassment, to ensure consistent expectations, protections and processes across all employment relationships.
- Prepare a discussion paper setting out options for policy alignment, legal and practical implications, and recommended next steps for SPCB consideration.
- Engage with party leaders to reaffirm their commitment to a zero-tolerance culture at Holyrood, and then work with the SPPA Committee, and employers working at the Parliament, to endorse the zero-tolerance statement.

Recommendation 2:

Introduce a Parliament-wide employer pledge

Strategic intent

To establish a unified benchmark that clearly defines expectations of dignity, courtesy, and respect, serving as the foundation for all further recommendations.

Recommendation

The SPCB should introduce an Employer Pledge signalling a shared, Parliament-wide commitment to a zero-tolerance approach to bullying, harassment, sexual harassment and hate-motivated behaviour and other forms of inappropriate and abusive behaviour.

Purpose

To establish a clear, visible commitment that applies to all parliamentary employers and supports a consistent culture of safety and respect. The Pledge is a collective and positive call to action. Meaningful cultural change relies on all parliamentary employers working together so that everyone - whether working at Holyrood, in a local office or from home - experiences the same high standards of safety, protection and support. It reinforces existing legal and policy duties, enhancing statutory responsibilities under employment and health and safety legislation by embedding best practice and fostering a consistent culture of dignity, courtesy, and respect across Parliament.

Recommendation 2:

Introduce a Parliament-wide employer pledge

Practical actions

- Publish the Pledge with brief, accessible guidance outlining expectations for all employers at Parliament.
- Encourage all employers (SPCB, MSPs, contractors, partners) to sign and adopt the Pledge.
- Promote the Pledge during induction for MSPs, MSP staff and SPCB staff.
- Use the Pledge as the foundation for future development, training, and accountability measures.

The pledge should be supported by clear, accessible guidance that outlines MSPs' responsibilities as employers.

This guidance should emphasise that these expectations are not intended to restrict MSPs' autonomy, but to establish fair, safe and accountable standards. It should be framed as supportive and practical, helping MSPs understand what good employment practice entails.

Recommendation 3:

Strengthen clarity, independence, and accessibility of the complaints system

Strategic intent

The review highlights a persistent trust gap in how complaints involving MSPs are handled. MSP staff report significantly lower confidence that concerns will be taken seriously. Strengthening clarity, independence and transparency is essential to rebuilding confidence and ensuring a system that is fair, consistent, and trusted across Parliament.

Recommendation

The SPCB should commission senior officials to review options to strengthen independence, transparency, and confidence in the complaints processes. This work should include an appraisal of potential models drawing on modern comparators and consider how principles of fairness, timeliness and independence can be better articulated and understood. A paper outlining these options should be prepared for SPCB consideration. Following this, the SPCB may also wish to share the findings with the SPPA Committee for any reflections it may wish to offer.

Purpose

To address confidence among MSP staff, ensuring the systems reflects modern expectations of independence, and clarify how current complaints systems operate, including correcting misconceptions about roles and decision-making. The review should not predetermine the outcomes but would provide an evidence-based set of options for reform. The diagram at Annex H illustrates the current mechanisms for handling complaints of bullying, harassment and sexual misconduct. It's clear from this that the existing system is complex and lacks a victim focus. Annex I illustrates the corresponding systems at Westminster.

Recommendation 3:

Strengthen clarity, independence, and accessibility of the complaints system

Practical actions

- Commission senior officials to lead an options appraisal examining approaches to independent determination and sanction in relation to complaints, informed by best practice in other legislatures
- Prepare a discussion paper for SPCB consideration, outlining options, implications and potential pathways for strengthening independence and transparency.
- Subject to SPCB agreement, share the findings with the SPPA Committee.

Recommendation 4:

Strengthen working practices and early resolution for SPCB staff and between MSPs & SPCB staff

Strategic intent

To strengthen clarity, confidence, and early resolution in working relationships within SPCB staff teams, and between MSPs and SPCB staff, supported by high-level guidance and enhanced early-stage support. All guidance will support the Zero Tolerance Statement, and the relevant Codes will continue to take precedence.

Recommendation

The SPCB should introduce:

- a concise working-practices protocol outlining high-level expectations for respectful and effective interactions within SPCB teams and in MSP–SPCB engagement
- a confidential early-intervention function for SPCB staff that complements ISAS and provides safe informal options for raising and addressing concerns, such as facilitated conversations and mediation.

Purpose

To promote safe, respectful, and effective working relationships; improve confidence in early resolution; and ensure consistent, proportionate responses before issues escalate, while fully preserving the authority of the relevant Codes and formal procedures.

Recommendation 4:

Strengthen working practices and early resolution for SPCB staff and between MSPs & SPCB staff

Practical actions

Introduce a high-level working practices protocol

- Set out expectations for respectful conduct and constructive engagement within SPCB teams and between MSPs and SPCB staff.
- Provide simple guidance on when informal resolution may be appropriate and when formal routes should be used.
- Make the protocol accessible through induction and core materials.

Establish early intervention support that complements ISAS

- Provide triage, anonymous logging and proportionate informal options such as facilitated conversations.
- Strengthen onsite police presence to provide opportunities for victim-led or third-party reporting of serious safety concerns.
- Use aggregated informal data to identify patterns and support early preventative action.

Recommendation 5:

Strengthen protections for MSP staff

Strategic intent

The review highlights the particularly acute risks faced by MSP staff due to small-office structures and limited HR support. As a point of principle, MSP staff should have access to dedicated, professional HR support in line with modern workplace standards. Without this, staff remain vulnerable and isolated. Building on lessons from the Speaker's Conference on the Employment of Members' Staff and reforms in the House of Commons, this recommendation seeks to strengthen safeguards without reducing the SPCB's responsibility to support MSPs.

Recommendation

The SPCB should commission senior officials to strengthen safeguards for MSP staff by clarifying employer responsibilities and expanding access to consistent HR advice and support – drawing on comparator models such as the House of Commons.

Purpose

To ensure MSP staff have clearer protections and access to independent, confidential professional support, while maintaining balanced and appropriate support for MSPs in their roles as employers.

Recommendation 5:

Strengthen protections for MSP staff

Practical actions

- Create a confidential HR advice service for MSP staff, informed by the modernised approach adopted in the House of Commons.
- Introduce proportionate safeguards, such as clearer boundaries and early risk identification tools, and structured early resolution options, adapted to our context.
- Amend and clarify existing policy and guidance to build in additional safeguards in line with [Preventing sexual harassment - Sexual harassment - Acas](#)

Recommendation 6:

Introduce a Parliament-wide risk assessment framework

Strategic intent

SPCB should implement a comprehensive risk framework aimed at preventing bullying, harassment and sexual harassment. Failure to undertake risk assessments to prevent harassment could lead to enforcement action by the EHRC or increased compensation in tribunal claims.

Recommendation

The SPCB should introduce a risk-assessment framework that helps employers to identify and mitigate risks of bullying, harassment and sexual harassment, including third-party harassment.

Purpose

To support the SPCB in meeting its preventative duties and assist MSPs and Parliamentary Groups in fulfilling theirs, whilst also reinforcing the Employer Pledge through clear and practical safeguarding measures.

Recommendation 6:

Introduce a Parliament-wide risk assessment framework

Practical actions

Prepare for the new duty

- Review existing practices and identify higher-risk environments (e.g., overnight accommodation, business travel arrangements, alcohol availability at events, external stakeholder meetings).
- Equip systems and processes to assist SPCB managers and MSPs as employers to meet the forthcoming “all reasonable steps” legal standard.

Embed early risk identification

- Provide guidance on identifying higher-risk settings.
- Supply templates and tools for consistent risk assessment.
- Integrate risk-assessment expectations into induction and training for MSPs, managers and staff.

Improve early escalation and case-spotting

- Establish a confidential, non-punitive forum for SPCB–party engagement.
- Enable early, proportionate interventions that prevent escalation while respecting MSP independence.

Offer supportive early-resolution options

- Provide coaching, facilitated conversations and practical guidance to MSPs and managers and staff to address concerns then they arise.

Recommendation 7:

Strengthen training, awareness and induction across Parliament

Strategic intent

Ensure all MSPs, their staff and SPCB staff understand their distinct roles, obligations and responsibilities. This includes equipping MSPs with the necessary knowledge and tools to fulfil their preventative duties and uphold commitments outlined in the Employer Pledge.

Recommendation

SPCB should implement a Parliament-wide training programme tailored to the specific needs of MSPs, their staff, and SPCB staff, ensuring practical delivery and clear alignment with the Employer Pledge.

MSPs and MSP staff cannot be mandated to undertake SPCB-led training, as they are not SPCB staff.

Recommendation 7:

Strengthen training, awareness and induction across Parliament

Practical actions

Work with political parties

- Encourage parties to embed employer-responsibility training into candidate development.
- Provide high-quality materials for parties to use voluntarily.

Strengthen SPCB development programmes

- Offer voluntary but strongly encouraged development tailored to MSPs' roles.
- Ensure all programmes link clearly to the Employer Pledge.

Deliver differentiated training

- **SPCB staff:**
Maintain mandatory corporate induction and annual refreshers.
- **MSP staff:**
Provide a clear induction on applicable policies, reporting routes and protections.
- **MSPs:**
Use expectation-setting mechanisms – Pledge sign-up, transparent reporting of participation, and access to enhanced support for those who engage.

Build capability in key areas

- Early-stage intervention
- Preventing retaliation
- Handling concerns safely
- Managing small or remote teams
- Giving and receiving feedback
- Supporting psychologically safe conversations

Recommendation 8:

Engagement with MSP Staff Trade Unions

Strategic intent

Many of the systemic issues identified in this review relate to the distinct risks, structures and experiences of MSP staff. Strengthening constructive engagement with MSP staff trade unions offers an important route to better understand these issues, promote early dialogue, and improve clarity in areas where SPCB decisions can influence their working environment. This engagement should complement, not replace, existing mechanisms for staff voice, recognising the diversity of ways in which staff may choose to be represented.

Recommendation

The SPCB should commission senior officials to review the proposals put forward by MSP staff trade unions to improve clarity, engagement, and communication between parliamentary authorities and MSP staff. This review should explore how SPCB decisions intersect with the MSP staff employment relationship, while fully respecting the existing legal employment structure.

Purpose

To ensure MSP staff have meaningful, representative routes to raise issues and contribute to discussions affecting their working environment, while maintaining and valuing existing forums and acknowledging that not all MSP staff will choose trade union membership.

Recommendation 8:

Engagement with MSP Staff Trade Unions

Practical actions

- Develop a discussion paper for SPCB consideration, setting out options, implications and proportionate approaches for strengthening engagement and mutual understanding. Without prejudice to the outcome, this may include exploration of a dedicated engagement mechanism or similar structure without presuming an outcome.
- As an early activity, consider whether providing SPCB-hosted email accounts for MSP staff trade unions could support clearer, more reliable and more consistent communication channels between unions and their members. The House of Commons approach, where equivalent trade unions are provided with House-hosted email accounts, offers a useful comparator when exploring potential options.

Recommendation 9:

Embed a Parliament-wide speak up culture

Strategic intent

To build a culture in which concerns are raised early and safely, grounded in visible leadership, and shared responsibility. This recommendation focuses on the behaviours, norms and cultural conditions required to enable the new reporting routes, HR supports and safeguarding arrangements to succeed.

Recommendation

The SPCB should introduce a Parliament-wide Speak up Framework that strengthens psychological safety, tackles fear of retaliation and makes speaking up an expected and supported norm across all parts of the parliamentary community.

Purpose

The review highlights that many staff, especially MSP staff, are reluctant to raise concerns due to fears of career repercussions, retaliation, reputational damage, and doubts that their issues will be addressed. These anxieties are intensified within the political context, where employers influence employment and progression, and concerns may attract media attention. This framework aims to improve the cultural conditions affecting staff confidence to use support systems.

Recommendation 9:

Embed a Parliament-wide speak up culture

Practical actions

Establish Parliament-wide speak up expectations

- Introduce a short, principles-based Speak Up statement, endorsed by the SPCB, senior leaders and party groups, setting clear expectations that concerns should be raised early, listened to respectfully and acted upon consistently.
- Embed these expectations into induction and leadership development, without repeating procedural guidance already covered under reporting-route reforms.
- Design and implement a visible Speak Up campaign to support and encourage individuals to come forward and report any unacceptable behaviour they have experienced or witnessed.

Strengthen psychological safety across employment groups

- Provide practical tools for managers, MSPs and senior leaders to foster safe team climates (e.g., how to respond constructively when concerns are raised, how to respond in different settings, how to reduce defensiveness, how to normalise early conversations).
- Reinforce modelling of constructive challenge behaviours as part of leadership expectations, complementing the existing leadership visibility recommendation.

Make anti-retaliation protections visible and credible

- Communicate a clear organisational stance that retaliation or detriment for raising a concern will not be tolerated.
- Provide simple, scenario-based guidance on what retaliation looks like in practice (e.g., exclusion, reduced opportunities, undermining behaviour) and how individuals can seek help if it occurs.

Implementation considerations

25. Effective implementation will be critical to ensuring reforms deliver meaningful improvements in safety, clarity and trust. The following considerations are intended to support effective implementation and ensure that the recommended changes are practical, sustainable and capable of achieving the intended improvements in safety, dignity, courtesy and respect.

- **Adopt a phased**

- **implementation approach:**

- A programme plan will be developed to guide the phased implementation of the recommended reforms. The plan will set out clear stages, beginning with actions that address immediate risks, clarify reporting routes and reinforce independence in the system. Subsequent phases will focus on embedding cultural change and building capability, including targeted training, increasing leadership visibility and establishing robust monitoring frameworks. The programme plan will include a detailed timetable and sequencing of activities to promote transparency, maintain momentum and ensure each phase builds on the previous one for lasting impact. Regular review points will be incorporated

to assess progress, manage risks and adjust priorities where necessary, ensuring that the implementation remains practical, sustainable and aligned with the overarching objectives of safety, dignity, courtesy and respect.

- **Engage political parties as key partners:**

- A number of recommendations relate directly to MSPs, MSP staff and political party processes. Early and ongoing engagement with party groups will be essential to ensure alignment, coordinate induction and training activities, embed the Employer Pledge, and support more consistent employment practices across MSP offices. Political parties will also play a key role in strengthening expectations, improving independence in MSP-related processes such as vetting and supporting a culture that encourages early reporting.

- **Resource the programme appropriately:**

- Some recommendations involve new functions or expanded services, such as an HR support provision for MSP staff, early interventions, improved complaints handling, and a Parliament-wide risk assessment framework. These changes will require additional capacity, specialist expertise and potentially new budget lines.

An early resource assessment will help ensure that the reforms are deliverable and that existing services are not placed under unsustainable pressure.

- **Prioritise communication, visibility and clarity:**

- Many of the problems identified in this review stem from unclear information, inconsistent messaging and lack of visibility of support. Implementation should be accompanied by a coherent communications plan that ensures all staff know where to find routes, rights, expectations and protections. Regular updates on progress will reinforce transparency and demonstrate leadership commitment.

- **Embed trauma-informed principles and safeguarding throughout:**

- New policies, procedures and support services should reflect trauma-informed approaches to ensure that those raising concerns are treated with dignity, compassion and fairness. Safeguarding principles will underpin reporting routes, early resolution options, risk assessment tools and the management of serious concerns, including cases involving MSPs.

Implementation considerations

- **Build capability and confidence:**
Training will be essential to embed new expectations, improve understanding of employer duties, strengthen early intervention skills and support psychological safety. Training should be tailored to the distinct roles of SPCB staff, MSPs and their staff, with accessible materials, scenario-based learning and opportunities for ongoing development.
- **Use data and monitoring to drive continuous improvement:**
A strengthened monitoring and reporting framework should be established early in the implementation process. This should include anonymised data on volumes, types of cases, timeframes and outcomes, alongside qualitative insights, culture checks and thematic reviews. Data should be used to track progress, identify patterns and inform ongoing preventative action.
- **Plan for transition during the Election cycle:**
The upcoming Election provides a unique opportunity to reset expectations, strengthen induction and embed consistent messaging for new and returning MSPs. Early planning will help ensure that key elements, such as the Employer Pledge, induction content, risk-based guidance and reporting routes, are fully integrated into onboarding processes.
- **Maintain focus on culture as well as systems:**
While system improvements are essential, meaningful change will rely on sustained shifts in culture, leadership behaviour and shared expectations across all parts of Parliament. Implementation should therefore be approached not only as a procedural change programme but as a cultural one, requiring visible organisational and political leadership commitment, consistent modelling of expected behaviours and continued engagement with staff.

Conclusion

- 26.** This review shows that although Parliament benefits from strong team-level cultures, the systems intended to uphold dignity, safety and respect are not yet providing the clarity, independence or consistency that staff should expect. Fragmented reporting routes, inconsistent induction, limited early resolution options and a clear trust gap in MSP related processes have created avoidable risks, felt most acutely by MSP staff working within small, personalised offices and in Parliamentary Group Pools.
- 27.** These weaknesses are reinforced by wider cultural patterns, including inconsistent leadership challenge, uneven psychological safety and a long-standing perception of unequal standards between MSPs and staff. In the context of strengthened duties under the Employment Rights Act 2025, there is a clear need to modernise existing arrangements and introduce stronger, more coherent protections across the parliamentary environment.
- 28.** The recommendations set out in this report provide a practical and achievable framework for reform. They focus on clearer expectations, simpler and more independent reporting routes, stronger safeguarding, improved induction and training, enhanced support for MSP and SPCB staff, and more visible, accountable leadership.
- 29.** Delivering sustained improvement will require collective commitment from the SPCB, organisational leadership, political parties and all employers operating within Parliament. By taking forward these actions, Parliament can build a safer, more consistent and more respectful working environment – one that reflects the dignity, courtesy and integrity expected by the people it serves.

List of Annexes

- **Annex A:** Terms of Reference for the Review of our Dignity at Work arrangements
- **Annex B:** Inclusive Parliament Review update to MSPs and MSP staff from Presiding Officer
- **Annex C:** Inclusive Parliament Review update to all SPCB staff from Chief Executive
- **Annex D:** Dignity at Work Arrangements Survey 2026 Report
- **Annex E:** Stakeholder Briefing - bullying, harassment, culture and behaviours
- **Annex F:** Benchmarking with other legislatures – Policy and reporting arrangements and approach comparison
- **Annex G:** Draft Zero tolerance statement
- **Annex H:** Scottish Parliament complaints process
- **Annex I:** Independent Complaints and Grievance Scheme (ICGS) complaints handling process [*independent service for UK Parliament*]



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