

Caribbean Clerks Programme

REPORT SUMMARY

25 January - 28 January 2023



PROGRAMME OVERVIEW

On 26th and 27th January 2023, CPA UK delivered the third Caribbean Clerks Programme, in partnership with the Parliament of Barbados and ParlAmericas. This followed two successful virtual editions of the programme in 2021 and 2022, and was the first time the conference had been held in-person.

IMPACT

To strengthen parliamentary democracy across the Caribbean by providing training and networking opportunities for parliamentary staff in the region.

OUTCOMES

1. Participants have increased knowledge and understanding of various aspects of the roles of parliamentary clerks and officials.
2. Clerks and parliamentary staff in Caribbean legislatures and the UK Parliament have strengthened interparliamentary professional networks, allowing for future collaboration and further sharing of knowledge and skills.

Sixteen legislatures across the Caribbean participated in the programme, with 34 clerks and officials from the Caribbean region and the UK travelling to Bridgetown. Delegates participating included clerks, deputy clerks, researchers and support staff. The sessions ran across two days and was hosted in the Senate Chamber of the Parliament of Barbados.

The approach of the programme was one of peer-to-peer learning, with attendees sharing their knowledge and expertise. The sessions covered a number of topics, including the role of a clerk, working effectively with members and operating with resource constraints.



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FULL REPORT

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The importance of clerks and officials in an effective parliament

The programme considered the roles of clerks and parliamentary officials as stewards of parliamentary practice and procedure. Rather than simply doing administration or choreography, they are essential in the effective running of a parliament. Participants explored more closely the different types of clerks and officials, including committee clerks, table clerks and Hansard reporters.



Delegates discussed the complexity of a clerk's role, remaining non-political in a political environment, and calm during times of stress. One delegate described the 'clerk face', whereby one must be impartial and attentive, offering guidance and advice, even when members may deem it inconvenient. Contributors discussed how the clerk does not work for, nor represent, the government, but is serves the parliament, and, by extension, the electorate.

Being confident and clear are important traits when clerking the chamber, delegates explained that they must remain professional, not overly friendly, and unbiased. Participants explored the specific roles of the table clerks across the Caribbean region, along with their associated challenges. Delegates went further to discuss the skill of finding the right balance of giving advice to the Presiding Officer, whilst avoiding unnecessary distraction, and the important role of body language when gaining their attention.

Finally, delegates explored the important roles parliamentary staff play in research and support, most notably as Hansard reporters, advisors and researchers. It was discussed how technology has been useful in assisting with these roles. However, many legislatures are still finding themselves short-staffed as there is a shortage of trained personnel for certain roles. Delegates shared that a lack of resources and research services is having a direct impact on the support they can give to members.

When discussing the role of the clerk, there was an emphasis on how clerks and officials can remain in the legislature for many years. They must be dynamic and adaptable to facilitate parliament running smoothly.

— “ —

“A clerk must be non-political in a highly political environment”

— ” —

Inclusive citizen participation

A recurring theme of the programme was the importance of facilitating engagement between the public and parliament. Participants explored how parliament communicates its work and how citizens can participate. Innovative steps have been taken in legislatures across the Caribbean to encourage inclusive citizen participation.

Technology has been a useful tool for a number of legislatures to facilitate public engagement and interaction in the work of parliament. One legislature allows live comments during meetings, which are shown live on YouTube. Sometimes committees can also take live questions through this channel. Another legislature uses social media platforms to bridge the gap between members and the public by posting short interviews with parliamentarians.

Delegates also explored the importance of engaging and involving young people in parliamentary affairs. Several legislatures across the Caribbean organise school visits and youth parliaments. These activities allow young people to better understand how parliament works and provide an opportunity to participate in youth parliament debates.

Participants addressed the importance of improving accessibility of information for the public with limited knowledge of parliamentary affairs. One legislature supports this through producing a 'Bills Essentials' document, that puts the bill into readily understandable language. For more simple bills, infographics are produced and distributed.

Delegates discussed possible next steps to improve this engagement even further, including scholarships and training programmes in politics for certain demographics, the use of parliament museums and parliament tours.

Working effectively with members

During the programme participants discussed how clerks can work effectively with parliamentarians. We considered codes of conduct, standards of service, the process of inducting new members and setting appropriate boundaries.

It was quickly established that members and clerks can work together more effectively when they recognise and consider each other's capacity and position. It is important for clerks to appreciate the many demands on a member in their role, not only in parliament but in their political party and constituency.



Delegates shared various systems that are used by certain legislatures that ensure there is clear guidance on what support clerks and officials can provide and the time scales for that support. We considered when relationships between clerks and members have broken down, and shared steps that legislatures have taken to prevent bullying and harassment.

Participants shared the importance of self-care and the value of having boundaries between one's professional and personal life to prevent overworking. One clerk shared valuable advice he had been given by a senior colleague on the importance of having a life outside of parliament.

Adapting to resource constraints in smaller legislatures

Many participants work in smaller legislatures where the impact of resource constraints is acutely felt. To manage these financial and capacity limitations participants considered what steps were being taken to set priorities and to deal with backlogs of work.

To adapt and make the best use of the resources available, one legislature chose to minute parliamentary sittings, rather than the more resource intensive process of producing a Hansard verbatim account. There was an emphasis on taking steps to invest in and appreciate existing parliamentary staff, with one legislature offering legal training to all their law officers, and another legislature offering staff retreats and benefits on birthdays.

It was also noted that, to address the human and financial constraints, that it was very important to work in partnership with the Presiding Officer on the issues. It is important to be honest with the Presiding Officer, and ensure they are aware of the extent of the parliament's limited resources.

Speakers concluded by focusing on the importance of finding a healthy balance between the resources available and the services that officials can deliver. A number of participants highlighted the importance of not focussing on one's limitations, but rather on providing the best service with the resources they have.

— “ —

“Don’t say we are few, under resourced. We must get up and do what we can do.”

— ” —



Celebrating innovation across the Caribbean region

To conclude the two-day programme, participants turned their focus towards the strengths and achievements of the Caribbean legislatures and looked more closely at the innovative steps that have been taken across the region.

Due to the pandemic, there was a sharp increase in using technology in parliament, which has had longer lasting benefits. The use of digital technology has allowed some Caribbean legislatures to go paperless, and publish laws and bills online for staff and the public. This advancement in technology has also improved accessibility, with better streaming facilities of meetings and sittings. The possibility of using electronic documents, e-tabling questions, and e-laying papers has, for one legislature, reduced delays and kept parliament moving smoothly.

In other parliaments, they have seen a range of important developments in their operation of parliaments, including Standing Order changes, as well as redevelopments of parliamentary premises. Several Caribbean legislatures revised their Standing Orders, with one amending them to allow virtual meetings. Many Caribbean legislatures have also been making improvements to parliament buildings and working facilities, with many now noting better amenities and private working spaces for clerks.



— “ —

**“Every parliament
has performed
extraordinarily
[through the]
worldwide
pandemic”**

— ” —

Finally, a significant development witnessed in several Caribbean legislatures was a number of parliamentary roles being held for the first time by women. These roles included the office of Presiding Officer, Clerk and Deputy Clerk.

Whilst remaining mindful of the challenges and difficulties that continue to exist amongst the legislatures of the region, we recognised that there is much to share, learn from and celebrate in Caribbean parliaments.

PARTICIPATING LEGISLATURES



Anguilla



Belize



Guyana



Saint Kitts
and Nevis



Antigua and
Barbuda



Bermuda



Jamaica



Saint Lucia



The
Bahamas



British Virgin
Islands



Montserrat



Suriname



Barbados



Grenada



Saint Vincent and
the Grenadines



Trinidad and
Tobago



United
Kingdom

PARTICIPATING CLERKS & OFFICIALS

House of Assembly Anguilla

- Vanisha Proctor, Committee Clerk
- Eusvon Brooks Chambers, Senior Clerical Officer

Parliament of Antigua and Barbuda

- Ramona Small, Advisor

Parliament of the Bahamas

- Rashad Flowers, Table Clerk

Parliament of Barbados

- Pedro Eastmond, Clerk
- Beverley Gibbons, Deputy Clerk
- Keisha Holder-Ottley, Clerical Office, Journals Department
- J'anne Greenidge, Typist, Journals Office
- Vllma Bradshaw, Hansard Reporter
- Krystal Blackett, Hansard Reporter
- Suzanne Hamblin, Library Assistant and Assistant to the Regional Secretary

National Assembly of Belize

- Clarita Pech, Deputy Clerk
- Eudice Gibson, Senior Clerk Assistant

Parliament of Bermuda

- Kara Beale, Assistant Clerk/Committee Clerk

House of Assembly of the British Virgin Islands

- Phyllis Evans, Clerk
- Linton V. Leonard, Public Relations Officer

Parliament of Grenada

- Andrew Augustine, Clerk
- Melvina Gulston, Administrative Assistant

Parliament of Guyana

- Gailann Alana Griffith, Research and Analytical Assistant
- Letta Tracey Ann Barker, Research and Analytical Assistant

Parliament of Jamaica

- Tracey Cohen, Assistant Clerk
- Carl Bryan, Chief Hansard Reporter

Legislative Assembly of Montserrat

- Judith Baker, Clerk

National Assembly of Saint Kitts and Nevis

- Trevlyn Stapleton, Clerk
- Mauriel Knight, Deputy Clerk

Parliament of Saint Lucia

- Sharon Montoute, Deputy Clerk
- Nita Louis, Administrative Secretary

House of Assembly of Saint Vincent and the Grenadines

- Sharon Nash, Deputy Clerk

National Assembly of Suriname

- Ruth de Windt, Clerk
- Rattan Naresh Algae, Scientific Advisor

Parliament of Trinidad and Tobago

- Sherlana Ramdeen, Procedural Officer Intern, Table Clerk
- Sharla Elcock, Legal Officer I, Table Clerk

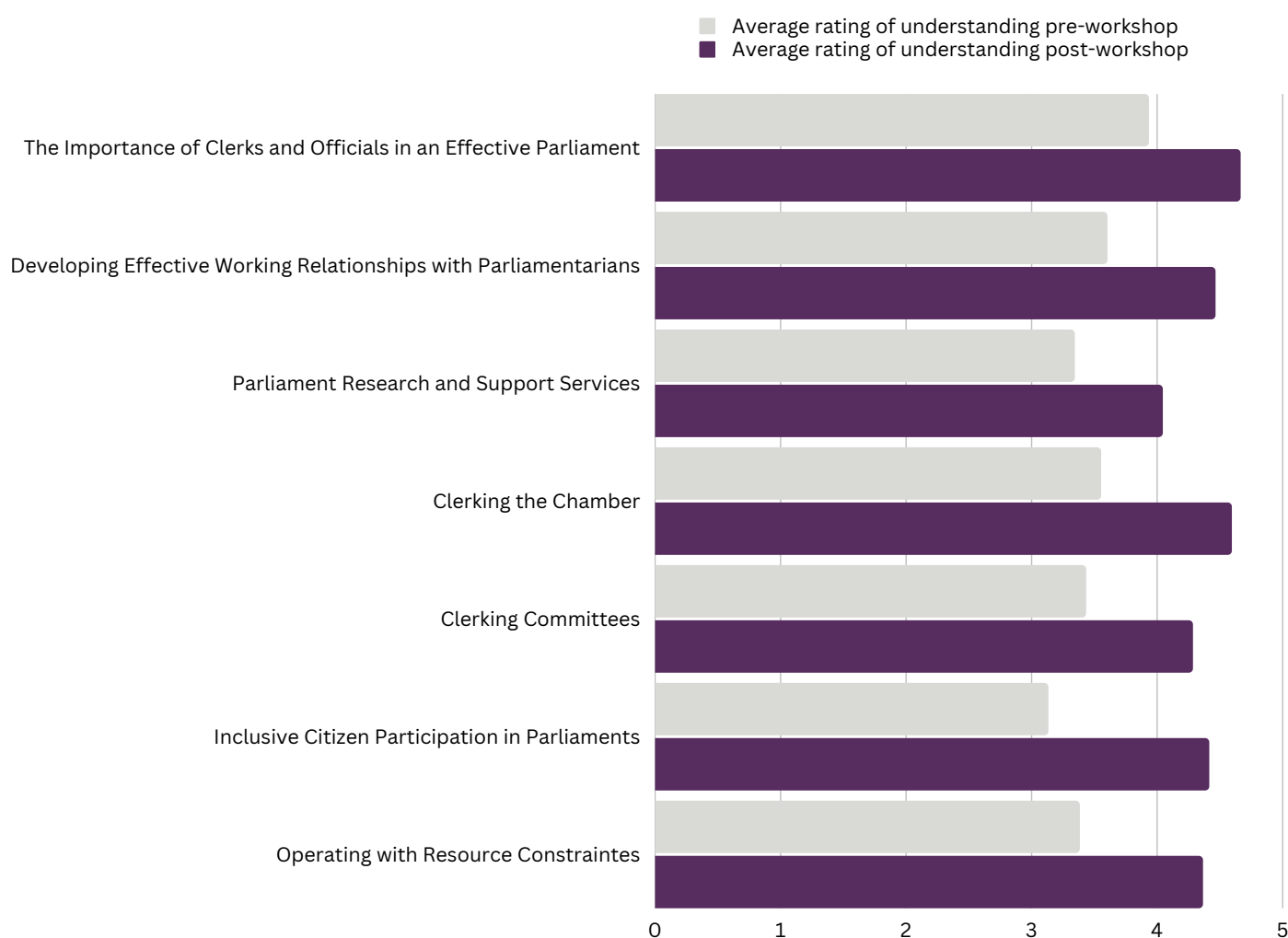
Parliament of the United Kingdom

- Lynn Gardner, Clerk of the Interparliamentary Office
- Chris Stanton, Principal Clerk, Select Committee Team

MONITORING AND EVALUATION

At the beginning of the programme, each participant completed a pre-programme assessment and then completed a post-programme assessment at the end, evaluating their own level of understanding of the areas explored in the programme. The scale of understanding ranged from (1) "None" to (5) "In-depth".

Overall, participants found that they increased their knowledge in all seven areas, ranging from 18% to 41%, with an average of 27% across all areas, as illustrated in the below chart. Around 90% of participants found the programme 'fully relevant' to their role and 10% stated 'partially relevant', while no one said 'not relevant'.



PROGRAMME

DAY 1: THURSDAY 26 JANUARY 2023

0930 - 1015 Formal Opening of the third Caribbean Clerks Workshop

President of the Senate, Hon. Reginal R. Farley and Chairman of Committees Peter Phillips MP spoke to formally open the programme.

Victoria Bower, CPA UK, explained the format and expectations of the programme and participants were invited to complete a pre-programme assessment form.

1030 - 1130 Session 1: The Importance of Clerks and Officials in an Effective Parliament

This opening session considered the roles of clerks and parliamentary officials as stewards of parliamentary practice and procedure. Rather than dealing with 'just' administration or choreography, they are essential in the effective running of a parliament.

1130 - 1230 Session 2: Supporting Parliaments: Challenges and Opportunities

The programme participants divided into pre-arranged groups with a mixture of legislatures and professions represented. Groups were asked to share where their legislature was running efficiently and where there were challenges. The purpose was to facilitate networking and inform all those present of the opportunities and challenges in the region.

1415 - 1515 Session 3: Developing Effective Working Relationships with Parliamentarians

This interactive session considered how clerks can work effectively with parliamentarians. Consideration was given to Standards of Service, impartiality, the process of inducting new members and setting appropriate boundaries.

1530 - 1630 Session 4: Parliament Research and Support Services

This session considered the roles in Parliament that enable parliamentarians to carry out their roles, including researchers, advisors and Hansard reporters. Discussions considered how parliaments can make best use of their resources to facilitate informed scrutiny and how parliaments can make use of digital technologies in the roles.

PROGRAMME

DAY 2: FRIDAY 27 JANUARY 2023

0930 - 1030

Session 5: Clerking the Chamber

Given the importance of the proceedings in the Chamber, this session looked specifically at how a clerk effectively supports the Presiding Officer in Chamber proceedings. This included planning ahead and anticipating issues, responding to situations in the Chamber and following-up and reflecting on issues afterwards.

1030 - 1130

Session 6: Clerking Committees

This session considered the role clerks play in the effective operation of committees in parliaments, including how a clerk can work with the committee chair and members to plan inquiries, hold effective evidence session and produce reports. Discussions considered what one can do when a committee is struggling to convene or build momentum, and what steps can be taken to support cross-party working.

1145 - 1245

Session 7: Inclusive citizen participation in parliaments

This session looked at facilitating engagement between the general public and the parliament. It considered how parliament communicates its work and how citizens can participate in the operation of parliament. Discussions looked at how legislatures avoid only involving the 'usual suspects' but rather take a proactive inclusive approach to promote the participation of under-represented groups.

1415 - 1515

Session 8: Operating with Resource Constraints

This session considered how parliaments, staff teams and individuals manage resource constraints, with a particular focus on smaller legislatures. Discussions considered issues such as how priorities are set and how to deal with backlogs, with attention to how this is done in partnership with the Presiding Officers and parliamentarians.

1530 - 1630

Session 9: Regional Showcase – Celebrating the Strengths of Caribbean Parliaments

This session showcased the innovative steps being taken across the region in parliaments, from youth parliaments to Standing Order reform, and from building projects to constitutional change. Alongside being clear-eyed about the challenges in the region, there was much to share, learn from and celebrate in Caribbean parliaments.

1630 - 1700

Formal Closing of the third Caribbean Clerks Programme

Speaker of the House of Assembly, Hon. Arthur E. Holder LLB MP and Chairman of Committees Peter Phillips MP spoke to close the programme.



CPA UK

Westminster Hall
London
SW1A 0AA
T: +44 (0)20 7219 5373
F: +44 (0)20 7233 1202
E: cpauk@parliament.uk
W: www.uk-cpa.org

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Imogen Richards