

Caribbean Clerks Programme 2025

REPORT SUMMARY

11 - 13 February 2025

IMPACT

- To strengthen parliamentary democracy across the Caribbean region by supporting legislatures to be effective and inclusive

OUTCOMES

- To enhance the understanding and implementation of effective parliamentary procedures, practices, and legislative processes by sharing best practices and experiences between Caribbean and UK parliamentary officials.
- To build on and strengthen professional relationships and networks between parliamentary clerks and officials across the Caribbean and the UK, encouraging ongoing collaboration, knowledge exchange, and mutual support on parliamentary issues.

PROGRAMME OVERVIEW

From the 11 to 13 of February 2025, in partnership with the Parliament of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago and ParlAmericas, CPA UK delivered the fifth instalment of the Caribbean Clerks Programme. This in-person edition in Port of Spain built on previous programmes that have been held annually, both virtually and in-person, since 2021.

31 parliamentary officials from 16 legislatures across the Caribbean participated, as well as two officials from the UK Parliament. Delegates came from a range of professional backgrounds and experience levels, including clerks, researchers and other parliamentary roles, with some relatively new to their position and others with decades of parliamentary experience. Over three days, sessions took place in the Red House, the Parliament of Trinidad and Tobago's historic parliamentary building.



The Red House, Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago

Key topics were the independence of parliament, inducting new members, technological integration, and public outreach. These focus areas were carefully selected following a planning meeting with participating legislatures.

The programme's main outcomes were to facilitate knowledge sharing through a peer-to-peer learning approach and to strengthen professional relationships that would continue beyond the event.

The Parliament of Trinidad and Tobago generously hosted the programme and organised a range of cultural activities offering delegates a glimpse into Trinidad and Tobago's vibrant culture.

PARTNERS



Caribbean Clerks Programme 2025

FULL REPORT

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Delegates from across the Caribbean came together for the 2025 Clerks Programme

Strengthening Parliamentary Processes

Parliamentary officials provide the institutional foundation that allows parliamentarians to perform their duties effectively, ensuring that parliaments function efficiently in law-making and other key responsibilities. However, upholding democratic practices is not without its challenges.

Delegates shared firsthand experiences of navigating these challenges and discussed practical strategies to overcome them. For example, officials can encounter resistance from members when procedural advice does not align with their political objectives.

The application of the sub judice convention, that members should not comment on live court cases, is also a challenge that officials must navigate. A key takeaway from the discussion was the importance of documenting procedural challenges and responses as they arise, to ensure that these decisions can be referred to if similar issues occur in the future. Though not every scenario can be anticipated.

One legislature shared an unexpected procedural dilemma when their ceremonial mace was thrown out of a window!

A central focus of the programme was inducting new members, so they are equipped with the knowledge and skills they need to navigate the procedural complexity of parliament.

One parliament shared its experience following a recent election when there was a high turnover of members. An induction programme was in place, including hundreds of volunteers who served as mentors. An interesting reflection from this induction experience was the difference between what parliamentary officials wanted members to know versus what the members themselves wanted to learn first. Often, new members needed practical information first, such as where their office is located, before learning about parliamentary processes. A buddy system was implemented, to avoid overwhelming new members with information initially. Members could then reach out to their buddy with any questions during the first few months of the parliament.

To explore the experience of a newly elected member, participants took part in a breakout group activity where they took on the role of a newly elected member and were asked to consider what information they would find most valuable and what mistakes they would want to avoid. Common priorities included understanding salaries, dress codes, and receiving a guided tour of the parliament building. Potential mistakes a member may want to avoid were using unparliamentary language, failing to adhere to the dress code, and making procedural missteps.

Maintaining Parliamentary Independence and Integrity

An important factor in a parliament's integrity is its independence from the executive. This independence enables effective government scrutiny. The discussion on parliamentary independence highlighted both its core principles and the challenges of maintaining it in practice. Sometimes the executive has an influence over the parliament's funding or in some cases, parliament is even treated as a government ministry.

One delegate highlighted that in their legislature parliamentary officials must be assertive in order to maintain the separation of powers. This requires in-depth knowledge about the standing orders and the constitution.

"As Parliamentary Officers, we are custodians not just of our internal practices but we must be shakers, movers and ambassadors to the people who are served by our institutions."

Participating Parliamentary Clerk



A panel fields questions on the evolving role of clerks and officials in parliament

Parliamentary integrity is crucial for maintaining public trust and this depends on the conduct of its members and staff. Professionalism, ethical behaviour, and accountability are all vital.

Delegates explored the role of codes of conduct in promoting these values among parliamentarians and parliamentary staff, including different approaches to implementing and enforcing these codes.

One legislature shared the experience of having two distinct codes of conduct, one for members and one for officials. The members' code sets out clear behavioural standards, including requirements for regular declarations of interests, income and assets. Oversight is provided by the Commission of Standards for Public Life, which advises government bodies on ethical behaviour and submits reports to parliament to ensure transparency. Meanwhile, the public code of conduct for staff outlines expectations such as honesty, political neutrality and avoiding conflicts of interest.

Another legislature provided an overview of the several sets of ethical rules in place in their parliament, which govern the behaviour of members and officials. These include a code of conduct for both chambers, a behaviour code for members, officials and visitors and 'House Values' for officials. The code of conduct not only specifies rules around declaration of interests but also around bullying and sexual harassment. The behaviour code which came about following coverage in the media related to workplace bullying and harassment. One challenge includes finding a balance between confidentiality and transparency, since sometimes the reports are not publicised, and the code is regularly under review to address this.

The fundamental elements of a code of conduct are clarity around its objectives, transparency and clear consequences for breaching the code.

To deepen their understanding, delegates participated in a breakout exercise to develop their own framework for a code of conduct. Impartiality, transparency, regular reviews and assessments, clear consequences for breaches, and a fair appeals process, were highlighted as key principles.

Modernising Parliamentary Practices through Technology

As parliaments adapt to meet the demands of a rapidly evolving digital age, the integration of technology has become essential in enhancing the efficiency, transparency, and accessibility of parliamentary processes.

One legislature noted that in the last decade or so, several types of technology have been implemented to improve transparency and public engagement. These include an improved system for searching for documents, a platform that allows parliamentarians to edit documents in real time that also supports instant messaging, and the use of a website and social media for their parliament which informs the public of meetings, proceedings and other activities at the National Assembly. There is also training currently underway on AI, with the idea of using it to assist with ministry and Hansard reports.

One parliament explained that they are adopting a more cautious and risk-averse approach to AI implementation, due to concerns around parliamentary privilege, and the potential for the accidental inclusion of errors in reports, briefs or speeches generated by AI. Another concern expressed is the high energy requirements for AI systems, and the impact on the environment.

During a breakout group discussion on the implementation of technology, delegates were asked to discuss potential uses for technology to improve parliamentary processes in their context. Delegates identified a number of advantages, including facilitating research, assisting with the management of members' calendars, and reducing the time taken to produce Hansard and committee reports.

The challenges around Hansard efficiency were a key discussion point for the programme, and delegates shared their experiences and the effective ways they have found to tackle Hansard backlogs.

One legislature detailed how their challenges with Hansard are largely a result of staffing constraints, which has led to a backlog of two/three years. Measures taken to approach this challenge include the recruitment of temporary staff, and the outsourcing of editing. However, errors in editing and formatting showed the need for more specialised training in Hansard production. Future considerations included leveraging technology such as AI and speech-to-text software to make Hansard production more efficient.

A legislature gave a detailed overview of its implementation of Automated Transcription Software. The software that the parliament uses is called SliqScribe, which has automatic speech-to-text transcription, cloud-based storage, and accuracy that improves over time. Whilst the software has improved the efficiency of Hansard production, the parliament still faces challenges around staffing constraints, and there are future plans to hire more staff.

Engaging the Public

A key characteristic of a well-functioning parliament is its openness, both in terms of transparency and public engagement, as well as fostering an inclusive and supportive working environment for its staff. Delegates discussed how their parliaments uphold these values, sharing examples of best practices and the challenges they face in striving to achieve them.

One parliament shared the importance of engaging with the public to create a sense of belonging among citizens. This, in turn, boosts the parliament's credibility and helps restore public faith in the institution. In 2001, this legislature implemented a youth parliament programme focused on empowering young people. Despite its success, challenges to public engagement remain, including a general lack of understanding about parliamentary processes and the perception of parliament as an exclusive, elitist institution.

Another parliament shared its successful mentorship initiative called The President's 10, which targets young women in their third year of secondary school. Led by the President of the Senate, this programme provides participants with hands-on experience in Antigua and Barbuda's political system and equips them with vital skills for the workforce.



Delegates explore how workplace development is shaping their parliaments

Strengthening the Workplace

A crucial aspect of parliamentary openness is the staff who make it all possible. Ensuring that the working environment is comfortable, inclusive, and positive is essential not only for staff retention but also for maintaining motivation and supporting the delivery of parliamentary objectives.

One legislature highlighted the importance of inclusivity and diversity in the workplace. To promote these values, the parliament hosts events that raise cultural awareness and actively prioritises accessibility for people with disabilities. In 2021, a wheelchair ramp was installed to improve access. Additionally, staff are encouraged to participate in training and seminars offered by the Ministry of Public Service and the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association. By promoting diversity, inclusion, and accessibility, this parliament fosters a respectful environment that boosts morale, supports good governance, and strengthens democracy.

Another parliament stressed the importance of both attracting new talent and retaining experienced staff with procedural knowledge. To ensure staff career progression and retain expertise, clerks are rotated through specialised areas to broaden their skills. However, challenges persist, such as long working hours. To maintain a positive working culture, this parliament promotes a flexible and inclusive work environment, with a minimum office attendance of 40%.



Delegates were welcomed at the iconic Red House in Trinidad and Tobago



A stilt performer brings the spirit of Trinidad's vibrant carnival to life

Next Steps for the Caribbean Clerks Programme

The Caribbean Clerks Programme continues to serve as a valuable platform for parliamentary officials across the region to exchange knowledge, share best practices, and build professional networks. Feedback from this year's participants will help shape discussions on potential future initiatives, ensuring that any next steps align with the needs of the region's legislatures. We look forward to exploring opportunities for continued collaboration and knowledge-sharing in the years ahead.

PARTICIPATING LEGISLATURES



Anguilla



Antigua and Barbuda



The Bahamas



Barbados



Belize



British Virgin Islands



Cayman Islands



Grenada



Guyana



Montserrat



Saint Christopher and Nevis



Saint Lucia



St Vincent and the Grenadines



Suriname



Tobago



Trinidad and Tobago



United Kingdom

LIST OF PARTICIPANTS



House of Assembly of Anguilla

Vanisha Proctor



Parliament of Antigua and Barbuda

Rosemarie Weston

Zenia Barnes



Parliament of The Bahamas

Asharan Lightbourne



Parliament of Barbados

Keisha Holder-Ottley

Vilma Bradshaw



National Assembly of Belize

Heillie Burns

Manuel Grant



House of Assembly of the British Virgin Islands

Lenisha Callwood

Theresa Penn



Parliament of the Cayman Islands

Nordra Walcott

Twila Escalante



Parliament of Grenada

Andrew Augustine

Melvina Gulston



Parliament of Guyana

Leelawattie Panchu

Rodwin Bancroft



Legislative Assembly of Montserrat

Judith Baker



Parliament of Saint Lucia

Nita Louis
Sharon Montoute



National Assembly of Saint Christopher and Nevis

Mauriel Knight
Trevlyn Stapleton



House of Assembly of St Vincent and the Grenadines

Debroah Charles
Kimberly Ash-Cruickshank



National Assembly of Suriname

Naresh Algoe
Ruth de Windt



Tobago House of Assembly

Dalia O'Neil
Lincoln Nelson



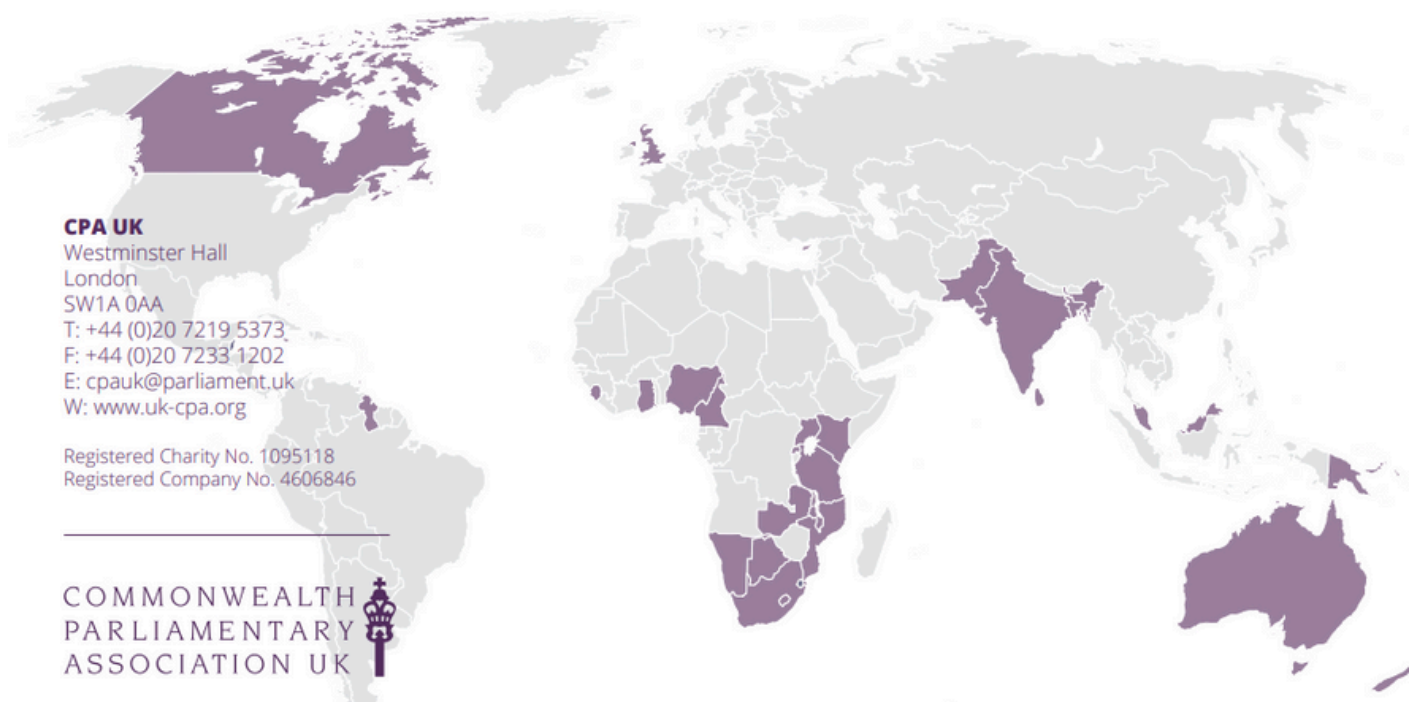
Parliament of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago

Chad Salandy
Darien Buckmire
Kimberly Mitchell
Lorraine Berahzer



UK Parliament

Kate Meanwell
Mike Everett



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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Registered Company No. 4606846

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PARLIAMANTARY
ASSOCIATION UK



Christopher Brown, CPA UK