Thank you very much for your invitation to submit evidence to your Committee’s inquiry on the future of House of Lords investigative committees. I have set out some comments below based on my reflections having been a member of the Health Select Committee for 7 years, its Chair for 4 years, and as Chair of the Commons Liaison Committee since November 2017. I should note that this submission is based on my informed but personal point of view. I have not yet had the opportunity for a full discussion on this topic with all the members of the Commons Liaison Committee.

I would be happy to be consulted on early drafts of any blueprint for reorganised Lords’ Committees if that would be helpful. I will be following the progress of your review with interest, and look forward to hearing your views on how the two Liaison Committees might work together in the future.

Sarah Wollaston MP
Chair, House of Commons Liaison Committee

Memorandum from Dr Sarah Wollaston MP, Chair of the Liaison Committee

1. The review’s terms of reference pose the question “To what extent does it remain desirable to avoid overlap with the House of Commons?”. While I would suggest that it is always wise to try to avoid duplication, I think that committees in the two Houses can complement the others’ work by bringing a greater range of perspectives to an issue. Nevertheless, it is widely recognised that many members of the Lords bring great expertise and experience and are often less constrained by party politics.

2. The departmental arrangement of Commons committees is settled, and I do not feel that it would be necessary to duplicate this in the Lords but rather to complement and in particular to look at cross cutting areas which may span departments. The Commons’ exclusive responsibility for the raising and spending of public money should be recognised and respected. Any reorganisation of Lords Committees could seek to build on the special strengths of the Lords in the scrutiny of legislation and delegated legislation. Whatever arrangement of Lords’ committees is eventually arrived at, complementarity is what we should seek to achieve and this requires a degree of coordination. To date, there has not been much
opportunity or structure for dialogue between the Houses’ committees. There are of course, joint-committees of both Houses and I hope that there will be further opportunities to develop this especially for pre-legislative scrutiny and Parliamentary Commissions, but there would be benefit in greater communication and coordination between permanent subject committees. For example, we could establish quarterly or biannual meetings of the two Liaison committees as part of encouraging more reciprocal relationships between committees.

3. Committees can work more effectively and have greater influence by working together and this has become an increasing part of the work of Commons committees. This could extend to the potential for greater collaborative working between committees of the two Houses. House of Commons Standing Order 137A(1)(b) does provide for joint meetings between Lords and Commons committees but, so far as I am aware, has never been used for such. The Liaison Committee has recently published a report that seeks to enhance existing powers for committees to work jointly.\(^1\) Nonetheless, we must recognise that the cultures of the two Houses are very different and that the pursuit of joint working needs to add benefits to both. It should not be expected to become the general pattern of working, but there is merit in exploring the benefits and how they might be realised.

4. In particular, benefits could come from joint working between the Commons and the Lords on specific topics. As well as capitalising on the evidence and cross-party way in which committees work, it could contribute towards establishing a consensus on policy areas where difficult decisions are required. For example, more than a hundred MPs, twenty-one of whom are members of the Liaison Committee, have recently supported a request the establishment of a Parliamentary Commission on Health and Social Care involving members of both Houses. The work of the Lords Committee in this area is very valuable.\(^2\) This is just one example of a subject area where the value of a coordinated cross House approach could deliver benefits.

5. A factor that must be considered in proposing future enhanced joint working between committees or the establishment of new commissions or committees across the Houses, is resources. The time commitment involved in committee work for MPs is substantial and the impact of any additional meetings on Member time should be borne in mind. While complementarity and enhanced joint working may make scrutiny more efficient overall, the practical

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\(^2\) House of Lords Committee on the Long-term Sustainability of the NHS, *The Long-term Sustainability of the NHS and Adult Social Care*, 2016-17, 5 April 2017, HL paper 151
implications need to be planned for. This extends to the staff resources available. In the Commons we are already questioning whether the current staff resourcing level is adequate to support effective scrutiny. Any development of greater joint working between the committees of the two Houses would need to be resourced as there is little prospect of committee teams having capacity to take on new, or extend existing work, within current arrangements.

6. As a minimum, and without additional resource, Committees of the two Houses could do more to share best practice. There is – rightly – much interest in both Houses in examining how we can broaden the evidence base our Committees receive and increase the diversity of witnesses giving oral and written evidence. The Liaison Committee is going to consider this matter next week, including looking at statistics for the gender diversity of witnesses for the first six months of this parliamentary session. Staff in the Lords and Commons Committee Offices share best practice but this is an area where the two Houses could learn more from each other. The Commons Committer Office has made much progress on other forms of outreach and engagement and has identified it as a priority committee activity.³

³ Draft House of Commons Committee Office Strategic Narrative, April 2018