I wish to respond to the inquiry’s call for evidence on behalf of the Conservative Party.

**Boundary Review**

The inquiry’s terms of reference included reviewing the expected impact of the Boundary Review.

Equalising the size of constituencies in the Boundary Review will ensure everyone’s vote will carry equal weight. Without such boundary reforms, MPs could end up representing constituencies based on data that is over 20 years’ old, disregarding significant changes in demographics, house building and migration. As it stands, some constituencies have twice as many electors than other constituencies and this cannot be right.

The principle of equally-sized constituencies was endorsed by the Committee on Standards in Public Life, and will ensure the vital democratic principle of one elector: one vote. At present, Parliamentary constituencies range in size from 21,000 to 108,000 electors.

Delivering equally-sized constituencies was a Coalition Agreement pledge, and was implemented following primary legislation in 2011 and 2013. These reforms to boundaries will ensure fair and equal representation for the voting public across the United Kingdom – both for the next general election, and in the future. The changes are non-partisan – as an independent body (the Boundary Commissions) will draw up the new boundaries after a thorough public inquiry process, and they will ensure parity for all.

The Conservative Government has a clear manifesto pledge to get on with implementing the new boundaries. The 2015 manifesto stated: “We will also continue to reform our political system: make votes of more equal value through long overdue boundary reforms... We will implement the boundary reforms that Parliament has already approved.”

In that context, there is no structural gender bias in the legislative reforms. The number of seats each political party receives in the next general election will depend on their electoral support with the public. The gender representation of MPs in the next Parliament will be a function not of the electoral system, but rather of the candidate selection choices of each political party.

We appreciate that Boundary Reviews can involve a challenging but necessary process of re-selection due to the boundary changes. The Conservative Party and the 1922 Committee is adopting a ‘No Colleague Left Behind’ approach, to minimise any disruption from colleagues looking to continue serving as a Member of Parliament.

Supporting existing MPs is in no way incompatible with increasing female representation. The Conservative Party intends to build on its progress in increasing the number of female Parliamentary candidates and female MPs. Our ambition is to have more female Conservative MPs, in both relative and absolute terms, after the next general election.

**Increasing female representation**

Since 2005, the number of female Conservative MPs has quadrupled, rising from 17 to 68. Of the Conservative candidates selected for the 2015 general election, a third were female.
We have made good progress in the Scottish Parliament and Welsh Assembly. Ruth Davidson MSP is the Leader of the Scottish Conservatives and the largest opposition party in the Scottish Parliament. 40 per cent of Conservative Members of the Scottish Parliament are women, and 29 per cent of Conservative Welsh Assembly Members are women. 27 per cent of Conservative councillors in England and Wales are women.

Over a third of Cabinet members are women – 8 out of 22, and we once again have a female Conservative Prime Minister.

Before the 2010 General Election we introduced the ‘A’ List which was gender balanced. We improved at the 2010 election on selecting women in Conservative retirement seats - 35 per cent compared with 21 per cent in 2010.

The Candidates team works alongside Women 2 Win, the Conservative Women’s Organisation and our Conservative ‘Friends of’ groups – who invest a lot of time with women candidates both in training, supporting and mentoring.

In the last Parliament, 123 women attended workshops. 31 per cent of this group were advised to enter the candidate selection process, 44 per cent of whom went on to become parliamentary candidates, and most then became MPs. This resulted in 56 per cent of new Conservative women MPs in 2015 coming through Conservative Women’s Organisation development. The programme has had even greater success with council candidates.

Through our outreach programme we are encouraging more women and BME candidates to step forward. We are planning a series of workshops across the country locally designed to encourage more people to stand as candidates for Parliament, as Police and Crime Commissioners, as councillors, for devolved bodies and for other positions in public life.

Women in Parliament

The inquiry’s terms of reference asked for views on the Sarah Child’s ‘Good Parliament’ report on representation in the House of Commons. The consideration of this report is primarily a matter for the House, but we would make some observations on some of the suggestions which directly affect political parties.

We do not support statutory sex/gender quotas for Parliamentary candidates. It is up to parties – at a local and national level – to determine the best candidate for each constituency. Gender balance is a very important consideration, but it is not the only consideration. Parties will rightly want to focus on ensuring their candidates’ reflect the modern diversity of the population as a whole, and have a healthy proportion of candidates who come from the locality in or near the constituency, as well as those with a good spectrum of professional experience from the public, voluntary and private sectors.

The report also calls for the abolition of the party conference recess. This would invariably make it harder for the political parties in Parliament to hold their conferences. The suggestion fundamentally misunderstands the role of party conferences in allowing party members, councillors and new activists to train, mentor, network and mix with the professional and Parliamentary party. Undermining party conferences would create barriers to the participation of new volunteers, especially those from less established ‘political’ backgrounds.
Conservative organisations like Women 2 Win have previously found party conference events of immense value in bringing women (interested in Conservative politics) together from across the country. Undermining party conferences would make political parties more London-centric and less accessible.

I hope this clearly sets out our position.

October 2016