

Report On The Sixth UK Overseas Territories Forum On The Oversight Of Public Finances And Good Governance



Day 1

Official Opening:

The forum officially opened with a speech by the Rt Hon. Sir Lindsay Hoyle MP, Speaker of the House of Commons, who welcomed everyone and discussed the purpose of the forum. He highlighted the significance of St Helena's participation, given the distance we had travelled. Deputy Director for Overseas Territories Strategy and Delivery, FCDO, Becky Richards stood in for Minister Doughty and emphasised the importance of building inter-OT relationships and the UK Minister's commitment to the OTs, encapsulated by the principle "nothing about you without you." St Helena's PAC Chair, Mark raised a question about the availability of FCDO information in respect of that commitment.

Keynote Address

The keynote address was delivered by Hon. Cora Richardson Hodge, PAC Chair of Anguilla, who spoke on the principles of good governance, stressing trust, transparency, accountability, and the rule of law. She emphasised the need for independent oversight

committees and transparent complaints procedures to build trust in governments. Public involvement and sensitivity to public opinions were also highlighted as crucial elements.

Reflecting on progress made through project support

Delegates were briefed on the ongoing evaluation of the UKOT Project, discussing its achievements and areas for improvement. Mathew Hamilton presented on the project, and members shared how the program had benefited them. I shared how the work that the project had done in helping us strengthen our own PAC has helped in establishing select committees.

Session 1 - Understanding Scrutiny

In the session on understanding scrutiny, Dame Meg Hillier MP shared her experiences from St Helena and BIMR, emphasising the importance of committees knowing their constitutional roles and avoiding political games. Preparation and cross-party collaboration were highlighted as essential, with good clerical support being crucial for capturing important points.

Kate Mathers from the NAO discussed the audit role and its impact, stressing the importance of providing high-quality information to committees. Harriet Aldridge from UK Internal Audit explained the role of internal audit in risk management and ongoing monitoring, and how it aids OTs in recruitment and improving guidelines.

Session 2 - Exploring Good Governance in Practice

During the session on good governance in practice, Louis Cooper from CIPFA discussed the practical aspects of good governance, referencing the Nolan principles and other global governance standards. The session included a case study exercise focused on company structure and governance. While this session was delivered with a very “private sector” theme, it did create an interesting discussion about what should be prioritised when having to deal with the slower way in which government systems evolve. Delegates came to the conclusion that if you have to change just one thing, creating a culture of openness to scrutiny was the most effective.



Day 2

Session 3: Comparing Parliamentary Systems

The session provided a comparative look at the parliamentary systems in the respective Overseas Territories (OTs), offering an overview of their procedures and features. Chaired by Rt Hon. Baroness D'Souza from the House of Lords, UK Parliament, the speakers included Hon. Renee Ming MP from the House of Assembly, Bermuda Parliament and Hon. Claude Hogan from the Montserrat Legislative Assembly, and myself.

I spoke at this session and focused my address on the governance journey in St Helena, highlighting the transition to a ministerial system. I spoke about how the absence of party politics and how we have created new scrutiny mechanisms, including a monthly Minister's Question Time and select committees. I mentioned how the PAC was a keystone for financial scrutiny on St Helena for years and how it was the model which inspired how we formed our select committees.

I spoke about the challenges we faced including how our two select committees are established under the Constitution as opposed to under the house and how this had the advantage that they carry a great degree of constitutional weight; however, while powerful, they can be difficult to adapt to every scenario.

In terms of what is working well, I spoke about how after just a handful of evidence sessions they are already having an impact.

We shared a similar issue to the Falkland Islands whereby our public service has an issue with high turnover and select committees have uncovered issues that people even managing the departments didn't know existed.

I also mentioned the fact we have successfully passed a private members bill, this caused some discussion because of our unusual minority government system.

I finished by talking about the establishment of a Youth Parliament and the ongoing works we are doing to improve our scrutiny system.

Session 4: Using Resources Effectively for Parliamentary

This session focused on the resources available to committee members and parliamentary staff, emphasising the importance of obtaining reliable data in a timely manner to prepare and conduct inquiries effectively. Facilitated by Victoria Bower, Head of International Partnerships Team, CPA UK, and moderated by Lord Lisvane from the House of Lords, UK Parliament, the speakers included Vanisha Proctor, Clerk of Committees, Anguilla House of Assembly, Nick Boorer, Clerk of Public Services Committee, House of Lords, UK Parliament, Judith Baker, Clerk, Montserrat Legislative Assembly, and Stephen McGinness, Clerk of Energy and Net Zero Committee, House of Commons, UK Parliament.

A key resource constraint faced by almost all territories was access to adequate human resources and in particular researchers and draftspersons.

I missed the latter half of this session as I was invited by Speaker Sir Lindsay Hoyle to attend PMQs as a guest, which was a lively and intense experience. The experience reinforced the discussion Speaker Hoyle and I had after the MQT session he experienced on St Helena, where he was impressed by our levels of respect and decorum.

Session 5: Government Responses and Committee Follow-Up

Chaired by Rt Hon. Baroness Hodge from the House of Lords, UK Parliament, this session focused on how committees can effectively follow up on their recommendations and the challenges involved in obtaining a response from the government. Speakers included Sarah Olney MP, former member of the Public Accounts Committee, House of Commons, UK Parliament, and Mark Yon, Chair of the Public Accounts Committee, St Helena.

The discussion highlighted the powers scrutiny committees have to compel officials and ministers to engage in the process, noting that in the UK system, a minister can be legally summoned to attend a session and potentially jailed for non-compliance.

Session 6b: Challenges of Being a Parliamentarian (Men's Caucus)

In this session, parliamentarians were split into men's and women's groups to explore the political and personal pressures they encounter.

The men's caucus had an open and honest discussion about balancing commitments between constituencies, legislature, and personal interests. Safety was a key topic, highlighting the relative safety on St Helena compared to other regions.

The two groups later reconvened to discuss their findings, noting common ground (i.e safety) and gender-specific issues in particular maternity leave and explaining that to the public who were often unsympathetic.



Day 3

Session 7 - Plenary Discussion: Summary of Day 2 and Introduction on the Future of the Project

In this session the Parliamentary, Internal, and External Audit delegates reported on the key areas discussed on Day 2. For me, the session provided deeper insights into the work of the Audit function and its crucial role in effective parliamentary scrutiny.

An important discussion on the future of the project and pending funding took place, where I suggested exploring broader scrutiny practices of governance, including more on select committees.

Session 8 - Managing a Change of Government

This session focused on ensuring continuity in scrutiny, accountability, and assurances during election periods and potential changes in government. A key identified risk, according to auditors, was the politicians themselves, as politics is extremely volatile compared to the stability that Audit is based around.

Session 9 – Financial Management in Government

This session, chaired by Paul Wright-Anderson, Senior Audit Manager at NAO, focused on how scrutiny and assurance organisations and committees can help improve the management of public finances.

The speakers included Chris Wobschall, Deputy Director of Internal Audit at the Department for Work & Pensions, GIAA; Hon. Erwin J. Saunders, Chairman of the Appropriation

Committee, Turks & Caicos Islands House of Assembly; Aruni Muthamala, Senior Economist at the Treasury Committee, House of Commons, UK Parliament; Beatrice Boileau, Research Economist at the Institute for Fiscal Studies; and Chris Coyne, Senior Audit Manager at the Financial & Risk Management Hub, NAO.

This session was particularly interesting due to the involvement of the Institute for Fiscal Studies, which demonstrated how independent financial analysis of budgets or policies can enhance scrutiny and public trust.

Session 10a – Building an Effective Relationship between Auditors General and Public Accounts Committees

This session examined the principles and practices of effective engagement between Parliament and the Office of the Auditor General.

Chaired by Axell Kaubo, Public Accounts Committees Strategic Lead at CPA UK, the speakers included Tim Jarrett, Second Clerk to the Public Accounts Committee, House of Commons, UK Parliament; Marsha Meade, Auditor General of Montserrat; and Mark Yon, Chair of the Public Accounts Committee, St Helena.

Although the session was heavily focused on Public Accounts Committees (PAC), it provided valuable insights into the interplay between PAC and Audit, even for non-PAC members like myself.

Conclusion of the UKOTP Forum

The UKOTP forum was predominantly focused on Public Accounts Committees (PAC), but almost all the aspects discussed were applicable to broader scrutiny work. The sessions highlighted the critical role of the Audit function in ensuring effective parliamentary scrutiny and the importance of maintaining continuity in scrutiny and accountability during election periods and potential changes in government.

One of the key takeaways from the forum was the importance of the separation of powers. This principle is essential for maintaining the independence and effectiveness of the Parliament and the scrutiny and assurance functions. The discussions underscored how independent financial analysis and effective engagement between Parliament and the Office of the Auditor General (in our case the Chief Auditor) can enhance public trust and improve the management of public finances.

Overall, the forum provided me with valuable insights, practical strategies and a keen interest in the work of the PAC. The lessons I have learned can be applied to enhance scrutiny practices across our governance structure.