

Administration Committee

Oral evidence: [Election Planning and Services](#), HC 588

Monday 5 December 2016

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Members present: Sir Paul Beresford (Chair); Sir David Amess; Martyn Day; Michael Fabricant; Nigel Mills; Ms Gisela Stuart; Mr Robert Syms; Mark Tami; Keith Vaz.

Questions 123 - 180

Witnesses

[I:](#) Mr Robert Syms MP, Government Accommodation Whip, Mark Tami MP, Opposition Accommodation Whip, and Fiona Channon, Head of Accommodation and Logistics, House of Commons.

[II:](#) Rob Greig, Director, Parliamentary Digital Service, and Dan Cook, Portfolio Manager, Parliamentary Digital Service.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Mr Robert Syms MP, Mark Tami MP and Fiona Channon.

Q123 **Chair:** Thank you. It is normal to ask all our guests if they would like to make a statement and introduce themselves and so on. We know two of you very well and the third one even better.

Mark Tami: How do you want to do it? In terms of taking through what the role is prior to the election?

Chair: Yes, please.

Mark Tami: Right, okay. I can only speak from how I handled it as the Labour Accommodation Whip, but prior to the election I circulated all our Back Benchers to say, "Were you happy with your office?" and so on. I received a number of responses back to say either, "Yes" or, "I'm fine". The purpose of that was to try to cut down the number of people you are looking to juggle around post-election.

Post-election, obviously from our point of view our numbers went down rather than up, so there is a process where you have to give back offices, and regrettably you cannot give back all the not very good offices; you have to give a selection. I think I am right in that there are three categories.

Fiona Channon: Yes. The Administration Committee in 2010 asked that the management information that the House holds should be available to all the Whips, so that if you are a new Whip you do not necessarily get a lot of poor offices. We collate all of that and let the Accommodation Whips have it straight after the election.

Mark Tami: So I had to give back a number of offices. I spoke to the Conservative Accommodation Whip and we did some agreement on offices in terms of where they were, which I think suited both parties quite well.

I had a number of people who were perfectly happy with what they had, and then I looked to accommodate our shadow Front Benchers in particular. There is an issue with London MPs. Rightly or wrongly, an increasing number of London MPs have their larger staff numbers here, so you have to look at that. Once everyone was sorted, we then looked at the new MPs and what their needs were.

In terms of the time it took, I think we got it done very quickly, certainly compared with previous elections. I know it will never be perfect, because people think an office should be there the moment you come back, but it does not work like that; it will never work like that, in my view.

You also have to deal with MPs who have lost their seats, and there is a process of understanding, I think, in terms of how people are clearing out



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their offices. There is a time period when they should have it done, but clearly we are not in a position of just piling everything up in the corridor or something like that. I think that would be very unfair.

The other issue we have to look at, I think, is if you have disability issues. The Palace and the whole House is not particularly well served in terms of offices that meet those requirements, so if there is anybody in a wheelchair or who has other issues—one of our new Members had hearing issues, and I think there was only one office on the estate at the time that had a system in it, so we had to find something suitable to accommodate that.

There have been concerns about people wanting to employ staff very early on and people do not have an office to put them in. My view is that people should take a bit of time before employing staff and not just leap into employing them straight away, so I think that is not necessarily a bad thing. I also think that, particularly for new MPs, sitting in a bigger office with other new MPs is not a bad thing, because I think it helps them into the way that it works. I think it would be, for some MPs, quite a lonely experience if on day one they were given a key to the office and that was it, and they were just in there. I know some people do not like the idea of initially sharing areas. I do not think it is a bad thing; I think it is a positive thing. Clearly it should not go on for very long, but I think that the length of time we took this time was perfectly adequate.

Q124 Chair: This is not a political statement, but you said you had more defeated Members. There is a five-day time limit. Obviously those retiring knew what they were up to and got out, but for the ones who expected to come back and suddenly found the public did not think they should come back is that five-day limit suitable?

Mark Tami: As you say, for the retiring ones there is no reason why they should not be out of their bunker. For those who come back to just clear out their offices, particularly if they were not expecting to lose, it is quite a daunting experience for some. We had a lot of Scottish Members who got virtually wiped out there, so that is not an easy thing. It is not easy for the staff either, and we should not forget that it is not just the MP; their staff are in that situation as well.

Q125 Chair: How did they get on with IPSA?

Mark Tami: I think there were issues, as there always are. Again, with these things you have to have some flexibility in that not everyone is exactly the same and will respond in exactly the same way, in the same way that if we have a bereavement situation you have to think of the staff as well and how that process is done. Yes, you should have time limits but I do not think you should enforce it to the point of saying, "No, it says five days, so that is five days."

Q126 Chair: The difficulty with that of course is that we have people who are trying to get into offices so you have to get those who are leaving out.



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Mark Tami: Yes, this is a juggling process because there are also people who are staying but they are going to a different office for one reason or another, so it is getting them to box up and move as well.

Q127 **Michael Fabricant:** I have a quick supplementary question. What was the longest time it took for someone? Five days is supposed to be the time that they get out. In practice, how long did it take for some, and did some completely abandon the idea and say, "Sod it, we will just leave everything there"?

Mark Tami: We had some who just wanted it to be boxed up and sent up to them, partly because they just did not feel like coming back down again. So there was that, but I do not think we had many who overran that period.

Fiona Channon: No, I don't think so. At the previous election and the 2010 election, there were some Members who individually deal with it in different ways. Some people come in, are very pragmatic, box it up and drive away, and that's it. Some go on holiday, frankly, because they are tired and they want to take a break, and then they would like to say, "Can you hold on to my stuff, because I have gone away?" And I had one or two Members who literally said, "Throw it all away; I'm never coming back again." So there are different responses to that, and I think that Mark and Robert would agree. Within the guidelines set by the Commission and the Committee, sometimes we have to be a bit pragmatic about how we can support Members who have left, both by standing down and by being defeated, as well as welcoming new Members.

Q128 **Michael Fabricant:** How long did it take for the longest ones to give you access to the offices?

Fiona Channon: I do not think many of them, if any, breached the five days, but what we did was help them box the stuff up and kept it here, so that the office was accessible but their stuff was not moved.

Mark Tami: On one occasion I met a former Scottish Member who I did not think was down, and I opened their office to show it to someone—I always take people around myself—and that was a bit awkward, really. You are showing somebody their office after they have just lost their seat. I felt a bit awkward.

Q129 **Martyn Day:** My understanding is that in the Scottish Parliament the Members pack up their offices before the election period. I wonder whether people think there is some merit in that. That would facilitate a fairly swift entry and reallocation of offices immediately afterwards.

Mark Tami: I think the issue with that is that if you think you are going to come back, why would you box up your office?

Q130 **Martyn Day:** You do not know if you are going to be in Government or Opposition. You might be in a completely different scenario.



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Mark Tami: It is a different system here and there is this idea I have heard mooted before that the office should be allocated to the seat rather than the Member, but again that ignores reality, and the reality is that you have to look after people on the way up, and I think you have to look after people on the way down as well. I am sure that I am no different. I have not had many Members come to me saying, "My office is far too big and has a nice view. Could you please give me something not very nice?" That just does not happen.

Chair: You surprise me. Robert?

Mr Robert Syms: I did not have the advantage of being the Whip when we had a general election, but my observation is that the perversity of IPSA rules means that more people are now pressured to have staff here, rather than to pay for renting offices elsewhere. The recent security concerns are another reason Members start to think that this Palace is a more secure environment, for both them and their staff, and we seem to have a mania for interns/apprentices, so that quite a lot of the new intake of 2015 have four or five staff, and they are therefore falling out of the windows—if they have windows—of their small offices.

First, most offices are given on the basis of seniority and you could have a far more efficient system if that weren't the case, but I don't think I would like to be the person to suggest we change the seniority rules, because if someone has been here 30 years I think it is not unreasonable, whether they are in government or not, that they should have a decent office.

When new people come in they are full of vim, enthusiasm and vigour. They come in and they see this wonderful building. I do not think they worry if for a few weeks they have to wait until they get allocated their office. I think the provisions made before where people were put into Committee rooms with all the other new boys and girls is quite good for them, to introduce them to each other, and then we can get some order out of chaos.

I agree that in losing your seat there is clearly a grieving process, if it is unexpected. If you are living on a very small margin then every election is an interesting one, and you can perhaps bag up everything. However, for those who did not expect to lose, people deal with it in different ways and you have to remember that there are family members and they are going through a career of letters, postcards and old election leaflets. What do they keep, and what do they chuck? What do they take back home? Will they regret it if they do? What will they hand over to any successor? I just think a little bit of grace is not unreasonable in those circumstances.

When I first came here in 1997, I worked out of my car boot in a car park for three weeks, and then in the Library, and then eventually things got sorted. We are in a much better position than we were in those days, and I think that it is not unreasonable that new Members should have a little bit of a pause before we sort out those who have been here for a while



and have to be dealt with.

- Q131 **Michael Fabricant:** Do you think we could make better use of the Library for accommodation, just for those initial two or three weeks?

Mark Tami: I think the Committee rooms work well, and this time they also had lockers, which we did not have before. The other thing I found was for a number of the bigger offices where I have two new-intake MPs sharing, that Committee room thing meant that they then said, "I'm perfectly happy to share with X or Y because we get on well. We both came in at the same time." That has helped. I think that the Committee room thing works fine, really.

- Q132 **Chair:** You suggested that there should be a delay before staff come in. It is a long time ago but I do remember the first day walking in here and getting a roll of mail, which I could not possibly have handled on my own.

Mark Tami: Yes. With new MPs, if they ask me, I always say to be careful about just recruiting the first person who comes along, or—even worse—where people have made certain pledges, either during an election or selection, to take people on, only to find out that they are not the best people for the job.

The other thing is that you get Members who will have a lot of staff here, or no staff here, and I think you need time to work out where you need your staff. Is it in the seat or is it here? So just rushing in, particularly if you recruited someone in London and found that you need them in North Tyneside, it is not easy; you are not going to have a quiet word with them and they are going to say, "Yes, of course I will relocate."

Mr Robert Syms: It is more of a shock for experienced House of Commons staff when they have been working for a senior Member and then they work for a new Member, and they suddenly find that their office accommodation has changed. They are usually the ones pushing the Member, "You must get an office. You must get an office here." That is where the pressure comes from.

- Q133 **Ms Gisela Stuart:** I have just one observation and one question. I think Mark Tami makes a very important point about recruiting. The best decision I made when I became an MP was to employ someone for six weeks whose job it was to set up my office and he was an HR person, because the people who help you campaign are not necessarily the best people to then help you be an MP. I think that distance is useful.

In terms of the offices, I wonder whether in this world of laptops and iPads, which is so different from when we came in, when there were piles of physical letters, whether that need for a physical office for you to function is somewhat reduced because what you need is an email address and wi-fi.

Mr Robert Syms: If you look at the office purely as a place of work, yes, but some people almost live in their offices. With the change in the IPSA rules and the fact that a lot of people do not have second homes, many



keep suits, clothes, stuff for the gym and some of their favourite possessions in their offices. It is quite important to people because we still work relatively funny hours and it is about just having a quiet place, for many Members, to just close the door and have some peace and some time on their own. If we reduce the offer then I think we would have more people going bonkers.

Fiona Channon: I agree with that absolutely, and the profile of Members will change, because more will want to use laptops and wi-fi and will be prepared to be agile, but a lot of the SNP Members who came down—there were a lot of them—were coming to London for the first time. I am putting words in Mr Day's mouth, but they will turn up with a week's bag, so it is important to have a space to put that in and share it and drop stuff off and be comfortable for five minutes. Even though the office is for the Member, it is the one small space where you can be yourself outside of operating on the rest of the parliamentary estate. I think that is still important to some Members—not all, but some.

Q134 **Chair:** Do you want to follow on from that in general?

Fiona Channon: I will follow on roughly from what Mark and Robert have said about timing. This is my fifth general election, Chairman, sadly, so we did commit after the previous Committee's inquiry into post-election Services to try to do this more swiftly in 2015, and we were about two weeks quicker in 2015. The election was on 7 May. All Members were allocated an office by 3 June, and there were 182 new Members. There was a change in Government, there was a change in the Leader of the Opposition, and there was a change in the third party for the first time in about 65 years. We had to change the third party leader's office and the Whips' office in time for swearing in and also rehouse the Liberal Democrat Whips' office, and we did all of that.

I think it would be a bit of a challenge for me to commit here to doing it more quickly in 2020, so I won't, but there was a lot of teamwork. I cannot do it without the support of the Whips, and having the Whips engaged beforehand—that includes the SNP leader and Whips on how they were planning to work post election—was very useful. We had more information on Members who may or may not change if they were returned, so we had some moves that we could process during the Dissolution period.

We did a lot of work in Portcullis House, which meant we were able to put Members into offices that were vacated, and Mark alluded to that. Some Members might have spent the previous five years on the Upper Committee Corridor, so the Whips, generally speaking, will move them first and then put the newer Members on the Upper Committee Corridor or different areas, so there is always a bit of a cascade, rather than there just being empty offices that new Members automatically go into. That is always a bit of a difficult conversation to have with new Members, so I am very grateful that these guys do that as well as my team.



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Mark Tami: If I can just add to that, the other thing with Members is that some will have anything, so long as it is in the House, whereas others like Portcullis or Norman Shaw, so there are different requirements or desires there for what Members want.

Chair: Thank goodness.

Mark Tami: Thank goodness, yes.

Q135 **Keith Vaz:** I want to ask about the hot desks that are given out to new Members. Concerns were raised about the lack of privacy. Obviously people leave things on their desks, and if there are other Members working quite late the room might not be locked up. Is there any other way in which we could ensure the privacy of Members' documents while they are using the hot desks? I am not suggesting that we should give them all rucksacks so they should be able to walk around Westminster, but there must be something that we can do on storage space to enable that to happen.

Fiona Channon: Absolutely. We did provide temporary lockers outside the temporary accommodation, which we thought might alleviate that. That was the result of feedback from the previous inquiry, Mr Vaz, which was that there was not enough storage space nearby, so lockers were provided for all new Members, and whether or not it was a case of the Member and the Member's staff possibly not having access to it, so we could have more lockers or more keys available. I would be loath to put additional storage in the temporary desking rooms, because nature and accommodation abhors a vacuum and as soon as you put storage by a desk it stops being a temporary desk and it starts to be "my desk" because it has "my storage" next to it, but we definitely have other general storage places, and all the new Members were allocated a permanent locker as well. So there was the locker by the Chamber as well as the locker by the hot desk rooms.

Q136 **Keith Vaz:** Mr Day may have mentioned this—I was not clear whether he did. In the Scottish Parliament Members are given specific rooms very early on, but on the understanding that it is temporary and that they might have to move to another room. Are we able to do that here? There seem to be a lot of rooms that people do not know precisely what happens in them, which are empty. Obviously the Whips will know, but there are some rooms that Mr Tami and Mr Syms may not know exist.

Mark Tami: Never.

Keith Vaz: It is quite possible.

Fiona Channon: I will leave that for Mark and Robert. My experience of moving Members is that if they move into a nice room that is vacant, there will be quite a lot of conversations to explain to them that they have to move elsewhere.



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Mark Tami: I totally agree with that. I remember going to show a Member—one of ours—a room only to find that a Tory Member had put his details on the door. That didn't hold, and I said, "No, that's not—" so we do get people who seem to think that they can either have a private arrangement with somebody to say that they can have their office, or think that they can somehow nab it. If you put someone in a temporary office and they like it, the problem is that getting them out of it might not be quite so easy, regardless of whether they said, "Of course I will move".

Q137 **Keith Vaz:** Going back to a comment you made earlier, to questions from the Chairman, you give proper regard to seniority and you are quite right to respect Members who have been here for a long period of time and realise they cannot just be shoved about from room to room.

Mark Tami: Who could you possibly mean?

Keith Vaz: I don't know who I am referring to, but if a Member says, as we get to the end of a Parliament, "I am going to stand down" and you and Mr Syms, with your great charm, will approach that Member and say, "Well, if you are standing down, we would like to get some allocations moving before the election." Have you ever done that? Have you ever approached people and said that?

Mark Tami: Yes.

Q138 **Keith Vaz:** Has the response always been, "Go away. I want to stay until I leave"?

Mark Tami: I have had, "Go away. You must be kidding. No way" and equally I have had people who have said yes.

Q139 **Keith Vaz:** Right, so it is something you will do?

Fiona Channon: Absolutely, and it is a bit unfortunate that Sir David has left, because that certainly happened to him in one of the previous Parliaments. The previous incumbent of his office knew that she was standing down and he made the agreement with the Accommodation Whip to move into it and we moved during Dissolution. To be fair to Robert and Anne Milton, who was doing the role, we moved several Members during Dissolution so that we could get some cascade going early.

Mark Tami: Anything I can do prior is one less thing to worry about afterwards.

Q140 **Keith Vaz:** Sure, but the real problem is that very few Members know where these rooms are. Only you and Mr Syms in your corporate memory know the size, the square footage, the view and all that kind of stuff. Unless people are taken by Whips to rooms, nobody knows what is on the estate apart from yourselves.

Mr Robert Syms: Which is a great relief.



Mark Tami: You might say that, but I couldn't possibly comment.

Mr Robert Syms: What happens is that people see what their friends have and they see offices they covet, so when a Member resigns or dies you get several people immediately asking, "Can I have their office?" People in this place are not slow about coveting somebody else's office, and suddenly people say, "What a terrible thing that happened to so-and-so. Can I have his office?" One is trying to be reasonable with such things. So people work out where they want to be, and Portcullis House is probably the most popular block with most of our side. As Mark says, there are some people who love the larger rooms in Norman Shaw. There are others who like being close to the Chamber. People normally work their way in this job to where they want to go, and there are some quite senior Members with quite modest offices because they are just happy where they are.

Mark Tami: To add to Robert's point, I had one Member—I certainly will not name them—who approached me regarding a Member who had sadly died and not only asked me if they could have their office, but said that that Member would have wanted them to have it. They didn't get it—they are still waiting, shall we say.

Chair: Martyn, can you follow that?

Q141 **Martyn Day:** We have already had some discussion about new Members and new Members' staff in the initial period. I think I am inclined to agree that it is inappropriate to rush ahead and appoint staff, but as a new Member one of the first things I wanted was some assistance, particularly with that 30 or 40 minutes a day mail sack and everything else, and all you have is the Parliament phone number here and your email address, and you are hammered stupid with 400-odd emails a day coming in and a sack of rubbish. So you are very keen to get assistance with that.

From my own experience, I had some people lined up at the beginning and I moved as quickly as I could to get my initial staff in place. I did not have security clearance until after I was in an office. I do not think it would have made a lot of difference for that part there, but the real crux of my question comes to the period after that, because it took me a good many months before I was able to open an office in the constituency, and having somewhere for these initial staff to work from, and I am sure I am not alone. I had them working from home, by mobile phones in their own houses, which was not ideal for managing things. So in that initial period it would have been particularly helpful if I could have had space to have brought them down. What do we do with staff during that hybrid period?

Mark Tami: I think that is particularly an issue if you have won the seat from someone else, so there isn't the office that perhaps the previous Member had that you could keep the lease going and move in with that. I accept that that is an issue but, as you say, even if we gave everyone an office on day one, their ability to come and go, with the security clearance, can take weeks if not months. I had a temporary member of



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staff for whom that took months and months. The other thing is that it does not matter how fast we move if PICT or anybody else cannot set the whole thing up in time; it has to be a complete package, rather than just one part of that.

Mr Robert Syms: The other factor of course, post a general election, if you have the same Government it is easier, but if you have a reshuffle going on at the same time there are Members in quite nice offices who are going to go into pretty awful Ministers' offices. Until things shake themselves out—and sometimes it takes a few weeks for a Government to be formed—it is not always possible to allocate offices. Some of the quite senior people who suddenly find themselves without a job need to be given a good office, so one could allocate faster but then you suddenly find somebody of 30 or 40 years and an ex-Cabinet Minister does not have a reasonable office. So you do have to let the cards fall a little bit and you cannot move faster than the Government form themselves, and until you know who is on the Back Benches and who is in government.

Mark Tami: The other thing is that all the time you have to make sure that your sums work, because if you ever get into a position where you suddenly find out you have more Members waiting for an office than you have offices, then you are in a very bad place. There is always that juggling and balance that has to be done.

Q142 **Chair:** You have both come up with the problems, but what about the answers?

Mark Tami: I would say that there is—this has been raised already—a particular problem with London Members, or Members with constituencies where rents are very high; I do not think it is just London. I am next to Chester. The rents in my seat are quite cheap, but if you go just a few miles over the border they are very expensive. I think IPSA really needs to look at that, because we cannot continue to accommodate—I think I can speak for all parties really—if people just keep on putting more and more staff in here. Clearly the Speaker has made a big thing about how great it is to have interns, but not a lot of thought seems to have been given to the fact that these people have to go somewhere.

Q143 **Chair:** So should IPSA shift their payment scheme depending upon the cost?

Mark Tami: I think that they need to have some idea that the level of support for business costs and office rents may be okay in some areas, but within other areas it is just not going to allow an MP to have an office there, which means that they then come to us. I have had an MP said to me, "Look, my lease is fine at the moment, but it is coming to an end and I can't find anywhere where I will be able to carry on as I have been." But we just do not have the space here that would allow us to say, "Fine, have another office".



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Mr Robert Syms: We are in an unpredictable business, so you do not always know who is going to be returned, or which Government are going to be returned. Given the unpredictability of it all, I think the House manages it pretty well and in its stride, and I think it has become better and better over the years that we have done so. For most Members who get elected by surprise and then suddenly have to have staff, an office and everything else, it is quite a shock, but they are certainly better supported than they would have been 20 years ago. Certainly, when I came in in 1997 there was no induction at all. If you asked a more senior Member what you had to do they just said, "Follow me when the bell rings" and that was about it, and, "Don't forget to go to the fees office and make sure they pay you, otherwise you will not get paid in the first month." That was about the only advice I received.

Mark Tami: I think I was told where the post office was and you picked up your green parcel thing and that was it.

Fiona Channon: To pick up—and I know our Digital Service colleagues are coming in after us—there may be ways that some of this can be helped. Ms Stuart spoke earlier about different ways of working, and 365 and all the ways that IT are unlocking more agile working might help a bit, but I do think that both Whips are correct about the pressure on the estate, especially going forward. There are big building projects and there is more and more pressure on housing people here and we are going to get to the stage where you cannot take everybody into the secure estate.

Q144 **Ms Gisela Stuart:** I think it is something to take up with IPSA in a sense, because when we first came in the running costs of the office and rental costs were one budget and you had some leeway. I am in the part of Birmingham where essentially, since the new rules came in, I now just have to reconcile myself with the fact that I have to pay out of my own pocket towards the rent because there is absolutely no way in Edgbaston—in other bits of Birmingham you can, but not in Edgbaston—where you can get an office that is safe and halfway decent, where you can expect to have staff to pay. It may be a point where because that is not a variable, whereas if you have the running costs of the office and the rent as one then you can make some movement on that.

Q145 **Michael Fabricant:** I am tempted to ask whether or not being the Government Accommodation Whip is the most unpopular job there is, but maybe we should skip that one.

Mr Robert Syms: As you are the ex-pairing Whip of the Government I think that is the most unpopular job.

Mark Tami: I am both, so I think I am in big trouble.

Q146 **Michael Fabricant:** Robert, you mentioned that a number of new Members had whole teams of staff that they wanted to bring down to London. Is that common between both parties, and how did you deal with it?



Mr Robert Syms: It is partly the IPSA rules, partly security and partly because most young people who want to work in politics quite like to be here rather than elsewhere, for a variety of reasons. It is also the mania for people having chiefs of staff and apprentices and interns. I certainly notice that some of the more senior Members of the House have fewer staff, but the new boys and girls who come in seem to have full offices, with people hanging out of the windows. Because they are the new people, they tend to be in smaller offices in the Upper Committee Corridor and places like that. It is difficult for them because they are trying to manage in a slightly pressured situation, but it is also difficult for us because we get the pressure being pushed back, "Can't I take that office down the corridor?" and quite often that is not the case. So we have a bit of a creep where some of the new Members are getting more than one room in order to accommodate their staff and everything else.

Q147 **Michael Fabricant:** You didn't find that with reality setting in they got rid of some of their staff?

Mr Robert Syms: Personally, I think that our job would be a lot easier if they halved the staffing budget.

Mark Tami: They will cram in more and more people as a way of saying, "You will have to do something now because I have just taken on another person." People sometimes say, "Oh, there is a room that is empty down there." I always say that it is a bit like someone coming to you and wanting social housing and saying, "That house is empty" and you say, "Yes, but I am sure it has already been allocated." That is sometimes the case here. Just because a room is empty does not mean that it is not going to be used for something.

There are also rooms here that may be Conservative, Liberal or whatever, but there are also rooms that the House has and uses, and I think some Members sometimes think that they are all our rooms and that we are just not giving them. A lot of Members think that Robert and I are just mean people who have all these fantastic empty offices that we just do not want to allocate to people—if only that were the case. It is really a case of juggling in order to try, and we have obviously had a turnover of shadow Cabinet Members, and that is not easy to suddenly magic up offices, and people will recruit staff, but you have to work within the office space that you have.

Mr Robert Syms: Quite often you get a chain. You get one person moving, another person moving, another person moving and so on, and then if somebody changes their mind or there is a problem in between suddenly everything goes pear-shaped.

Mark Tami: I have had that just recently where it was all agreed and then suddenly their staff member got to them, if I am being honest, and then they said, "No, it is not going to work." In my mind, that was clearly the staff member, because the Member was absolutely fine and then suddenly there was a problem.



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Q148 **Michael Fabricant:** How flexible are you at the beginning of a Parliament in the allocation of offices between parties? In particular, are you still against the idea of having a Labour office next to a Conservative office— obviously separate offices, but adjoining?

Mark Tami: We have floors in Portcullis House that are all Labour or all Tory, and at the last election there was one Labour Member on a Conservative floor and we adjusted it so that that did not happen. Throughout the rest of the building there are Conservatives next to— there are probably Members of our own side that people would rather not be next to, if we are being honest. I do not think that really creates a problem

Fiona Channon: In my office we have a list of all the spaces that are Member spaces by party, and there are about 1,034 in total—not all offices, but spaces—and then they are allocated depending on the number of seats won, and that information is given to the Accommodation Whips and then they do their bargaining, as Mark alluded to, based on, “I have to give up X and gain Y.” We also had to factor in the SNP this time, because they went from six Members to 56, so that was a large part of the agreement.

Q149 **Michael Fabricant:** Just on the allocation of offices, was there any real difference between how you did it in 2010 and how you did it in 2015?

Mark Tami: I did not do it in 2010. I had a long think beforehand about how we could—that is why I sent out a letter to Back Benchers—because anything you can do before the election, the more names you can cross off that you know you are not going to have a problem with. I think we are always looking at how we can speed it up. Within that you have to accept that on day one you are never going to be able to say, “Yes, here are the keys and off you go.”

Mr Robert Syms: Sometimes people put off retiring if they think their party might win, and accelerate their retirement if they think their party is in some difficulty. I think there are certain years—2010 was one—when it looked like there was going to be a change of Government, and then people have to say, if they have been in for a long time on the governing side, “Is this a good time to go?”

The other thing is that they had redundancy payments in 2010, so a number of people went to take redundancy or a resettlement package, which we do not have now. It is probably easier because we have a fixed-term Parliament, which is why this Committee and other Committees can work towards a specific date, but I suspect that management would be easy if one or other side of the House know that it is going to be an absolute car crash and disaster and more people start to retire.

Fiona Channon: From a House administration side, the policy and the practice were the same. Mark is completely right that there was more engagement maybe with Whips and both sides wrote that letter—I



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believe Anne did something similar. The information gathering and everything we provided to the Whips was the same in both Parliaments, because that was based on what we agreed with the Administration Committee we make available to Members.

Q150 Chair: One thing you have not mentioned, in the middle of all this, as I discovered to my cost, is that someone is in there washing walls, painting walls, varnishing and so on, and that was not always co-ordinated. I remember standing in the corridor as a man with a paintbrush arrived as I was moving in. How did that go?

Fiona Channon: A large proportion of Portcullis House was done during Dissolution. I have a spooky figure about the tons of carpet—I think we got rid of 18.5 tons of carpet for recycling during Dissolution. That went relatively smoothly, but you are completely right that if a Member went in, and it was mostly from a defeated rather than a standing-down one, if they were standing down we knew which offices we were going to be able to refurbish and get into, so the Whips had vacant possession pretty much when Parliament comes back, but for standing down the office may have been occupied by somebody who had been there for quite a long time and it did need basically a coat of paint before anybody else could move in. So hands up on that one. That probably happened more on an ad hoc basis, but the standing down offices we tried to hit during Dissolution.

Mark Tami: I certainly can recall having some offices that we knew we would have to repaint, because they might look okay with everything in but the moment you take everything out it suddenly looks pretty grim, so you perhaps hold them back and do not allocate them straightaway until they are brought up to some sort of standard.

Q151 Nigel Mills: Northern Estate might make life interesting if you are still in the role in 2020 or probably shortly before. Any early thoughts?

Mark Tami: Should I leave now?

Nigel Mills: You will have been Accommodation Whip for a long time by then. I am sure one election is enough for you. Whereas Mr Syms, I think, deserves an election to show his expertise. That is going to be quite a challenge, isn't it, moving people out of Norman Shaw north and south and into somewhere else and then shuffling around?

Mark Tami: I think what you need to do is that it needs to be very clear that people are being moved out to Richmond House, as long as we go down that route, and then they go back to their offices. What we do not want to do is get into a situation where people decide, "Oh, no, I quite like it in there" or, "I don't want to. I want somewhere else". Otherwise that will create a bit of a scene. The fact is that the Northern Estate has to be done for a whole host of reasons and we just have to get on and do it.



Fiona Channon: I think the timing for the Northern Estate programme is important in how close in advance of the election Members are asked to move. My experience of Members is that they tend not to feel comfortable moving in the November or December before an election—as we know, it is a fixed-term Parliament—because you are 12 or 14 weeks away from Dissolution. The Northern Estate has the Leader of the Opposition and leaders of other parties in it, so they may feel that they need to move in advance of that, which is the conversation we are having at the moment with the design team. Then we will have new Members going into whatever our decant solution is, so that might be nicer, obviously not when the Northern Estate is refurbished, but in the short term it might be nicer.

Q152 **Nigel Mills:** Do you get much difference in demand from Members saying they want a modular office where they have their own room and staff can be outside or they want a room all together with their staff, or they want to be completely separate from their staff? Is that going to feed into how you will reconfigure Richmond House, if we use that, and the Norman Shaws when they are being knocked about?

Fiona Channon: Portcullis House pretty much has a variety of those models. Member/staff adjacent or suite where it is just Member and their staff, or just singleton Member is the model that we have suggested to the design team to look at, because that captures mostly the way that the variety of Members work. Most Members do want their staff somewhere close to them. It depends on whether or not they are comfortable sharing that inside staff space in Portcullis. I think the most important thing, as the Whips will say, is having variety so that you can accommodate the different ways that Members work. Although there are 650 Members, there are 650 different ways that they use their offices. Having some flexibility is the important thing.

Mark Tami: One of the options was to have just a total open plan and our view was that that is not going to work for a lot of Members. Fiona is right; you do need a range that you can fit people in. In the same way, we have some MPs who share with other MPs, and they are perfectly happy doing that. To other people, they just would not go for that at all. I do not mind being in the same office as my staff; I do not have a problem with that. Some other colleagues just do not like that.

Mr Robert Syms: I think generally that most Members, if they had a choice, would have a staff office and their own office where they can close the door because then they can make private phone calls, they can play music, they can look at the iPlayer and do all sorts of other weird and wonderful things they want to do on their own. In this place, where everywhere you walk and everywhere you turn a corner, it is great when you go into the Tearoom or the Dining Room and meet colleagues and have a chat, but everybody needs to close the door and just have some time on their own. I think that is what some Members miss, particularly when they have too many staff.



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Q153 Nigel Mills: I think the SNP are largely all in one self-contained building. Do you think that is healthy? Would you like to have a Tory building and a Labour building?

Mark Tami: That came about because that was a new building—well, it was not a new building but it was a converted building—that was roughly of a size that would accommodate that group of people. It seemed to fit and it also removed the complex juggling issue about whether it is Norman Shaw North, or is it a bit of both? It just came up at the right time that that was available.

Mr Robert Syms: I am in Portcullis House. I can remember a while back there was a problem with a particular Ministry and I walked up the corridor and went into nine offices to ask if they were having a problem with the same Ministry and they all said yes. They were all Tory offices, but the particular Minister who I had approached who had said there was no problem—you can easily find out what is going on from the members of staff who are answering letters. I think there are advantages with being next door to your own particular party.

Chair: Thank you very much. That brings back some horrible memories.

Mark Tami: The most interesting request I had was from a Member—I will not name them—whose sole requirement was to be in the building that has the least problem with mice. They did not mind what the office was like, but that was their sole requirement because they have this big phobia about mice. So different people have all sorts of reasons why they want different offices.

Chair: Did you sort it for her?

Mark Tami: You automatically jumped to the conclusion that it is a woman.

Chair: It's all right; I will have my head knocked off later. Thank you very much.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Rob Greig and Dan Cook.

Q154 **Chair:** Would you like to make any statement, say who you are and so on for the record?

Rob Greig: Sure. Hi, everybody. Thank you for seeing us. Most of you know who I am: Rob Greig, the director of Digital Service. Sitting to my left is Dan Cook, who at the time was the programme manager for the general election IT roll-out, and who is now the head of the portfolio for digital platforms in Digital Service. Dan might want to say a few words, because he was a lot more heavily involved in this than I was—of course, I joined Parliament only shortly before the election. In many respects, I was in a luxury position of being able to observe what was going on without having to be involved, because this programme of work had been in train for about two years.

There are three things that I would like to say. First, I have never seen such an incredible amount of work achieved by so few people, because they got several thousand devices out to Members across the UK. That was done by a very small team in what was then Parliamentary ICT, led by Dan, and I think that, for the resources they had, they did an incredible job.

The second thing is that, from what I hear, each time this happens it gets a bit better, but there is always room for improvement. The third thing is that there are still a lot of outstanding questions from the roll-out of this general election based on decisions that were made. For example, the choices of hardware that we sent out; there were these all-in-ones that lots of people really liked and they are not much more than a laptop strapped to the back of a screen. I am concerned about how long those will last and whether they will last the full length of a Parliament. That leads us to another point that we have talked about here before, in this version and a previous version of the Administration Committee, which is: does the kit really last the full length of a Parliament? What we see is that towards the five-year mark Members and their staff are struggling with kit that has got older and slower.

There were some critical decisions around things like Apple Macs. We can come to more detail on that, but what I would say is that I do not think the Administration Committee that made the choice around introducing Apple Macs at the time were given the full information around how difficult or otherwise it would be to integrate a totally new operating system into an environment that was only designed for Windows. Also, the level of preparation resources given by the parliamentary IT team at the time to delivering that solution—we are still paying the price for that.



I think that there are a lot of challenges but also a lot of good things to be taken from this exercise, but it might be worth seeing what Dan's view is.

Dan Cook: It is largely the same as yours, Rob. We had quite a small, incredibly dedicated team that worked incredibly hard to deliver what we did. From speaking with colleagues who had been through previous elections, and with Fiona and others, it felt that we got a lot of the core activities right and we handled 182 MPs through the new Members' reception area very quickly and efficiently with no queuing. We played a key part in getting new Members' offices and returned Members' offices set up as quickly as we could, but the flipside to that is that some decisions were taken around the service offering that, as Rob has said, are now costing us and we are having to review. Those are overall my thoughts.

Q155 **Chair:** Can I start off with a slightly different thing? You mentioned Apple Mac problems. I could not understand why we were offering Apple Mac—I was not on the Committee then—because it does not integrate properly with any of the 365 or any of the Microsoft stuff. When I asked some of the Members why they chose an Apple Mac, I was told, "Because it looks nice." That came from a very senior, very bright legal individual. At the same time, or just prior to this, we were giving out old iPads and expecting those to integrate as well. In fact, we are still putting iPads out while there are better items on the market that work better with Microsoft stuff.

Rob Greig: Yes. First, on the Apple Mac decision—there might be some Members here who were here at the time; Mr Fabricant might have been here—I think there was a desire by Members to have a wider variety of IT, from the papers I have read. I also think that people who use Macs have a really good experience with them.

The challenge with Macs is that when you introduce an Apple Mac into an environment where there are around 50,000 devices connected, 10,000 of them run by Parliament, and 9,000 users. You start to apply policies to those Macs—the Cabinet Office has experienced exactly the same problems—which then make the Macs not as easy to use anymore. They are more like a Windows machine. The gloss goes off them and all the things that people like about them go away, except for how they look. That is a challenge. You have to turn it from what is a personal user device into a managed corporate device. That has been the challenge for this organisation and others when introducing Apple into the enterprise.

My other observation is that Apple themselves are just not geared up to work with the enterprise. Windows and Microsoft have been doing it for years and they are just much better at it; you get a lot more support. For example, we have someone from Microsoft sitting in our offices at least one day a week—maybe two—helping the team deal with all the issues and keep the enterprise on the road. We get very little support from Apple, because they are not geared up for that.



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On the iPads, that is a legacy choice that this organisation made a long time ago to use a product called GoodReader, which is a product where you can get your papers—not for all Committees or all meetings but a lot of meetings are done through this GoodReader application. It only works on an iPad, and GoodReader say they will never develop for any other platform. Until we can wean ourselves fully off the GoodReader platform and on to some other tools—for example, Office 365, which the Committees has done a lot of good work on—we have to keep the iPads.

Q156 **Chair:** Should we move in that direction?

Rob Greig: Definitely, and that is the direction we are going in.

Q157 **Nigel Mills:** On this, maybe I can just defend the previous Committee on two points. First, on the iPad trial I remember being here and saying that we should trial other tablets, partly on cost and partly so that we were not dependent on just one supplier. We were told that only iPads had sufficient security that we could rely on, and therefore there was no way we could use any other make of tablet at that point. I have no idea whether that was right or wrong or whether that has changed.

The second thing was that the then PICT IT strategy for the whole of the last Parliament until the very end was to move to a situation where Members had complete choice over their IT and PICT could effectively work with anything that Members bought. There was not even going to be a catalogue, in effect; we could all go and buy whatever we wanted from anywhere and you could magically make it work on a plug-and-play basis. When Apple got recommended, that was as part of a suite whereby Members could buy whatever they wanted, spend their budget however they wanted, and then the House would say, “We can support whatever you want to buy.”

Magically, in those last few months before the election, the strategy was changed to having a catalogue again with only a few items, which seemed perfectly sensible. I do not particularly want to go and research every laptop on the market and work out which ones might be best for me. So I don’t think it is fair to say that it was the previous Committee that was driving Apple in the teeth of IT advice; it was very much a case of the Committee agreeing to it because we were told we could do it, in effect. I think some members of the Committee were very keen to have Apple, weren’t they, Mr Tami?

Mark Tami: Yes. I was just going to add that, certainly from my personal experience of using Apple before and the Dell stuff, where the keyboard falls to bits—the keys fall off the keyboard on mine—it is not a great experience, and that is another reason why you think, “Why not go to Apple?” We were certainly told at the time that this was not going to be a major problem in terms of being able to use Apple. The other thing is that I have an Apple phone, and logically to me then if everything is Apple surely that should make everything work a bit better, but clearly I am wrong.



Rob Greig: I would say that I do not think the Committee was responsible for whether it worked or not. Ultimately, I think that there was an aspiration that people could choose any device and have it connected. The reality of being able to do that is a different thing. The reality is that there is a tension between, on the one hand, being able to deliver a high-availability environment that is secure and, on the other hand, letting everybody bring in any device and do whatever they want with it.

In terms of how Apple works, the iPad was the right choice at the time, because when that decision was made it was pretty much only the iPad that was mature enough to be used in the way everyone wanted to use it. What has happened is that androids have caught up, Windows has caught up—the Surface is a very good device. Now there is much more of a choice, but we made a choice back in the day, however many years ago it was. The UK Parliament was held up as a shining example of a Parliament that was moving away from paper and using tablets, so that was a really good thing to do.

What we have done is made some decisions about the software we run on those tablets that makes it hard for us to offer up alternatives such as the android tablet and the Windows tablet, and GoodReader is an example of that. What we need to do is move away so that people do have a choice of tablet. On Apple devices, I can completely see the point of view that it works; I have the same brand and it works. The reality, of course, is that the majority of users here—we had an FOI the other day and I think we have something like 9,700 Windows devices and 298 Apple devices. That mixed economy is very difficult to manage, but I think we could have managed it a lot better by the year running up to the general election all the staff being trained on how to support Apple Macs, for example. It is those kinds of things that would have made the transition much smoother.

Q158 **Chair:** Presumably your problems, in short summary, are finance, quality of equipment and the compatibility of the software itself.

Rob Greig: That pretty much sums it up, yes.

Q159 **Chair:** One point that Members have made about Dissolution and IT is that—shock horror—when everything shut down they could not access stuff, and so on. This is not just Members; it is also staff. What are you going to do this time?

Rob Greig: I witnessed this first-hand, because I discovered that basically Dissolution hits and then we cut off all our Members and all of their staff. I found it quite bizarre, and then it was explained to me that Parliament technically does not exist during this period. We have challenged that and I recently wrote to the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards. I said to her that my intention this time around is to leave Members' emails on and their staff's emails on with some guidelines, and



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those guidelines will be exactly the same as the guidelines for social media.

What we intend to do is that while at the moment your display name—not your email address but your display name—might say “Sir Paul Beresford MP”, we will take the “MP” out because nobody is an MP anymore, and we will load in and enforce a disclaimer at the bottom that says that this person is either a former Member of Parliament or a candidate, depending on what wording is agreed as it goes through the policy process. The principle is basically to leave everybody with access to their email and ask Members to police that themselves on a simple set of rules. This is what the Canadian Parliament do during their Dissolution. When I spoke to them, I heard that it works very well for them, so I am proposing that we do the same.

Dan Cook: It is also about what we do with equipment. We do not take all your equipment away; we just inform you that you should not use it for campaigning purposes and that, if you do wish to use it, you can hire it from us. It is a more pragmatic approach.

Q160 **Chair:** In your evidence, you said that you would be looking to other groups for advice, or you should be, which—

Dan Cook: Other groups for advice on this approach?

Chair: Yes.

Dan Cook: As we did in the run-up to the last election, we consulted quite heavily with a group of Members’ staff chaired by Georgina Kester, who works for MAPSA. They gave us lots of feedback on our approaches and the equipment, and then we also ran a number of sessions where we invited Members and their staff to come and look at the hardware catalogue, to look at devices, to tell us what they wanted to be included and what they thought was best. That will certainly be in our plans for the next election.

Rob Greig: Yes. I do not think this process of loading all the Members’ data on to a memory stick and giving it to them and sending them on their way at the moment of Dissolution is either practical, best value for the taxpayer or cyber secure. It would be much better to leave them on the systems until the point that we know what the outcome of that election is. Even then, if we have a defeated Member, I think we should give them 30 days and help them and hold their hand to get the data that belongs to them, rather than just cutting them off.

Q161 **Michael Fabricant:** First of all, on the Apple point, one of the reasons was that some colleagues—not me—were saying that there were programs that they used on their Apple devices. As Nigel said, quite rightly, the Administration Committee was led to believe or certainly not told that there would be difficulties having Apple on a major network. That is why we went with it, but it was not just for the looks; it was for the software that is available on Apple but is not generally available on



MS machines, Windows based.

Chair: I had better clarify that it was a Member who chose because of the looks, not the Committee, but I am not going to name him.

Michael Fabricant: No, we know that, but I am saying that there were other Members who wanted the software that is on Apple devices. The other point I want to clarify is that you were saying that you are planning to move away from the iPad, which I can see the logic of. However, I do hope that emails will still be accessible from iPads and iPhones, because a lot of colleagues have iPhones and private iPads, and they would not want to be cut off from that.

Rob Greig: The answer is yes. I do not think we are moving away from iPads. I think we will want to offer people a choice and we cannot offer people a choice until we solve the GoodReader problem, which is this one piece of software that runs on iPads. Yes, of course, people will continue to receive their e-mail on their iPhones and iPads. In terms of the choice, if we were making a choice like that again now, I think I would be saying to you, "Let's do a pilot and prove to this Committee that it actually works smoothly, before we make the final decision on a major strategic shift on what catalogue of IT we are going to be supporting here."

Q162 **Michael Fabricant:** Let's talk about the catalogue. In 2020, what plans do you have—we are still four years away—to make any changes to the catalogue? Obviously there will be more up-to-date equipment, but do you have any philosophical changes about what sort of equipment you might be offering? Or would it be more or less as was before, albeit not with Apple equipment?

Rob Greig: Yes, I think there are a number of changes we can make. First, we can make it easier for people. Those of you who have experienced the catalogue will know that at times it was a little bit confusing to use, so I think there is a piece of user experience to do on the catalogue. There is also a difficulty at the moment where you might have £700 of your allowance left and some office budget and because they are not in the same budget you cannot say, "I want to buy this laptop that is £1,000. I want to spend £700 of my allowance and £300 from my office." We cannot do that at the moment, so we want to fix that. We also want to fix the process. I think what would happen is that it would not be automatic in the receipt that you get.

Dan Cook: Yes, we had to intervene manually for purchase order numbers and that sort of thing with part of the process.

Rob Greig: Also, another thing you do not realise is that behind the scenes every two weeks I have to sit down and sign a pile of invoices like this because of the manual processes that sit behind it. Some of these invoices are for £5,000 and some of them are for £1.30. All your names come up because I sign all this stuff off because I am accountable for the authorisation of your IT budgets.



Michael Fabricant: You need an IT expert possibly.

Rob Greig: Yes. We need to digitise that process to make it more streamlined so that we can easily tell people how much of their allowance they have left. The other thing we could do, especially with new Members, is explain to them about allowances for the whole term of the Parliament. We often get into situations with new Members where they spend it all at once and then a year in they say, "I could do with a printer over here" or, "I could do with a machine over here," thinking about that mix. If we can solve some of the problems of being able to spend from different funds, if you like, into the one catalogue, that would be a lot better for everybody. Then we can streamline the process underneath.

We have not made any proposals, decisions or really had much thought yet about what devices we put in there. Our aspiration is to offer people a range of devices, but to be sure that they can all work. There are also a number of challenges that we get. For example, we get asked, "These devices are so much more expensive than if I went and bought it from PC World." There are three things I would say about that. First, I see from the last time they did it that they tried to select devices that would last—tried to. All devices contain a chip inside them that allow us to encrypt the device. As long as your password is secure, if you lose the laptop or the iPad or whatever, it is basically a beer mat. Nobody can get into it so your data is safe.

The third reason is that most of the devices—not the Apple ones, but most of them—come with a next-day, on-site warranty provided by the company we use, SCC. We need to explain that better for people and maybe give people a choice of whether they want the warranty or not. There lies a challenge, because if someone chooses not to have a warranty and the device breaks three years in, the response is, "We cannot get you next-day support." The tension is how we then help the Member through if they have used all of their allowance. It is about us thinking carefully about what services we can offer to provide Members with good equipment through the entire term of a Parliament.

The other thing we have to consider is that it is highly likely that a very large group of Members in the next Parliament will be moving out of this building, so we should make sure that they have guidance on the types of devices they should be choosing, to give them and their office staff flexibility to be able to work from different places, whether it is moving to Richmond House or somewhere else, when we move into perhaps a different building for a different Chamber for R&R. It is considering those things as well.

Q163 **Michael Fabricant:** You said in earlier evidence, and you just alluded to it now, the length of time that the equipment lasts. With five-year Parliaments and fixed terms, you were saying earlier on how after three or four years it starts slowing up or, in the case of Mr Tami, the buttons fall off. Will any device? My experience from broadcasting is that we used to have very heavy bits of tape recorders and stuff that were analogue



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and worked for years. As soon as it went digital it did not need to be that well made because it is either ones and noughts or it is not and you simply replace it when it goes wrong. How are you going to be able to do this, though, when people have a fixed budget for that five years if they then cannot replace with brand new equipment?

Rob Greig: This is the problem, and I think the challenge here is ultimately about money and budget. What I would like to do is some kind of replacement mid-term to keep people up to date, especially as we are moving to a world in which Members and their staff more and more are using the technology, and less and less are using paper. There is a desire to use the technology. That does beg the question: should we find a way of funding some sort of refresh mid-term? But it is whether there is the appetite and the money for that in the context of austerity and all the other things we are trying to do on cost saving, while recognising that the most important thing we do here is provide that equipment working to the Member.

Q164 **Michael Fabricant:** I have one final question. You were talking about the complication of the catalogue and the need to simplify it while at the same time still offering variety. What sort of advice do you give to new Members who may not be technical—although in my experience the newer the Member the more technical they are; nevertheless, not everyone is—about what equipment they are likely to need as a Member of Parliament?

Dan Cook: We had a team in the office who gave advice to Members and Members' staff who contacted the office, and we just talked them through the process about what their requirements were, how many people they had in the office, whether they were likely to work from different locations, whether they had used certain types of machines before and were comfortable with them, asked them about any accessibility requirements around size of screens and those types of things. We had a team who were there really to have that conversation with each office and to come up with the best offering for them, which we worked through.

Q165 **Ms Gisela Stuart:** At the moment, the constituency offices have to wait about four to six weeks to receive equipment. Can that be speeded up? Also, sometimes some members of my staff work from home and there is endless confusion about delivery addresses and invoice addresses. It would not seem to be beyond the wit of man to organise that. Is that something you are addressing?

Rob Greig: I think that in this process of improving the catalogue, where things get delivered to would help with the delivery thing. In terms of speeding up the process, from what I observe—Dan, do tell me if I am wrong—the team that was organising the general election roll-out was very small, so that is why it broke down doing new Members first and then refreshing the returned Members' equipment later, because technically they already had equipment. I would like to think that if we



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plan the process differently when Members return, we could deliver that new equipment much faster at the return of the new Parliament. Some people had to wait until January.

Q166 **Ms Gisela Stuart:** Do you have a sense of why it took so long?

Dan Cook: It was sheer volume of orders. We had a team out working around the country and as soon as orders were placed they went on to a backlog and then we worked through them as quickly as we could. That is why; it was sheer volume of orders.

Ms Gisela Stuart: But you can anticipate that peak, can't you?

Q167 **Nigel Mills:** On that point, as I recall from my own experience, there was a set time from when you made the order that it was meant to be processed and you were meant to get your IT, but there seemed to be a bit of gaming by the provider, in that the day they processed the order was several weeks after you made it, so they could hit that four-week window. Is that something that you experienced and monitored? Because they were nowhere near hitting that performance target.

Dan Cook: We did monitor it closely and we had weekly meetings with the supplier to keep them honest and to keep putting pressure on them. We know that some of the backlog for orders was on our side and our own internal processes—Rob referred to this before—of having to intervene with orders to manually apply purchase orders ourselves. That prevented the order getting to the supplier to then start processing. Some of it was our side and some of it was their side, but I think overall the process can be improved to make that quicker and to get things out to Members and their staff more quickly.

Rob Greig: Yes, I think that process can be dramatically improved by just taking the human out of it in the middle. What I would say is that the supplier struggled and I saw that the director of that organisation was brought in on several occasions because we were having serious issues with them in terms of their ability to deliver the promises they had given us, and there were a number of challenges with them. I think they learnt a lot in this process as well.

Q168 **Nigel Mills:** One problem was because it was said it was a four-week timetable I thought that will be recess, so I will be in my constituency so I will leave my laptop in my constituency. Then they sent me a date in late October and said, "If your laptop is not in the constituency, we cannot do it." I will be here sitting. It became a bit of a farce by that time.

Rob Greig: I think the ideal would be to have all Members have their equipment by the end of the summer, so that when they come back into that first real sitting period after the summer recess they all have their new equipment. That would be the ideal and more realistic.

Q169 **Ms Gisela Stuart:** Have you made any assessment in terms of the



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technical support you are able to provide to members of staff in the constituency offices?

Rob Greig: Yes, we have. A number of us have been to the constituency roadshows across the UK and talked to members of staff. I have visited Members' offices personally in every region except Wales, and so have members of my team, including Graham Peek, who is our head of Member services. He visited some offices. We also visited 31 offices over the summer and asked them how they were getting on with their IT, with a particular focus on cybersecurity and, as you know, we did the digital mentoring pilot with four Members. We have a lot more information now on the challenges Members' staff are having, and I think what we need to do is provide better regional support. My observation is that Members' staff, from an IT perspective, are the poor relation of the staff that work in Westminster, who have engineers that can come to their desk and support them. We do not provide that as well out there in the constituencies.

Q170 **Ms Gisela Stuart:** Other than better regional support, are there any other areas that you have identified where you could improve the service and technical support to staff in the constituency offices?

Rob Greig: Training is a general issue. I have visited offices and seen people doing things and workarounds when a simple training session would show people a lot and people would get a lot of value from that. That is what we are trying to do as part of the Office 365 programme. Dan is leading a programme of work to visit every Member's office over the next 12 months from January—not Dan personally—

Ms Gisela Stuart: That sounds like a bit of "Pilgrim's Progress".

Rob Greig: —and provide training and support for Office 365. I think that will help people a lot. One of my concerns in constituency offices is that, because the allowance for IT is limiting, we notice that a lot of offices use kit that has been given to them for free: donations, kit that has been bought from Tesco, things like that, and especially some really old stuff running Windows XP, which is very, very risky for running casework tools on and things with sensitive information. As part of that piece of work, we are trying to offer people advice and support in trying to move away from those devices and use different ways to access their data.

Q171 **Ms Gisela Stuart:** Are you looking ahead to the next general election in terms of awarding the contract to deliver training to constituency staff? Has that been awarded for the next general election at all?

Rob Greig: No.

Q172 **Ms Gisela Stuart:** What is the process of looking at that, do you know?

Dan Cook: It has not been awarded for the next election. What we have done and what this paper refers to is what we are coming to the Committee next week to talk about, which is the programme of visiting



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all Members' constituency offices across the next 12 months, for which we do have a partner in place to help us do that work. Subject to the performance of that, we may look to use them, but certainly we will look to continue delivering training services beyond next year's work as well.

Q173 Ms Gisela Stuart: Do you want to tell us now who that partner is or do you want to wait?

Dan Cook: I do not know if it is finalised. I know you have signed it but—

Ms Gisela Stuart: We can do that at the next session.

Dan Cook: Yes, we can do that next Monday.

Rob Greig: I think it is fair to say that since I have been here there has been a debate going on internally with officials on where the border is in terms of the services that Parliament provides. I have been pushing quite hard that that border moves to include the constituency office and pressing the argument that until we provide parity of service to the constituency staff so they have a similar experience to Members in Westminster, the service will never be perceived as good. We could give an amazing service to members of staff and Members in Westminster, but if there are still problems in the constituency then we are always going to struggle to provide that good level of service. We have to find innovative ways of levelling that out, if you like.

Q174 Ms Gisela Stuart: Can I put the plea in that "constituency office" is defined as where that member of staff works, because certainly some of my members of staff work from home for two days a week?

Rob Greig: Yes, of course.

Q175 Martyn Day: Given that IT is a full-term budget, I know that in my own case I did not have an office until September, and we did not really know what we needed until we had the office space and the number of staff we were going to have, but in the period between me being elected and having that office I still needed some IT support for myself and my staff. I wonder if there is any prospect of looking in the future at maybe some kind of rental scheme whereby Members could rent equipment from you until we know what we want on a more permanent basis. Certainly, for that initial period when everybody is working from their own homes, how we cover that, I am just floating that—even if it was refurbished equipment that we could have for a period.

Rob Greig: I would be willing to look at it. I do not know how we would administer that and fund that, but absolutely I would be willing to look at any ideas that anyone has that could improve the services we offer, especially around that election time when it is so busy and people are not sure what they really need to do—it goes back to that point about how we assist new Members who have not been an MP before. What do I need to be an MP? It is that kind of thing that we need to support people on.



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Dan Cook: As it stands, when new Members come into the reception area, they are handed the laptop and an iPad to get themselves up and running but, as Rob said, we could look at alternatives for that and see if there is a better model that works more in 2020.

Q176 **Nigel Mills:** Going slightly back to the quality of customer service, we have had some evidence that suggests that it took multiple visits to people's offices to get IT set up and it took quite a bit longer than it ought to have done. Is that something you accept and will find a way of fixing next time?

Dan Cook: I think it was a comment I put in, and Rob. An early observation when we were furnishing Members' offices with IT equipment was that one engineer would go and fix your printer and then we would get another call saying, "Can you come and set up our scanner?" It was picked up early on and it was something we improved as we went by, but the recommendation I have made for next time is that we have named contacts for each Member so that when our Digital Service staff arrive there is a clear checklist that they must follow and it is much simpler for Members to get further support to any issues that are likely to be interrelated. Printing and scanning, for example, are clearly bedmates so it is worth doing those checks and we will do those in 2020.

Q177 **Nigel Mills:** Presumably, you will need to make sure that the engineers you are sending out are familiar with the relatively limited range of equipment that they are meant to be installing and not, "I haven't seen one of these before. I am not sure how to do this," which I think I experienced.

Rob Greig: Yes. I think there is a piece of work to do with engineers around what the message is and what our customer service standards are and what our aspirations are in terms of delivering services to Members. When I was in Edinburgh, I was in an office and one of the engineers of the company that does the delivery came in, and they also do the Scottish Parliament's delivery in Scotland, so it is the same company doing both. I wonder if there is any way we can join up with some of the regional Assemblies, if they are going through the same process, to be able to make sure we have a more fluid delivery to Members' offices regardless of whether they are one of our Members or a member of one of the regional Assemblies.

Q178 **Nigel Mills:** You say you want to give constituency offices the same standard of service as we get here. One thing I do not have to do here when I get my office is try to get a broadband connection that works, whereas we are a bit left on our own already in our constituencies to try to get broadband installed and work out what we need and how it all works and then when it goes wrong what on earth we can do with it. I think you are moving further that way by cancelling the Virgin contract in a few months' time. Is there more you can do to hold people's hands as they go through trying to get business broadband and phone lines set up, which is not quite as easy as perhaps it ought to be?



Rob Greig: I think our intention is to provide support for the broadband that Members wish to use, rather than forcing them to use a particular type of broadband, where we have historically found that to be very difficult, especially when the Member claims the phone line from IPSA but gets the broadband from us. When it goes wrong, it is very hard to get either supplier to admit fault and we just get stuck in the middle providing the poor service. What I would much rather we do is the Member gets the full package and then we provide support on top of that package, when people get stuck, to make sure the wi-fi is working, it is secure and all those kinds of things.

Q179 **Chair:** The problem with that is that it is not always the broadband. I am thinking of some problems I have had with BT, and I can go on for hours but will not. They have a section, and the new rules are going to make it worse, that look after the broadband and then they have another section that looks after the telephone line, and neither the two will talk. My only way of getting around it is that there is a dedicated BT team in the House of Commons and I have just dumped the thing on them. Will the other providers—TalkTalk and so on—be persuaded to offer a similar service?

Rob Greig: This is an interesting question because the project manager of the broadband move has been talking to Virgin and BT and we have talked to their heads of PR. They are very interested in providing the best possible service to Members, for quite obvious reasons, when historically they have not been very interested in providing the best possible service to the Digital Service that owns the contract. We will have to see, but I would like to think that they are going to pay a lot more attention to an MP directly than they are to us. There seems to be a lot more interest in providing not only a smooth transfer, but the right level of account management for those Members that choose either of those two suppliers. I think they are genuinely keen to have the business as well.

Q180 **Chair:** Can we move on to something slightly different? Assuming 2020 is the date, in IT land that is a long way. Have you seen any trends and so forth? One of the trends I have noticed is that a lot of people, having seen the use of laptops or Microsoft Surface plugged into bigger screens and mouse and all the rest of it, have seen the advantage of being able to unplug everything, stick it in a handbag or whatever and take it home and use it at the weekend and bring it backwards and forwards. That is a trend I have sort of seen. Are there other trends? How are you thinking forward for 2020? Where do you think you will go?

Rob Greig: I think it is an obvious statement to say that there is a downward trend in desktop sales. I would not be surprised to see the same of laptops. However, laptops have a role to play at the moment because of the maturity of the tablet devices, but we are seeing devices such as the Surface come along that are sitting in that middle ground between an iPad and a laptop. I think we are going to see a lot more of that. If you look at the products that HP and Dell are producing now, they are producing competitors to the Surface. That is happening. We also



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have the iPad Pro that has come out, which is the bigger iPad, so there is a lot of that.

I am not sure at this stage if we would ever provide wearable technologies on the catalogue this time around, but I think we will see more and more requests to integrate with wearable technologies, so the devices we provide: can I get my email on my watch, in my glasses—all that kind of thing. The more Members turn over at elections, the more requests we might see for that kind of thing coming along as well. I think it will be going in a number of directions in terms of the new devices that are coming along. Battery life is getting longer, screens are getting richer in terms of what they offer, and devices are getting lighter. I can see at the moment why we would want to offer desktops, but come 2020 would we really want to offer desktop computers, or is a fully mobile offering probably going to be more likely?

Chair: Thank you. If you go away and think, “Damn, I should have said that.” bung it in on paper or even in an email. Thank you very much. That concludes the public session.