

ADMINISTRATION COMMITTEE

Note of discussion for the meeting held on 27 April 2020 at 4.30pm

[Meeting held over Microsoft Teams as a videoconference]

Members present:
Sir Charles Walker (in the Chair)

Michael Fabricant
Marion Fellows
Collen Fletcher
Sir Greg Knight

Mrs Pauline Latham
Mrs Maria Miller
Jessica Morden
Giles Watling

Apologies: Mark Tami

1. Declaration of interests

The interests of Members, who were not present at the Committee's first meeting, were noted, in accordance with the Resolution of the House of 13 July 1992 (see Appendix A of the Formal Minutes).

2. Introductory session with the Clerk of the House and the Director General of the House of Commons

Dr John Benger, Clerk of the House of Commons, and Ian Ailles, Director General of the House of Commons, briefed the Committee.

Members held a discussion on the House Service's response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Chair asked Dr Benger and Mr Ailles to describe what the challenges had been so far and what could be expected in the coming weeks.

Dr Benger said that one of the main operational challenges had been trying to deal with the logistics of enforcing public health measures in a busy and historic working building at the centre of public life. He noted the work that House teams had undertaken to support the key functions of the Chamber and House business, which included broadcasting, digital tools, and onsite facilities. He added that the House was close to having virtual division technology in place and that work was underway to create a virtual annunciator and clock.

Mr Ailles said he was pleased the House had been able to move from two-hour to six-hour hybrid Chamber sessions in a week. He said the upcoming challenge would be continuing to provide a robust service for longer sessions and determining how much more investment was required to strengthen services. He noted that there had been a great deal of work around digital services, such as the roll out of Microsoft Teams. He said the House was working closely with other legislatures, the Cabinet Office, Public Health England and the Department of Health, and had received positive feedback from colleagues on the measures it had put in place.

Dr Benger and Mr Ailles said that a forthcoming challenge would be supporting both the House of Commons and the House of Lords if they wanted to sit at different times or in different ways, as many staff worked bicamerally, but that the House was keen to support Members in any way it could.

Several Members asked what support would be given to Members who were required to remain in self-isolation, even when the majority of Members were to return to the Estate. Dr Bengier said that the hybrid proceedings would remain in place for as long as the House thought necessary. The House was doing everything in its power to ensure that Members had the ability to participate remotely in proceedings and IPSA had increased allowances for Members and their staff to support this. He said that as long as social distancing was government policy and in the public interest, the House would be faced with a situation where large numbers of Members would not be able to physically participate in proceedings in the Chamber. With limited seats available in the Chamber because of social distancing precautions, the House would continue to ensure that hybrid and virtual facilities were strong. A Member asked for assurance that hybrid facilities would continue even if the majority of Members were able to physically participate in the Chamber. The Chair said this was something that the Commission should consider, and was ultimately a decision for the House.

Mr Ailles said that the House Service was continuing to assess the number of staff needed to provide the services Members expected and required. He added that the House was constantly looking at how to optimise services while operating with fewer staff. He noted that many House staff onsite were essential staff working in the security and catering teams, and that some staff needed to attend the estate for other essentials services such as safety checks. He also indicated that the House might need to provide a more limited offering of onsite services if the number of staff on the Estate was to be restricted.

A Member asked if the ongoing situation could be used as an opportunity to deep clean certain areas. Mr Ailles said that cleaning staff had been focusing on 'high traffic' areas and had used the recess to perform deep cleans. He noted there would be challenges with getting additional staff in under the circumstances but that the cleaning contract was being reviewed.

The Chair asked if hand sanitiser would continue to be provided onsite for the foreseeable future. Mr Ailles said that the House had been placing hand sanitiser dispensers in targeted areas and was putting continued arrangements in place for the next few months. There were currently no issues with the supply of hand sanitiser. A Member asked if the House could ensure that there were hand sanitiser dispensers placed outside toilets, or if for hygiene reasons doors could be altered so that they could be pushed open rather than opened with a handle. Mr Ailles said the House was considering measures such as this for the longer term.

A Member asked if the House was liaising with other parliaments on their work in this area. Dr Bengier said the House was in contact with other parliaments in the Commonwealth and European Union. He said that most were radically restricting access but had not developed hybrid or virtual models to the extent that Parliament had. While some were working to establish these models, the UK Parliament was ahead in terms of developing these systems.

A Member asked if there had been a change in attitude among staff about remote working. Dr Bengier said the Commons Executive Board had already agreed to ask staff about their experiences of remote working to see if expanding these arrangements presented opportunities, such as the potential to make savings and expand roles for people with caring responsibilities and disabilities. He noted there were also risks involved with remote working, such as a potential lack of privacy and less face-to-face collaboration, and so the House would need to balance the positives and negatives.

A Member asked for an update on work to improve WiFi connectivity on the estate. Dr Bengier noted this was an area where the House had not listened to the needs of Members, and that future work such as this should be shaped by Members' priorities.

The Chair thanked House staff for their work during the crisis and noted it highlighted the importance of having high-quality digital systems in place to enable the House to function successfully.

The Chair thanked Dr Bengier and Mr Ailles for attending and asked they provide an update to the Committee again after the Whitsun recess.

Decision

The Committee **noted** the update.

3. Informal Note

The Committee **agreed** the informal notes of the meeting on 18 March 2020.

4. Confidentiality and Privilege

This item was deferred to the next meeting.

5. Working Practices of the Committee: Administrative Matters

This item was deferred to the next meeting.

The Committee will next meet on 4 May 2020 at 4.30pm