

ADMINISTRATION COMMITTEE

Note of discussion for the meeting held on 11 May 2020 at 4.30pm

[Meeting held over Microsoft Teams as a videoconference]

Members present:
Sir Charles Walker (in the Chair)

Michael Fabricant	Mrs Maria Miller
Marion Fellows	Jessica Morden
Colleen Fletcher	Mark Tami
Sir Greg Knight	Giles Watling
Mrs Pauline Latham	

1. Informal Note

The Committee **agreed** the informal notes of the meeting on 4 May 2020.

2. Parliamentary Digital Service update

Tracey Jessup, Director, and David Smith, Deputy Director, Parliamentary Digital Service, briefed the Committee.

Ms Jessup said that owing to the COVID-19 pandemic, the past six weeks had seen a major change in the way both Members and staff interacted and worked and that PDS had been working hard to deal with this change. She highlighted some of the key achievements, including the rollout of Microsoft Teams, collaboration with the broadcasting unit to allow for hybrid proceedings, and the development of an online voting system.

The Chair and several Members commended the Parliamentary Digital Service for its work during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Chair asked if Microsoft Teams would replace Skype for Business and Zoom. Ms Jessup said that Teams was a broader and more modern product than Skype or Zoom which would allow for improved videoconferencing functionality and relied on less bandwidth than Skype. There was an ongoing public discussion about the security of Zoom. She added that in the coming months PDS would be looking to move chargeable telephone calls, the main functionality of Skype for Business, to Microsoft Teams. However, this would need to be done with care as Parliament had a complex telephony landscape and PDS wanted to ensure the work of Members' and their staff would not be interrupted during the transition.

A Member asked what work was being done to improve Wi-Fi on the Estate. Ms Jessup explained that a project to upgrade the Wi-Fi in Portcullis House had just been completed and would be followed by a similar upgrade in the Palace. An upgrade of Wi-Fi connectivity on the Estate was faced with several challenges. The construction and layout of the Palace, in particular, with its thick walls and an increasing amount of scaffolding due to construction works which created 'Faraday cages' had an effect on connectivity. Under these conditions, only a limited form of intervention was possible. Several Members said they had been unaware of these challenges, and the Chair said that he would write to all Members explaining the work done so far and the difficulties faced.

A Member asked how many Members did not have access to Microsoft Teams. Mr Smith said that Teams had been rolled out to all Members and their staff.

A Member asked how many Members could not participate in remote voting because they did not have access to the necessary software or equipment. Ms Jessup explained that all Members now had the ability to participate in remote votes. She added that improvements had been made to the system as a result of the initial tests conducted with Members. A Member asked if there was a failsafe in the system in case a Member was unable to vote due to a technical or connection issue, rather than a failure with the voting system. Ms Jessup said that guidance on this had been circulated to Members that week, though any Members who had experienced an issue when voting should contact the Public Bill Office as soon as possible to bring it to their attention in the same way that they would for any issues that arose when voting in the Chamber. She added that if there was a widespread issue such as a connection failure, the Speaker had the power to nullify the vote and call the division again.

A Member asked when a remote voting system would be introduced in the House of Lords. Ms Jessup explained the House of Lords did not have an equivalent system to the Commons' online Members' Hub so one had had to be developed from scratch. Mr Smith estimated the Lords' system would be in place by 15 June.

A Member asked the Chair if there had been a discussion at the recent meeting of the House of Commons Commission on the continuation of hybrid proceedings for committees after the lockdown restrictions were lifted. The Chair said that it had not been discussed, however the medium to long-term aim was for the House to sit physically again. He added that some Members had expressed concern that there was no way to verify whether Members themselves were voting using the remote system.

Decision

The Committee **noted** the update on the Parliamentary Digital Service.

3. The Members' Services Team and User Group

Lee Bridges, Director, Members' Services Team, briefed the Committee.

Mr Bridges said that the Members' Services Team had been set up to increase the capacity and range of HR services provided to Members and their offices in light of the issues identified in the report by Gemma White QC in 2019. He added that understanding the services required by Members would be crucial to the team's work and that a Member and Members' staff engagement lead had been appointed to focus on this.

The Chair welcomed the provision of HR support to Members.

A Member expressed confusion over how the Members' Services Team would fit in with the existing Members' HR service. They added that they were not aware of the new service and asked if reminders and refreshers of the services and training provided by the House could be sent every six months or so to Members, particularly for those who had recently been elected. Mr Bridges explained that the staff of the existing Members' HR service staff had been transferred to the new team, which would be expanding on their work and the services provided. He added

that the creation of the new team had been communicated to Members in newsletters and through other channels since February.

Mr Bridges said that he hoped the Members' Services Team would become the consultant of choice for Members through its understanding of the workings of the House and the unique position of Members as employers. It was expected that the Team would have a HR pack in place for the next election to explaining what Members needed to do to set up their offices and the Team would also be proactive in contacting Members to advertise its services.

A Member asked how incidents of sexual harassment would be dealt with. The Chair said that the Independent Complaints and Grievance Scheme had been introduced to deal with incidents of this nature and noted that all Members and their staff had been encouraged to take the Valuing Everyone training course.

Decision

The Committee:

- **Noted** the update from the Members' Services Team; and
- **Nominated** Sir Charles Walker to Chair the Members' Services User Group.

4. Nominations to boards and groups

Decision

The Committee:

- Nominated Sir Charles Walker to the Parliamentary Fire Safety Committee; and
- Nominated Marion Fellows to Chair the Travel Office Consumer Panel, and Michael Fabricant as an attendee.

5. Any other business

Access to sanitary products

Several Members said they were keen to have a full discussion on this matter at a future meeting.

The Committee will next meet on 18 May 2020 at 4.30pm