House of Commons

ADMINISTRATION COMMITTEE

Note of discussion for the meeting held on 8 June 2020 at 4.30pm

[Meeting held over Microsoft Teams as a videoconference]

Members present:
Sir Charles Walker (in the Chair)

Michael Fabricant
Marion Fellows
Colleen Fletcher
Mrs Pauline Latham
Mrs Maria Miller
Giles Watling

Apologies: Sir Greg Knight

1. Informal Note

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

2. Session with the Clerk of the House and the Director General of the House of Commons

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

Dr Benger said that the House Service was in was in a transitional stage as an organisation. The Executive Board had spent time developing a strategy for the House Service, but there were issues around the extent to which it properly captured the demands and requirements of Members, how the House Service prioritised its work as an organisation, and how its successes were measured. There was a need to distinguish between business as usual, where the House Service had high levels of performance overall, and the changes it wanted to make over time.

The Chair said that the reports by Dame Laura Cox and Gemma White QC into bullying and harassment had indicated a significant gap between Members and House staff. The findings of the reports had caused reputational damage to the House.

Dr Benger said that he recognised this. The way forward was to ensure a better mutual understanding of each other's needs and pressures, and to restore good relationships without hierarchy, undue deference or bullying. Implementing the three central recommendations of the Cox Report had been a slow process and it would be a watershed moment if the House were to approve the implementation of the third recommendation, now that it had been approved by the Commission. He added that in order to understand the needs of Members better, a new customer engagement role had recently been created to lead on work in this area. He recognised that the Administration Committee had a vital role to play in gauging the views of Members. A Member said that they welcomed this approach as the House was unlike most other places of work with unique requirements.

A Member noted that the House Service Strategy needed to better reflect the needs and requirements of Members. They added that there were also no Members on the Executive

Board and that it was incumbent on Members to identify what they wanted from the House Service rather than its strategic direction being based on the assumptions of officials. Dr Benger recognised the importance of the House Service identifying and responding to the needs and requirements of Members as individuals, each with their own priorities, but getting that mechanism right was a permanent challenge. The House had decided that the Administration Committee and the Finance Committee were representative of Member views, so it was important he hold regular conversations with both committees. There should also be a more formal way for Committee members to liaise with the Executive Board, for instance with a rapporteur structure, so that Members' needs could be reported to the Executive Board. A new Head of Customer Service had also been created to determine how Member requirements could be better captured. He noted that the Commission had a statutory duty to review and inform the House Strategy and that the Administration Committee had an advisory role to the Commission. It was for the Committee to consider how that relationship worked in practice.

The Chair asked if the Strategy had already been agreed. Dr Benger said it was still in draft form as the key performance indicators were still being developed, and that while the strategy was intended for a medium-term period, the expectation was that it could be varied to take account of changing circumstances.

A Member asked if Dr Benger had a view about the potential conflict between commercial operations on the Estate and the needs of Members. Dr Benger said that since the 2008 financial crisis there had been a shift in policy to pursue commercial opportunities such as third-party banqueting and events, and it would be for Members to decide the delicate balance of trade-offs. He noted that the Administration Committee had a role to play in making recommendations to the Commission in this area. Members agreed to revisit the matter at a future meeting.

A Member asked whether it was worth considering the planned works to Norman Shaw North before more money was spent, given that the original plans for the Northern Estate and Restoration and Renewal were likely to be reviewed. Mr Ailles noted that the plans to refurbish the Northern Estate predated R&R and that essential work to the core of the Norman Shaw North building was still required, though the COVID-19 pandemic provided an opportunity to review plans for the Northern Estate and to gain a better understanding of what Members wanted from their buildings.

A Member asked how works were progressing on Canon Row and if there was accommodation available for Members in the building. Mr Ailles said that Canon Row was coming back into use and would be occupied by key services. He added that it would be a service building rather than one occupied by Members.

A Member asked what the reasoning was behind access restrictions in House bars and what the response had been to the trial of new access rules. Dr Benger said that the old access restrictions were the result of custom and practice. Strangers' Bar was the most contested area where previously the only House staff that could access the Bar were Officers of the House, which constituted a minority of House staff. The new rules had been introduced as a pilot to address inequalities between House staff and to ensure that passholders were able to access areas for which they had a business need, though in Stranger's Bar the new rules had not worked well in practice, given the size of the space. He added that the Committee could suggest a compromise on the use of Strangers' Bar so that it was Members only from Monday to Wednesday and open to staff on Thursdays when there was less pressure on the facility. He did not want to revert to the old rules where only some members of House staff could use the Bar because of their seniority.

A Member noted that there was a need for spaces in which Members could hold private conversations. Dr Benger said that there were areas which remained Members-only while others were available only to Members on certain days.

A Member asked what might be done to provide a more family-friendly Parliament. Dr Benger said that he wanted to create a more family-friendly workplace but noted the limitations of the Palace as a heritage building and that space was at a premium. He said that the House Service did its utmost to support the complex working lives of Members and to seek the Committee's views on how best it could support them, given its role in capturing the views of stakeholders.

A Member asked if there would be greater opportunity for remote working in the future. Dr Benger said that House staff had recently been surveyed on this point. There were real opportunities with working from home, but also real challenges. He said that, for instance, he did not want staff to lose the value of face-to-face conversations or for Chamber teams to lose touch with Members. Staff would be surveyed again further into lockdown or once lockdown was lifted to see if their views had changed. Mr Ailles added that there were many staff who worked 'on-post' and had to be present on the Estate, for instance catering staff, security officers and visitor assistants. There was no one-size-fits-all solution and the House Service wanted to ensure that staff would still come onto the Estate to collaborate.

Decision

The Committee **noted** the update.

3. Corporate Business Plan outturn 2019/20

Mostaque Ahmed, Managing Director, Malin Eliasson, Director of Corporate Finance and Performance, and Jane Hough, Head of Business Planning & Performance, Finance Portfolio and Performance, briefed the Committee.

Mr Ahmed discussed some of the key highlights of the review of the 2019-20 Corporate Business Plan in a year characterised by significant changes, which included the 2019 General Election and the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Chair commended the performance of the House Service in rising to the challenges of the last year.

The Chair noted that there were longstanding issues with Wi-Fi and mobile phone connectivity 'notspots' on the Estate and asked if there was confidence that they could be resolved. He added that by resolving issues such as these Members could be confident that the House Service was listening to and addressing their concerns. Mr Ahmed said that the Director of PDS was aware of the issue, which had been raised during discussions on the prioritisation of digital projects. Mr Ailles said that PDS had already completed work to improve connectivity in Portcullis House and that the current focus was to improve connectivity across the Estate. He suggested that the Committee identify ten locations where connectivity was in need of improvement for PDS to focus on as a priority.

The Chair asked for clarification on the Committee's role in monitoring the outcomes of the Business Plan. Mr Ahmed said that the Business Plan was produced by the House

Service to inform its priorities for the delivery of services, and the views of the Committee were being sought for the first time to help shape those priorities. A revised version of the Business Plan for the 2020-21 period would be presented to the Committee at the end of the month.

A Member asked what percentage of the actions that were not completed at the end of the year would be abandoned entirely and how many would continue to be a priority. Mr Ahmed provided the example of the Fire Life Safety Works which would be prioritised over the coming year, while other projects were ongoing and crossed reporting periods, such as the work on cultural transformation following the recommendations made in the reports by Dame Laura Cox and Gemma White QC. He added that PDS was under huge pressure to deliver several crucial projects during the COVID-19 outbreak and in light of that of that a conscious decision was taken to review the priority of some actions in other areas during the year.

Decision

The Committee **noted** the update.

The Committee will next meet on 15 June at 4.30pm.