

## **ADMINISTRATION COMMITTEE**

### **Note of discussion for the meeting held on 7 September 2020 at 4.30pm**

*[Meeting held over Microsoft Teams as a videoconference]*

#### **Members present:**

Sir Charles Walker (in the Chair)

Michael Fabricant  
Marion Fellows  
Sir Greg Knight  
Mrs Pauline Latham

Mrs Maria Miller  
Mark Tami  
Giles Watling

**Apologies:** Jessica Morden

#### **1. Informal Note**

The Committee **agreed** the informal note of the meeting on 20 July 2020.

#### **2. House Service response to COVID-19 pandemic**

Marianne Cwynarski, Head of the Governance Office, and John Owen, Programme Manager, Governance Office, briefed the Committee.

Mrs Cwynarski provided an update on the House's arrangements in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. She reported on preparations made during the summer recess in expectation of an increase in the number of passholders returning to work on the Estate in the autumn term. A wider range of facilities and services had reopened to meet demand, though one of the key challenges was to ensure that social distancing measures were complied with as footfall on the Estate increased. A proactive information campaign had been launched to remind passholders of the importance of following social distancing measures and signage had been increased across the Estate. Additionally, the House was implementing a test and trace process and information cards had been sent to all Members. There were also plans to carry out COVID-testing onsite. She added that House staff had been encouraged, where possible, to continue to work from home to ensure maximum capacity for Members and their staff working on the Estate. Mr Owen said that the mitigations of the House's response to the pandemic were under constant review to reflect the changing nature of the pandemic and the information issued by Public Health England, with which the House was working closely. He added that the UK Parliament was one of the few that had not lost any sitting days to COVID-19.

A Member asked if there were enough desk spaces available for those returning to work on the Estate to do so safely and what provision there was for those who found it difficult to work from home as they lived in shared accommodation and wanted to return to the Estate but did not have a business reason for doing so. Mrs Cwynarski said that as social distancing could not be ensured in all office areas, for House staff desks would be made available in Richmond House. It was for Members to decide how best to configure their offices. Staff who found it difficult working from home were permitted to work on the Estate, as long as this did not exceed two staff per Member per day.

A Member asked what measures were in place to deal with incidences of infections on the Estate and what the testing process was. Mr Owen emphasised that no incidents had been positively identified where the transmission of the virus had occurred on the Estate. Measures to deal with suspected infections included short-notice closures of areas to allow enhanced cleaning to take place. The testing programme had been piloted through the Whips Offices and would be rolled out the following week.

A Member asked what percentage of House staff were currently working onsite and in which teams. Mr Owen said that between 40 and 50 percent of House staff were on the Estate at the current time. Some teams were using a rota system to ensure the continuation of services. Mrs Cwynarksi added that for business-critical staff, such as those supporting the work of the Chamber, onsite attendance was much greater, though in other teams, where staff were able to perform their duties from home, they were doing so.

A Member asked if any House staff had been furloughed. Mr Owen noted that no staff had been furloughed.

A Member noted that the full resumption of parliamentary business was dependent on guidance issued by Public Health England and asked what that advice would need to be if Westminster Hall debates were to resume. Mr Owen noted that it was possible that business in Westminster Hall would resume in October. In terms of the Chamber, Mrs Cwynarksi noted that the 2-metre rule still applied, as reducing this to 1-metre would require additional mitigations such as sitting down when speaking and the wearing of masks.

### **Decision**

The Committee **noted** the update.

### **3. Savings and efficiencies**

Mostaque Ahmed, Managing Director of Finance, Portfolio and Performance, briefed the Committee.

Mr Ahmed presented a paper containing several possible options for the House Service to make savings and efficiencies in light of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. The paper was prompted by a discussion on House finances by the Commission at its meeting in July and set out proposals for the short and medium term from the Commons Executive Board. He thanked Rhiannon Hollis, Head of the Private Office, for her work preparing the paper.

The Chair emphasised the need to establish how many members of House staff were currently at home with no work to do because they were employed in teams for which there was little or no demand for their services during the pandemic. He also expressed concern at the House's policy of encouraging staff to work from home in the longer term as there was no indication that in doing so staff were more productive. Home working was not suited to the needs of everyone. Mr Ahmed said that the House was approaching these new ways of working with caution before taking any decisions that would have an impact on how staff worked in the longer term. A series of surveys had been conducted to gain an understanding of the experiences of House staff, with another due to be sent out in September, and individual teams were also being approached for feedback. On staffing costs, there would be difficult choices to make for the Commission once the House had a better understanding of the long-term impact of the pandemic, on commercial activity for example, and the workforce required to sustain the organisation.

A Member said that there were not enough proposals in the paper to make substantial savings. If the current overspend was driven by a reduction in the House's income brought about by the pandemic, why was a proposal not included on how to refocus on core business and democratic functions rather than non-essential services such as banqueting and tourism. They expressed concern that there was a feeling that the federal structure of the House Service still existed, given that the 2014 Governance Review stressed the need for better integration. Another Member said that there was a need for a wider strategic review of the House Service to better understand the facilities and services that currently existed and whether they were required in their existing form. The Chair echoed the points, stressing the need for a prioritisation of the House's democratic functions. Mr Ahmed said that the future operation of banqueting and tours were to be considered by the Administration Committee, Finance Committee and the Commission later that month. He noted that even when centralised structural changes had been made, in some parts of the organisation local structures had grown over time. Marianne Cwynarski (Head of the Governance Office, in attendance) recognised that in some teams there was a duplication or overlap of certain functions and that there was a need to centralise those roles or redeploy those staff within those teams. A Member added that there was a need for a wider strategic review.

Several Members expressed concern at the possibility of reducing the House's office accommodation in Central London, given that many other organisations would be doing the same and it was very unlikely that a leasee would be found at a time of low demand. It would be better to retain office space to ensure that adequate social distancing measures were in place so that Members and staff could work safely on the Estate or in nearby buildings.

A Member asked if Members had been consulted on their plans for the staffing of their offices, i.e. whether in light of the pandemic more office staff would be based in constituencies rather than on the Estate and what the implications of that would be. Mr Ahmed said that he would raise this with colleagues in the Moves Programme team. A Member said that they felt Members were incentivised to have their office staff on the Estate rather than in constituencies because of the costs involved.

A Member asked what consideration had been given to the effects of home working on mental health and noted the positive effect that being on the Estate could have on wellbeing. Mr Ahmed said that staff who needed to work on the Estate as home working had negatively impacted their mental health were allowed to do so and guidance had been issued to managers in the House Service. Mrs Cwynarski echoed those points.

A Member said that they had not experienced any diminution in the range or quality of services provided by House teams in which staff were working from home and commended those services. The House had a duty of care to all those employed both on and off the Estate.

## **Decision**

The Committee **noted** the update.

## **4. Filming and radio requests**

The Chair briefed the Committee on the following filming and radio requests that were received over the summer recess, some of which had already take place and which were granted under the powers delegated to the Chair by the Committee:

- a request from the Leader of the House to film in the Bridge Street gift shop;
- a request for the Times Radio mid-morning show that was broadcast live from Parliament on 1 September;
- a request from ITV for a piece on the 150th anniversary of the Palace of Westminster that was filmed on 26 August;
- a request for the BBC to film three short A-Z information films on Westminster Hall debates, maiden speeches and Black and Ethnic Minority MPs; and
- a request from the Press Association to carry out drone filming and photography of the Elizabeth Tower.

### **Decision**

The Committee **noted** the filming and radio requests approved by the Chair during the summer recess.

## **5. Any other business**

### Meeting on 28 September

The Committee agreed to meet at 3.30pm on Monday 28 September, instead of the usual 4.30pm meeting time.

**The Committee will next meet on 14 September at 4.30pm**