

ADMINISTRATION COMMITTEE

Note of discussion for the meeting held on 30 November 2020 at 4.30pm

[Meeting held over Microsoft Teams as a videoconference]

Members present:

Sir Charles Walker (in the Chair)

Michael Fabricant
Colleen Fletcher
Sir Greg Knight

Mrs Pauline Latham
Mrs Maria Miller
Giles Watling

Apologies: Marion Fellows and Mark Tami.

1. Informal Note

The Chair requested an amendment to the informal note of the previous meeting.

The Committee **agreed** the informal note of the meeting on 16 November and to an amended version of the note of the meeting on 23 November 2020.

2. COVID-19 update

Marianne Cwynarski, Chair, and John Owen, COVID-19 Planning Group, briefed the Committee.

Mr Owen provided an update on the preparations made by the House Service in response to the new restrictions that were to be put before the House on Wednesday and were expected to be in place once the lockdown ended on 2 December. He added that certain services were reopening in line with guidance issued by Public Health England (PHE) and the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE), which stated that the services in question could safely reopen.

Mr Owen said that the COVID-19 Planning Group wanted to add flexibility to allow Members to bring one staff member staff onto the Estate where needed. The Chair repeated his comments made at the previous meeting that he was keen to support Members' staff in returning to work on the Estate as it was crucial for their mental health to ensure that there was a clear distinction between their home and work lives, given the difficult issues they were dealing with from constituents as well as unpleasant calls and correspondence.

Decision

The Committee **endorsed** the following approach on the resumption of the following services:

- (a) the Adjournment and Members' Dining Room (from 2 December), and Bellamy's (7 December);

- (b) the House of Commons Shop and the Houses of Parliament Shop (2 December), plus a pop-up shop operating in Portcullis House Atrium ahead of the Christmas Recess;
- (c) the hairdresser (2 December); and
- (d) the gym (7 December, though it was hoped this might be brought forward to 2 December).

The Committee **noted** the current plans for the operation of the Estate:

- (a) that there would not be changes to non-passholder access at this time;
- (b) that the Pass Office opening hours would be extended until 6pm and the pass issuing office in Black Rod's Garden would re-open;
- (c) that social-distancing measures within catering venues would be maintained;
- (d) that alcohol would not be served on the Estate after 22:00 but there would be an additional hour to finish any drinks in line with the new guidance;
- (e) that the Commission's decision to limit the number of Members' staff on the Estate would remain in effect though Members would be able to bring up to one member of staff onsite where it was not possible for them to work from home; and
- (f) that services in the Undercroft Chapel would resume from Wednesday 2 December.

3. Update on Microsoft Teams and telephony

Steven Mark, Senior Responsible Owner, Microsoft Teams Programme, briefed the Committee.

Mr Mark gave a presentation on the switchover from the Skype for Business telephony system to Microsoft Teams in the next year to provide a single integrated platform for all telephone and video calls. Microsoft Teams had been rolled out to all users on the parliamentary network in the spring of 2020 though Skype for Business continued to function as the basis of the telephony system. Microsoft was planning to turn off a significant part of the Skype for Business service in the summer of 2021 and were encouraging customers to migrate telephone numbers over into MS Teams well in advance. As many Members' accounts were still based in Skype for Business, their numbers would need to be moved into Teams to ensure that they continued to work after the switch off. The MS Teams Programme team were still working through some of the practicalities of transition but would aim to ensure Members and their offices could continue to work with minimal disruption. It was hoped that migration would take place in March 2021 out of working hours but with a short interruption to telephone systems. Several Members' offices had been identified to take part in a pilot in the New Year. He added that he would be happy to provide an update on the progress of this work at a future meeting.

The Chair asked how long the interruption to services would be during the migration. Mr Mark said that it would be about an hour, and would take place out of business hours, such as overnight on a weekend, to avoid disruption to Members.

Decision

The Committee **noted** the update.

4. Flagpoles in New Palace Yard

Isabel Coman, Managing Director, Strategic Estates, briefed the Committee.

Ms Coman put forward a request from Mr Speaker to erect three flagpoles in New Palace Yard for the raising of flags to commemorate events and set out the options for consideration and the costs involved. Option two (the lawn in the centre of New Palace Yard) was the most economical of those in the paper as there was less likelihood of the disturbance of archaeological remains, which would incur additional expense and oversight from interested bodies. The flagpole policy would also have to be updated to cover the new location as well as another in Richmond House.

Decision

The Committee **noted** the proposed location of the new flagpoles and the policy on the display of flags.

5. Cleaning strategy

James Turner, Director of Customer Experience and Service Delivery, In-House Services and Estates, briefed the Committee.

Mr Turner recognised that there were significant issues with the way in which cleaning was managed by the House Service. Given that both the Commons and the Lords used the same contractor there seemed to be a disconnected approach. The cleaning contract was due to end in August 2021 and this would provide an opportunity for the House to review cleaning services and to define clearer outcomes.

The Chair expressed his gratitude for the work done by all of the cleaning staff on the Estate. A Member seconded him in this.

Decision

The Committee **noted** the update.

6. Any other business

Access to sanitary products

The Committee **agreed** that this item on the forward programme should only be considered once there was sufficient data and feedback following the trial and that it should be postponed from the next meeting to one in the New Year.

Training and support for Members' staff

A Member asked if the provision of training and support for Members' staff could be considered at a future meeting as staff often had to deal with difficult calls and correspondence from constituents which had only increased during the pandemic. A staff member in their office had recently attended suicide prevention training so that they could deal with callers in distressed situations. The Member added that it would be helpful if the issue could be brought to the attention of IPSA and the Commission to ensure that they were aware of the difficult and sensitive work that staff were undertaking and the need to support them in their work.

Decisions of the House of Commons Commission

The Committee **noted** the decisions taken at the meeting of the House of Commons Commission on 9 November 2020.

The Committee will next meet on 7 December at 4.30pm.