

ADMINISTRATION COMMITTEE

Note of discussion for the meeting held on 18 January 2021 at 4.30pm

[Virtual meeting held on Microsoft Teams]

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

1. Informal Notes

The Committee **agreed** the informal note of the meetings on 30 November 2020, 7 December 2020 and 11 January 2021.

2. Work of the Communications Office and communications review

Alice Holmes, Joint Director of Communications, and Alex Noonoo, Deputy Director of Internal Communications, briefed the Committee.

Ms Holmes provided some background on the work of the Communications Office and its objectives as well as an update on the ongoing review of internal communications. In addition, she drew the Committee's attention to some recent highlights in the work of the office such as external communications relating to the history and restoration of the Palace that had generated a significant amount of media interest, particularly items on the discovery of the 'secret door' in Westminster Hall and the work to restore the Elizabeth Tower.

Mr Noonoo then spoke about the project to create a new intranet portal that would bring a range of improvements including optimisation for mobile devices, a modern look and feel and the streamlining of content. Among the current priorities was the consultation of Members and other user groups, which was expected to begin in the coming weeks, to ensure that the new intranet met the broad range of needs represented by these groups.

Decision

The Committee **noted** the update.

3. The Commons, Our Parliament, Play your Part

Sarah Petit, Cultural Transformation Director, briefed the Committee.

Ms Petit provided an update on the project to support positive working relationships between Members and House staff. The project, which would be linked to related work within the House, would include the launch in February of a programme of events and resources to help staff develop a better understanding of the work of Members that went

beyond the limited procedural focus of the past to include a fuller appreciation of the demands and pressures placed on Members in their roles. It was hoped that this would include a seminar series with Members among the guest speakers and volunteers were sought from among the Committee membership as were its views on the direction of this work.

Decision

The Committee **noted** the update.

4. Members' Services Team and Member engagement

Chris Sear, Director of the Members' Services Team, and Kate Emms, Director of Member Engagement, briefed the Committee.

Mr Sear reported the following highlights in the work of the team:

- staff in the HR advice section had been assisting Members' offices throughout November and December with a range of issues;
- the service had been bolstered with improved advice and guidance on Members' responsibilities and roles as employers, which included the publication of the first guide on the recruitment of Members' staff, while a second, on the probation and induction of staff, would soon be published [*the document was circulated to Members after the meeting*];
- the team had contacted all new staff in Members' offices to offer advice and support on House services if needed, as well as those employed by Members of the 2019 intake;
- weekly office manager calls had continued and, it was hoped, would become a permanent feature, with over 100 people on a typical call and lots of positive feedback received.

Ms Emms provided a summary of her role which involved engaging with various teams across the House. She had recently begun a regular round of visits to the Party Whips' offices to introduce colleagues from the House Service so that key messages could be relayed more effectively to Members and to stimulate engagement. She added that she had been working with Mr Sear to encourage participation in the weekly office manager calls and welcomed suggestions from the Committee.

The Chair said that while Members' primary role was as legislators, it was also vital that they were provided with the correct tools to enable them to be good employers and to ensure the happiness of their staff, particularly as there were now increasing demands placed on them.

A Member welcomed the information on the recruitment and induction of staff as it had proven to be very useful.

A Member asked how many Members of past election intakes were aware of and used the services provided by the Members' Services Team. Mr Sear said that he had joined Ms Emms in her visits to the Whips' offices so that information on services was relayed to

Members. He recognised that there had been an issue with the provision of information for past election intakes, though now a staff member from his team provided an induction talk for all new Members. The key issue was to ensure that Members knew that they could get in touch with his team when they needed assistance. The Member suggested hosting an information stand in Portcullis House as IPSA had done in the past. Mr Sear said that he would explore the suggestion further.

A Member said that their office manager greatly appreciated the weekly calls and thanked the team for this service. The Member said that given the House Service Strategy was currently set by House staff whether there was a role for Members to become actively involved in identifying and setting an overarching set of priorities that also applied to themselves.

Decision

The Committee **noted** the update.

5. Members' Satisfaction Survey

David Newsome, Customer Director, briefed the Committee.

Mr Newsome provided an update on the recent Members' satisfaction survey conducted in September and October 2020.

- The results had been encouraging as 88% of respondents were either satisfied or very satisfied with House services, an increase on the previous survey period;
- most respondents were happy with the support they had been given during the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly in the transition to virtual ways of working;
- the Library and the Chamber and Committees Team emerged as the most highly rated services, though satisfaction levels had shown a slight decrease on the previous period surveyed;
- all other services had seen an increase in satisfaction levels, the highest of which was the Parliamentary Digital Service with an increase of 35%, largely the result of the support it had provided during the pandemic, though negative feedback focused on such as poor Wi-Fi connection and the factors influenced more by the current situation than the quality of service;
- where Members had expressed dissatisfaction with services, staff in the Customer Team would put them in touch directly with the relevant teams within the House to address their concerns.

A Member said that poor Wi-Fi signal was a continuing problem, even with the recent improvements introduced by the Digital Service.

Decision

The Committee **noted** the update.

6. Upper Waiting Hall exhibitions

The Committee considered a proposal to review the decision taken in September 2020 to postpone Upper Waiting Hall exhibitions and the ballot for the next period until the New Year, given the continuing impact of COVID-19.

A Member suggested postponing the ballot until 2022 as Upper Waiting Hall exhibitions were not part of the core work of the House. The Chair said that the Committee would continue to review the in light of the current situation.

Decision

The Committee **agreed**:

- to **postpone** Upper Waiting Hall exhibitions further, until the summer (April-July) of 2021;
- to **provisionally confirm** that the next ballot would be for spring (January-April) 2022 rather than autumn (September-December) 2021, to account for the knock-on effects of any backlog of exhibitions; and
- to **confirm** that applications for new exhibitions would be accepted from the autumn (September to December) of 2021; and
- to **review** this schedule in March.

7. Any other business

PQ on procurement

Isabel Coman, Managing Director, In-House Services and Strategic Estates, briefed the Committee following a recent Parliamentary Question on the procurement of wash basin taps that were not British made.

Decision

The Committee **noted** the update.

The Committee will next meet on Monday 1 February 2021.