

ADMINISTRATION COMMITTEE

Note of Discussion for the meeting held on 19 July 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
Jessica Morden
Giles Watling

1. Informal Notes

The Committee **agreed** the informal notes of its meetings on 5 and 12 July 2021.

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

Dr John Benger, Clerk of the House, and Marianne Cwynarski, Director General (Operations), briefed the Committee.

A Member asked if the Restoration and Renewal Programme was still necessary given that essential fire safety works and repairs to the Palace's cast iron roofs had been completed and that asbestos left undisturbed in-situ was no longer considered to be a safety hazard. Dr Benger said that R&R was still necessary as several of the House's critical systems were beyond their end of life and maintenance budgets were increasing year-on-year, and well above inflation. While some essential works had been carried out in the Palace to date, over 70% of the work that would be undertaken during R&R would focus on urgent mechanical and engineering issues below ground. The R&R Sponsor Body set up by act of Parliament was in the process of preparing the Outline Business Case that would set out in detail the work required and be ready by the end of the year. He recognised the need for the Programme to ensure value for money.

A Member noted the importance of a House corporate culture that encompassed Members and other key groups working together for a common aim that was consistent with the Seven Principles of Public Life (the 'Nolan Principles'). Dr Benger said that the House was in a far better place than when the Cox Report was published in 2018 and much had been done to improve the culture of the House as an organisation. Eighty percent of Members (as well as all of those recently elected in a by-election) had completed the Valuing Everyone training module.

A Member asked what feedback had been received from Members on how well key messages relating to House Services were being communicated to them. Mrs Cwynarski said that the aim of October's programme of events was to engage directly with Members and get the message across about the facilities and services available to them. Dr Benger noted the engagement work done by the Members' Services Team through their popular weekly calls with Members' office managers.

A Member said that the virtual proceedings implemented during the pandemic had enabled select committees to hear from a broad range of witnesses from locations across the world, and asked if virtual participation for witnesses would continue to be supported. Dr Benger said that the technology for hybrid broadcasting installed in committee rooms during the pandemic would remain in place for evidence taking and further consideration would be given to expanding the number of hybrid meeting spaces for this purpose.

A Member asked what assessment had been made of the risk of the COVID-19 virus spreading in the Division Lobbies during divisions when the House returned in September. The proxy system in place during the pandemic reduced crowding in the Lobbies and they hoped that the House would not implement any changes based on the Government's advice if it felt they posed a risk to Members. Mrs Cwynarski said that plans for the return of the House in September were being formulated though it was difficult to assess what the situation would be at that time given that infection rates were currently rising. A plan setting out how the House would deal with the implications of the pandemic up to Christmas would be put to the Commission in September. Dr Benger said that the pass reader system for registering Members' votes would remain in place. The proxy voting system would expire on Thursday that week and it would be for the Government to decide if it wished to reintroduce it. He added that the House had maintained a COVID-secure environment for divisions throughout the pandemic and as Corporate Officer, with responsibility for the safety and assurance of the House, nothing would be introduced that was felt to pose a risk to Members or staff.

A Member asked if the information and training provided to Members during their induction could be provided as a rolling programme with a refresher provided three or six months after an election. There was also a need to improve the search function and information available on the intranet as finding information was a huge challenge. They welcomed the office manager calls arranged by the Members' Services Team, particularly as they involved constituency staff who sometimes felt cut off from the parliamentary community, and the recently established Members' Services User Group in seeking and acting on feedback from Members and other stakeholders. They added that repetition was key in ensuring that important messages were communicated to Members and their staff. Dr Benger said that the intranet was high among his priorities and a business case and timetable had been prepared for the delivery of a new intranet.

A Member expressed their thanks to the House staff required to be on the Estate as restrictions were eased over the past week and in managing the physical presence of Members in the Chamber. Dr Benger thanked the Member for their comments.

Decision

The Committee **noted** the update.

The Committee will next meet on 6 September 2021 at 4.30pm