



House of Commons
Administration Committee

Refreshment Department Services

Second Report of Session 2005–06

*Report, together with formal minutes, oral and
written evidence*

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The Administration Committee

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Committee staff

The current staff of the Committee are Steven Mark and Nerys Welfoot (Clerks), Ameet Chudasama (Chief Office Clerk) and Jane Lauder (Secretary).

Contacts

All correspondence should be addressed to the Clerk of the Administration Committee, Committee Office (Palace of Westminster), House of Commons, London SW1A 0AA. The telephone number for general enquiries is 020 7219 2471; the Committee's email address is ac@parliament.uk

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Summary

This Report examines the operations of the House of Commons Refreshment Department (see Part 2), establishes what we believe the Department should be seeking to provide for Members, staff and others on the Parliamentary Estate, including visitors (see Part 4), and sets out our recommendations for how the current service should be changed to meet users' reasonable requirements at reasonable cost (see Part 6).

The Refreshment Department serves a wide range of customers and provides a correspondingly wide range of outlets. The constraints on the Department (see Part 5) mean that it should not be expected to operate at a profit. Its operations must, however, represent an efficient use of the money provided by its customers, and by the taxpayer.

We make recommendations (see Part 6) for a ten-year catering strategy to help the Department ensure that its service is able to develop in response to customers' needs and that its staff receive the support and training they need to adapt to change. Service, menus and pricing need to be benchmarked on a consistent and planned basis. We recommend changes to the style of service and menus in a number of outlets to make them more efficient and more attractive to their customers. As space is a premium on the estate and every outlet must be justified in terms of necessity, demand and cost-effectiveness, we also recommend the conversion or closure of some outlets. We also seek to address the issue of overcrowding in certain venues.

We make proposals for investigating the potential to contract out part of the House's catering operations. Finally, we recognise and support the ongoing co-operation that has developed over recent years with the House of Lords Refreshment Department. (See Part 7.)

1 Introduction

1. The House of Commons Refreshment Department (RD), one of the seven Departments which constitute the House service, runs a complex multi-faceted operation which includes restaurants, cafeterias, banqueting, bars, a coffee bar and retail outlets. It is important that the RD meets its users' needs, takes account of their preferences and represents good value for them and for the taxpayer. At our first meeting on 19 July 2005 we decided to hold an inquiry into the RD's operations and to examine the quality of service that it provides for the House. On 18 October we agreed terms of reference for the inquiry as follows:

- a) To examine how the subsidy reduction required of the Refreshment Department had affected the services that users of the Department's services received, and
- b) To examine ways in which the Department's services might be improved without requiring the expenditure of additional resources.

2. To assist us in our inquiry, we asked the RD to provide us with data on its operations and suggestions for how their service might be improved and made more cost-effective. As well as providing us with detailed organisational and commercial information (some of which we are able to publish with this Report), the RD conducted a lunchtime survey of users of the Terrace and Debate cafeterias on our behalf, and gave us a guided tour of the kitchens and delivery areas of the Palace of Westminster. We have also held private discussions with senior managers in the Department. We are grateful to the RD for their assistance, which has proved invaluable in our deliberations.

3. We decided to appoint a specialist adviser to assist us in our inquiry. Mr Dick Turpin has been able to bring to bear his wide experience of the hospitality industry to provide an expert outsider's view of the facilities provided for the House and to compare them with those available elsewhere. He has visited all of the RD's operating outlets and followed up on our behalf much of the evidence provided by the Department. His assistance has been invaluable in helping us to set the context for this Report.

4. We have also sought to engage users of the RD's services. A request for written evidence was sent to all such users on 24 October 2005. In particular, we invited views on:

- a) Whether the Refreshment Department provided the services needed by users
 - i. Where it did, which services were particularly appreciated and why.
 - ii. Where it did not, which services were needed, and how might the existing services be provided more effectively.
- b) What scope there was to reconsider the rules on access to encourage a more resource-efficient use of the facilities available.

5. We received close to 50 responses, including 16 from Members, 12 from Members' staff and 9 from House staff. We took oral evidence on 29 November from the Parliamentary Press Gallery; the House of Commons Trade Union Side (representing House of Commons staff); the Transport and General Workers Union, Parliamentary Branch, and the Secretaries' and Assistants' Council (representing Members' staff); and the

Commonwealth Parliamentary Association. The transcript of the oral evidence is appended to this Report, together with the written evidence we have received. Among the submissions we have received is one from the House of Lords Refreshment Committee; we discuss relations with the Lords later in this Report. We are grateful to all those who have contributed to our inquiry.

6. Part 2 of this Report describes what the Refreshment Department does, who it serves and how it is structured. In Part 3, we then look at the recent history of inquiries into and reviews of the Department. In Parts 4 and 5, we set out what we believe the Department should be setting out to provide, and we describe the constraints within which it must work, before, in Part 6, we consider possible changes to the service that might help the Department to meet these objectives within the constraints described. In Part 7 of the Report, we look at the relationship with refreshment facilities provided for the Lords within the same secure Estate, and we consider the possibility of contracting out part of the Department's services.

2 Description of the Refreshment Department

Services provided

7. The Refreshment Department (RD) serves drinks, snacks and meals to several thousand customers a day, with more than 8,000 transactions registered on the busiest days.¹ The vast majority of these customers are not Members. It seeks to provide one comprehensive service, from full English breakfasts for staff on the early shift, to banqueting for prestige functions hosted by Members and others. It does this through a wide variety of outlets in different locations across the Parliamentary estate, from north of Bridge Street to 7 Millbank: four self-service cafeterias; four table-service restaurants; five bars; a Members' Tea Room; the Pugin Room, which serves as both bar and tea room; one summer-only buffet pavilion; one coffee bar; hospitality rooms for private functions; and vending machines. Some of these venues are exclusively for Members; some are mainly used by staff; others are principally for the press.²

8. In addition to catering facilities, the RD is also responsible for the sale of House of Commons gifts and souvenirs through a souvenir shop, a number of dedicated kiosks, and several catering outlets.

Customers served

9. There are approximately 8,000 holders of full parliamentary passes and approximately 5,000 temporary passholders. Full passholders include Members of both Houses, their staff, the staff of both Houses, security personnel, members of the press, and others (who include Members and Peers' spouses and partners, civil servants and contractors working on the estate such as cleaners, the Post Office, shorthand writers and telecoms, as well as works contractors staff). The majority of temporary passholders are civil servants and contractors. This represents a diverse group of people with different needs, different working hours and different incomes. In addition, there are an estimated 450,000 visitors to Parliament every year. Unescorted visitors have access to retail facilities, as well as to a dedicated cafeteria.

10. Although the Department exists primarily to serve Members, who are key customers of the RD, they represent only five per cent of the total number of passholders on the Parliamentary Estate. In accordance with the House of Commons Business Plan, they should receive a service that enables them to perform their parliamentary duties effectively.³ Members require access in the course of their duties to catering facilities in close proximity to the Chamber and Committees.

11. The hours worked by many House staff are closely linked to the business of the Chamber and of Committees and these staff are restricted as to when they can take meal

1 Ev 18

2 *Ibid.*

3 House of Commons Corporate Business Plan 2006, p 5

breaks. Many House staff and Members' staff work long hours and are limited in their opportunities to leave the Parliamentary Estate to seek refreshment. Many staff consider the provision of reasonably priced food to be part and parcel of the conditions under which they work,⁴ particularly those staff who are required to be present when the House is sitting outside normal working hours. The RD must offer a standard workplace catering service for close to 3,500 staff of the House and Members' staff as well as for others based permanently on the Estate.

Structure

12. The Refreshment Department's mission statement is "to deliver the best quality service with an enthusiastic and professional team". As at 14 October 2005, the number of staff in post was 287 full-time equivalent staff, against a full complement of 313.⁵ The Director of Catering Services at the head of the Department sits on the Board of Management and is supported by two office staff and six Managers:⁶

- Executive chef (direct manager of 93 staff, functional manager of 43 staff)
- Operations Manager in charge of the Palace of Westminster (in charge of 98 staff)
- Operations Manager for the Outbuildings (in charge of 93 staff)
- Retail Manager (in charge of 3 retail staff).
- Human Resources and Development Manager (in charge of 3 staff responsible for Human Resources and training).
- Finance Officer/Business Development Manager (in charge of 22 staff in the Accounts Office, Purchasing and Stores and IT support).

13. In conjunction with the Executive Chef, the two Operations Managers head a structure of professional catering staff including: managers, supervisors, chefs, butchers, kitchen staff, cashiers, waiting staff, bar attendants, baristas, assistants, porters and store keepers across the Parliamentary Estate. A senior Sous Chef leads the kitchens in the outbuildings (including 27 chefs and 16 stewards) and the Head Chef leads the kitchen in the Main Building (including 50 chefs and 30 stewards).

14. The costs of the Refreshment Department are met from two sources: public funds from the House of Commons Administration Account and receipts from customers. The Departmental Trading Account bears all costs of sales (the cost of the food, drink and souvenirs), staffing costs, and operating costs (such as linen, cleaning and light equipment), and collects income from customers using the Department's services.⁷ The Trading Account does not bear the cost of capital works, maintenance, furnishings, utilities or accommodation costs; these are largely met from the budget of the Parliamentary Estates

4 Qq 59, 60

5 All subsequent figures in this section refer to the staff complement rather than the number of staff in post

6 Report of the House of Commons Commission for 2004–05, HC (2004–05) 65, p 81

7 Ev 18

Directorate. The RD operates at a loss – its staff costs alone amount to more than income received from customers.⁸ That loss—typically around £5 million a year—is met from the House of Commons budget and is often referred to as the level of subsidy.

House of Lords Refreshment Department

15. Within the Parliamentary Estate is another organisation carrying out similar operations to the Commons RD. The House of Lords Refreshment Department is, however, significantly smaller, employing 107 staff (including 16 managerial and 5 clerical posts), and with fewer outlets. Both Departments are to an extent competing for banqueting and retail business. The Lords' main kitchen is currently undergoing major refurbishment and many of the Lords outlets are closed, which makes any meaningful comparison of the two Departments difficult. We comment further on the relationship between the two Houses later in this Report.⁹

8 Ev 26

9 See paragraph 126

3 Previous inquiries and reviews of the Refreshment Department

Previous inquiries

16. Our predecessor Committees have reported previously from time to time on the Refreshment service provided for the House of Commons. In 1978 the Catering Subcommittee of the Committee on House of Commons (Services) concentrated on the reordering of the finances of the Refreshment Department, concluding that

Parliamentary catering should be regarded in the main as a service—but a service to which Members and other users should make a realistic financial contribution.¹⁰

In 1993 the Catering Committee recommended a major redevelopment of the Refreshment Department's accommodation phased over a period of six years.¹¹

17. The most recent such report, published by the Catering Committee in 2002, concentrated on the severe pressure on certain refreshment facilities at peak times, investigated the causes of the pressure and identified possible solutions.¹² Having received the results of a survey of usage of the facilities from the RD, the Report identified overcrowding and queuing in the two most popular venues, the Terrace and Debate cafeterias, as the areas of greatest concern for most users of the service. The new facilities in Portcullis House had recently been opened (December 2000) and the Committee noted that such was their popularity they had “increased custom in real terms rather than simply diverting it from other outlets”.¹³

18. The RD was able to implement only some of the Committee's recommendations aimed at improving existing outlets and services to alleviate this demand: changes were made to the layout of the Terrace Cafeteria serving areas; a Members' lunch buffet was introduced into the small Dining Room; menus were updated in the newly refurbished Bellamy's cafeteria; and access was granted to House staff and Members' staff to the Strangers' Dining Room on Thursdays. However, we have heard from the RD that a significant number of recommendations could not be taken forward:

- a) The Press Gallery withdrew an offer that access to the Press Gallery Cafeteria be extended to other passholders, citing concerns over confidentiality.
- b) The servery counter in Bellamy's Club Room proved uneconomical and could not be retained.

10 Committee on House of Commons (Services), Second Report of Session 1978–79, *The Future of the Catering Services*, HC 120, para 27

11 Catering Committee, First Report of Session 1993–94, *Refreshment Services for the House of Commons*, HC75, para 10.2

12 Catering Committee, First Report of Session 2001–02, *Refreshment Facilities in the House of Commons*, HC 832

13 Catering Committee, *Refreshment Facilities in the House of Commons*, para 5

- c) The Serjeant at Arms Department stated they were unable to identify any suitable sites close to communal seating areas in the Norman Shaw buildings for the installation of vending machines.
- d) Following the subsidy review (see below, paragraphs 19–23), the RD was unable to take forward projects recommended by the Catering Committee due to the investment costs or additional staff requirement needed to operate the proposed services.¹⁴ These projects included the replacement of the Terrace Marquee with a permanent structure providing a restaurant or brasserie for Members, the installation of a sandwich counter to replace the Souvenir Kiosk in 1 Parliament St and the installation of a made-to-order sandwich bar in Portcullis House.

Subsidy review

19. The House's obligation to provide reasonably priced catering facilities for Members and staff can only currently be discharged by subsidising the service. For the past ten years the subsidy, met from the public purse, has remained at around 50 per cent of total operating costs.¹⁵ Not all operating units are loss-making: private dining and banqueting and retail all make an operating profit.

20. In June 2003 the House of Commons Commission (the supervisory body of the House Administration) decided that the Refreshment Department should reduce the level of the catering subsidy and set the following targets:

- a) The subsidy should be reduced from 50 per cent of costs in 2002–03 to 47 per cent in 2003–04
- b) The subsidy should be further reduced to 45 per cent of total operating costs by 2006.¹⁶

21. Following an internal review of all RD services in 2003–04, a package of measures aimed at achieving the necessary reduction in costs was agreed, comprising:

- a) above-inflation selling price increases in April 2003 and 2004 on cooked and prepared dishes in the cafeterias and dining rooms,
- b) price increases on beers and lagers in the bars over and above annual supplier cost price increases,
- c) closure of certain services at off-peak times,
- d) menu simplification to reduce staffing requirements in the kitchens, and
- e) simplification of certain services at off-peak times to utilise staff in other areas.

22. The implementation of these measures, together with a 38 per cent increase in transactions in the years 2000–2001 to 2004–2005,¹⁷ helped the Refreshment Department

14 Ev 23

15 Ev 26

16 Ev 18

17 Ev 19

to achieve savings in costs. The subsidy in 2004–05 fell to 42 per cent of operating costs, exceeding the target of 45 per cent ahead of the deadline of 2006.

23. The Refreshment Department is entitled to congratulations for successfully meeting its target ahead of schedule. However, we have concerns about the effects on service delivery of the pressure to reduce costs and increase income caused by the subsidy review (see paragraph 29 below). We think it important to set out what in our view a refreshment service should be seeking to provide for Members and others on the Parliamentary Estate before we make any recommendations concerning service delivery or possible cost-saving measures.

4 What a Refreshment service should provide

24. It is our aim that the House of Commons should have a service that Members and others working on and visiting the Parliamentary Estate use by choice rather than because of a lack of alternatives.

25. We consider that the core functions of a service should be as follows:

- i. The provision of good quality, affordable food and drink, served quickly and professionally and in congenial surroundings.
- ii. Outlets should be conveniently located, especially for those with business in the Chamber and in Committees, with sufficient accommodation for those who wish to sit and eat and also provision for those who wish to take their food away.
- iii. Outlets should offer a range of service styles from the more impressive (for functions and the entertaining of official guests) to the more functional (general access cafeterias and take-away facilities), meeting the business needs of the different groups of core users—Members, staff and the public.
- iv. The retail outlets should offer attractive, good quality merchandise that makes an appropriate use of the House’s image and reputation.

26. Despite a continuing need for the House to provide a catering service at unusual hours when the House or its committees are sitting, as recently acknowledged by Members during a debate on the House of Commons Commission Annual Report,¹⁸ there have been changes to the House’s working practices in recent years. House business is concentrated into fewer days of the week than in the past, although not fewer hours overall. The numbers of Members’ staff and House staff have increased, and the House has opened up facilities to the public.

27. There have also been changes to the needs and preferences of Members and other customers which need to be reflected in the services provided. Whilst not all Members will agree with these changes, most will admit that they are an increasing reality. The following changes that we have identified are widely reflected in the venues available outside the House:

- i. *An increasing preference for less formal and faster service styles.* Outside the House, formal silver service dining has largely made way for brasserie-style venues with multi-skilled staff. There is also increasing pressure for good quality take-away food, especially at lunchtime. It is perhaps indicative that the two most heavily used outlets are the Terrace Cafeteria in the Palace and the Debate Cafeteria in Portcullis House, both of which are informal and both of which offer take-away food and drink.¹⁹ Our survey of the cafeterias on 9 November showed that 50 per cent of

¹⁸ HC Deb, 3 November 2005, cols 335–378WH

¹⁹ Ev 28–30

transactions were for food or drink to be taken away.²⁰ Of the sit-down restaurants available, the Adjournment Restaurant, with its more informal brasserie style of dining and modern menus, attracts more customers in the course of a week and has greater sales income than any of the other more traditional table-service dining rooms, except the Strangers' Dining Room, which has substantially more seating.²¹

- ii. *The modern diversity of expectations and changing tastes.* Whereas in the past, tastes and expectations may have been relatively uniform, there are clear differences today between those who prefer traditional menus and service styles and those who prefer more modern fare. Demand is increasing for healthier food and there is a growing expectation that the Refreshment Department will seek to accommodate special dietary needs and to procure its produce with an eye to sustainability. We return to these issues at paragraph 88.

20 Ev 39

21 RD evidence, Schedule 5 [not printed]

5 Constraints

28. There are certain constraints faced by the Refreshment Department that do not normally apply to commercial organisations outside the House. These constraints need to be properly understood before considering how improvements might be made to the Department's services.

Money

29. **We accept that the trend towards controlling and reducing the subsidy is a reality. Furthermore, we believe that the Refreshment Department should be more actively trying to lower costs in a way that does not affect the quality of the goods and services provided.** The Refreshment Department has told us that they are aware of a perception amongst their customers that since the subsidy review the choice and quality of food and service has diminished, particularly in some of the outlets most frequented by Members: the Members' Dining Room; the Members' Tea Room and the Terrace Cafeteria.²² One of the key questions we seek to address during this inquiry is whether the measures implemented by the RD have improved efficiency or cut costs at the expense of quality of service. **We have sought to establish whether there are measures that can be taken to improve the quality of service that Members and other users receive from the Refreshment Department, while at the same time seeking to sustain the subsidy reduction that has already been achieved.**

30. As we have seen, proposals from the Catering Committee for new services failed to make progress after the subsidy review because of the extra costs that they would have incurred. We accept that the cost of any proposal for a new facility, or for change in use of an existing outlet that we might recommend, needs to be justified in terms of strategic objectives and demand.

31. Demand for services is heavily affected by the parliamentary timetable. When the House is not sitting, revenue from most venues declines significantly along with the number of transactions. **At times when Members are not around, such as weekends and during recess periods, we believe the Refreshment Department could become more proactive in its marketing and the Parliamentary Estate could become more open to hosting appropriate events.**

32. It is difficult for the RD to adjust its staffing levels to match fluctuating demand, and it would be unreasonable to expect payroll costs as a proportion of turnover to diminish to a level comparable with a commercial operation. As a matter of fact, the number of staff employed by the Department has reduced over the last ten years from 344 to fewer than 300, and there may be scope for further rationalisation over time. **Matching human resources to demand is an ongoing challenge for Refreshment Department management.**

Heritage environment

33. The Refreshment Department faces a challenge in providing a complex service based in a palace which is a Grade 1 listed building and also a UNESCO World Heritage Site.²³ Whilst providing a setting of grandeur and historical significance for banqueting events, the layout and fabric of the building place limitations on the RD's operations and on the scope for development. Space is at a premium. In addition, listed building consent is necessary for significant structural changes to the building and this process increases the cost of any changes and the length of time for completion of projects. On-site storage, particularly in the Palace, is cramped and inconveniently located, increasing the number of staff required to receive and distribute products.

Security

34. The need for security-cleared catering staff within the Parliamentary Estate is a complication for the Refreshment Department when it attempts to adjust staffing levels to the peaks and troughs of demand. The Department employs permanent full-time staff with relatively little use of agency staff brought in to meet fluctuating demand.

35. The need to maintain security also restricts the timing of deliveries to the Palace. These limited delivery times are inconvenient for suppliers and for the Department and they affect the Department's negotiating position when seeking to maximise its purchasing power.

36. Security constraints also limit the Department's customer base. As there is only one facility which non-passholders may use unaccompanied (the Jubilee Café), the RD has little scope for bringing in custom from non-passholders. The Department does, however, seem to be making better use of its potential customer base, recording over 8,000 transactions a day: a significant increase over the 7,000 transactions a day reported in 2001–02.²⁴

Service obligation

37. The RD is obliged to provide a service to core users at times of limited demand when a commercial operation might close its doors. The Department told us that the Members' Dining Room is a "particularly difficult service to operate both efficiently and cost-effectively" as business levels can fluctuate from fewer than 20 Members to 150 Members leaving their meals for the division bell and then all returning at the same time to resume dining.²⁵

Unpredictability

38. In addition to the problems posed by the parliamentary timetable,²⁶ the Department finds it difficult to predict customer numbers accurately. The Business Statement and the

23 A number of the other buildings on the Parliamentary Estate are also listed. The only other listed building in which the RD has a presence is 1 Parliament Street, which is listed Grade II.

24 Catering Committee, *Refreshment Facilities in the House of Commons*, para 5

25 Ev 21

26 See paragraph 31

Order Paper are a clue to the likely demands of Members, House staff and civil servants when the House is sitting, but an unexpected statement or change of business can alter demand significantly. There is no straightforward way to estimate the number of Members' staff on-site at any one time. Demand for services during recess has also been difficult for the Department to predict. This uncertainty led to a tendency to estimate demand at maximum levels so as to avoid inadequate supply when demand unexpectedly increased. The Refreshment Department has told us that following the subsidy review it has attempted to reach a balance between the tendency to estimate demand at maximum levels and scaling back service capability (in particular staffing levels) to a level based on average demand.²⁷

Resistance to change

39. In the past influential Members have been strongly in favour of retaining the labour-intensive traditional dining room style of table service despite increasing opinion amongst other Members that the menus and style are outdated. This resistance has made it difficult for the Refreshment Department to introduce change and has encouraged a defensive institutional culture.

40. In addition, evidence suggests that there is resistance to change among some Refreshment Department staff, particularly those of long service working in the more formal outlets, who take pride in their role. In order to achieve more flexible staffing based on actual business requirements, the Refreshment Department aims to employ multi-skilled staff in all outlets, but progress in some areas appears to be slow.²⁸

27 Ev 21

28 Ev 36

6 Meeting the challenge

41. The challenge for the Refreshment Department is to meet the aims that we set out in part 4 of this Report within the context of the constraints described in part 5. In general those who responded to our request for evidence complimented the service provided:

- “It is a pleasure to eat in the Adjournment”.²⁹
- “...the banqueting service is outstanding and the refreshments are good”.³⁰
- “I’ve noticed the price rises, but it’s still good value”.³¹
- “...thank you for the underrated but truly excellent staff and restaurant at 1 Parliament St. The food is good, choice excellent, and staff really excellent”.³²
- “Generally [...] the services we receive are excellent”.³³
- “the catering staff work very hard, are pleasant and accommodating”.³⁴
- “We [...] compliment the catering and restaurant staff for their cheerfulness and patience”.³⁵

42. However, it is evident from submissions to our inquiry and from feedback given to the Refreshment Department that a number of dissatisfactions highlighted in the past remain:

- overcrowding
- unimaginative menus
- poor food quality and service in the outlets in the Palace
- a lack of decent fresh coffee facilities
- resentment towards the access regulations
- dissatisfaction with the layout of the Terrace cafeteria
- frustration with the provision of services during recess.

43. This section of the Report contains our recommendations for changes that we believe would help to improve the service provided by the RD and the framework within which it

29 Ev 43 [Meg Hillier MP]

30 Ev 43 [Susan Kramer MP]

31 Ev 43 [Dr Nick Palmer MP]

32 Ev 44 [Mr Barry Sheerman MP]

33 Ev 47 [Mrs Christine Heald]

34 Ev 47 [Christine Hemming]

35 Ev 11 [Commonwealth Parliamentary Association]

is provided, without making it less cost-effective. We look first at basic principles which could be applied across the service before suggesting changes to specific venues.

Basic principles

Strategy and innovation

44. It is usual practice in catering businesses to have a ten-year strategy document, which is considered an important tool in achieving change. The Refreshment Department's catering policies, in contrast, are reviewed annually as part of the preparation of a rolling three-year business plan. **In view of the challenges it faces and the desirability of co-ordination with the ten-year works programme, we consider that the Department would benefit from a ten-year strategy document, with objectives clearly set out in areas such as: service levels, productivity, benchmarking, selling prices, quality of product and staff training.**

45. The Refreshment Department has itself suggested developing and implementing a strategy along these lines, with a particular view to reviewing services that are not used to capacity:

This will facilitate the development of services on two levels: firstly, by regular and structured review of the catering concept, making best use of the resources and equipment currently available; and, secondly, by planning the development of catering services in tandem with the 10-year rolling programme of Works so that any structural, layout, equipment and décor requirements can be planned and financed in a co-ordinated manner. This would ensure that services are constantly kept fresh and well-utilised in the short-term, and would provide periodic opportunity, at points when major investment into the premises is needed, to invest in labour-saving equipment and work systems.³⁶

46. The main thrust of the strategy should be to achieve the primary objectives that we have set out in section 4 of this Report. The strategy must identify and prioritise its key customers. It would need to dovetail with the Strategic Plan for 2006–2011 for the House Service as a whole. Catering currently forms part of one of the supporting tasks envisaged by the Plan: to “provide a healthy, safe and secure physical environment in which the business of the House can be effectively conducted”.³⁷ It would also incorporate relevant commitments already included in the existing Departmental three-year business plan for 2005–06 to 2007–08.

47. We would be glad to be involved in helping to develop this strategy. As it would have financial and administrative implications, it would also subsequently need to be considered by the Finance and Services Committee and by the House of Commons Commission. **We recommend that the Refreshment Department prepare a draft strategy document for us to consider within three months of the publication of this Report, with suggestions**

36 Ev 35

37 House of Commons Corporate Business Plan 2006, p 5

for revised specifications and with timescales and key performance objectives for each part of the service to deliver the strategy.

48. The development and introduction of new menus, keeping up with food trends and tastes, maintaining and improving the style of delivery are important factors in the strategy of any successful catering business. This kind of innovation will need to inform the Department's strategy. Currently, innovation within the RD is a team effort led by the Head of the Department, the Executive Chef (responsible for food development), the two Operations Managers (responsible for service delivery innovation), and including the Purchasing Manager, the team of Sous Chefs and Catering Managers: "the entire management team".³⁸ We support the promotion of innovation within the Department. It is in the nature of innovative ideas that the majority of them will not be taken up, but it is important this should not discourage such thinking.

49. The Department has, through no fault of its own, been without an Executive Chef for two years. It is unsurprising that in the absence of the chef responsible for food development, we have heard complaints that menus have become old-fashioned and cafeteria foods inconsistent. **We recommend that an individual within the Refreshment Department should take responsibility for encouraging, gathering and analysing innovative ideas from both within and outside the Department that might help to improve service delivery.**

50. We have heard that after cost-saving measures were implemented in the light of the subsidy review, the RD received "a flurry of complaints" which died down quickly.³⁹ The changes that we recommend in this Report aim to produce benefits of improved quality of food and service that should quickly become apparent. We recognise that there will be opposition both from some Members and from some RD staff to innovative changes made to a style of service which they are used to and which they like. Changes have to be given time to work and to be accepted. Where changes have been suggested to us and approved by us, we will support the Department in seeing through any initial opposition. As a supportive employer, we are sure that the Department will give staff directly affected by the changes any necessary training and help them to adapt accordingly.

51. The RD has suggested to us that a user survey might help to assess customer reaction to any changed service; in general, the Department receives little quantifiable feedback.⁴⁰ **Such a survey several months after any changes to the service might well be a useful way of monitoring customer satisfaction, as long as it has high visibility to all those affected.**

Productivity

52. We noted in paragraph 32 that staffing accounts for a large proportion of the operating costs of the Department. According to our adviser, this proportion is higher than would be found in the private sector. We are proud of the fact that the House pays its staff fairly in a sector of the economy where pay is sometimes low, and that their terms and conditions

38 Ev 37

39 Ev 22

40 Ev 23

generally are good. Unsurprisingly in this context, the Department has low levels of staff turnover compared to the private sector. Our adviser has suggested that this may have a negative effect on the Department's productivity levels and on its ability to adjust staffing to meet reasonable changes to the service which customers want. Other developments may also have an impact on the staffing requirement, such as the extent to which produce is bought in rather than produced in-house. **We recommend that a productivity review of the Refreshment Department should be carried out once a strategy for the Department has been agreed to see if structural and operational changes would help it to reach its targets more efficiently.**

Purchasing

53. The Refreshment Department currently has 74 suppliers of souvenirs and 132 other suppliers (including food, beverage, sundries and services).⁴¹ This total of 206 suppliers generates more than 2,500 invoices a month. Requests from outlet managers for products can only be met if existing suppliers stock those particular items. Most supplier contracts last for three years, with the option of a two-year extension.

54. Because the House does not sit in the morning on a Monday or a Tuesday, deliveries are concentrated on these days. 45 deliveries are made on a Monday, with only 20 deliveries on other days of the week. A significant proportion of the Department's deliveries have to be escorted by a member of staff from the RD because the driver lacks the appropriate security clearance.

55. **We recommend that the Refreshment Department should investigate whether cost and labour efficiencies could be achieved by reducing the number of suppliers used. Given the difficulties of delivery to the Palace of Westminster and the constraints on storage on-site, and in the context of an ongoing study of the options for off-site security clearance of delivery vehicles, we further recommend that the Department should consider options for transferring some of its delivery operations off-site, for subsequent onward delivery to the Palace by a sole operator.**

Benchmarking

56. It is important that the Refreshment Department understands what is available more widely outside the House in terms of service styles, menus and pricing, in order to promote innovation and better quality and to understand the alternative venues available to its customers. The Director of Catering Services and other managers regularly visit other staff restaurant facilities and benchmark House catering services against these. They are expected to "make regular visits to other food-service sites, mostly operated by contract caterers, and are expected to return from such visits with at least one innovation that can be incorporated into the Refreshment Department's business."⁴² However, little appears to be done to benchmark against those high street venues that customers might use in preference to RD facilities. Some of those who responded to our request for evidence clearly prefer to eat outside the House:

41 Ev 37

42 Ev 44

“I now invariably take guests to eat outside the estate because I do not believe the quality inside is satisfactory”.⁴³

“Sandwiches, pre-packed salads and desserts whilst reasonable in price rarely appear fresh. Better value can be found outside the Palace from an independent sandwich shop”.⁴⁴

57. We are also unclear whether there is any involvement of staff below senior management level in benchmarking. Supervisors and staff both front-of-house and in the kitchens would benefit from the experience of seeing for themselves how service is delivered elsewhere. **Benchmarking with the private sector as well as the public sector is essential to ensure quality of service. We recommend that the Department benchmark its services strategically and consistently against catering businesses elsewhere, including against high street venues that customers might use in preference to its own facilities. Benchmarking reports should be considered every six months as part of the Department’s strategy. The Department might benefit from the use of an independent benchmarking service. Staff at all levels within the Department should be involved in this benchmarking exercise.**

Training

58. This benchmarking exercise might also assist staff training. In general, those responding to our inquiry have praised Refreshment Department staff for their efforts, and we echo this. Many staff have a deep understanding of their customers, Members in particular, developed over years of service. Staff training is crucial, however, to maintaining a customer-focussed service and to enabling staff to adapt to a changing environment. The RD has been seeking to develop a multi-skilled staff to help it to adjust to the changing pattern of demand over the parliamentary week and year. We have noticed, as have Members that responded to our inquiry, that at times the dining rooms appear over-staffed whilst the cafeterias struggle to cope with demand, and an ability to deploy staff more flexibly might help to deal with this kind of disparity.

59. The Refreshment Department is aware of the need to nurture a customer-focussed culture among its staff, and has been seeking to bring supervisors and kitchen staff into closer contact with the customer. The newer facilities in Portcullis House have been designed with kitchens visible to the customer; however, the layout of the facilities in the Palace does not allow for this kind of arrangement. There may nonetheless be ways in which more flexible duties would allow kitchen staff and front-of-house staff a greater experience of one another’s roles.

60. It was unfortunate that in 2004–05 the RD underspent significantly on its training budget. It appears to us that there is significant scope for training, either conducted in-house or bought in, and we trust that the Department will ensure that it plans carefully how to improve its delivery in this important area.

43 Ev 44 [Mr Andrew Slaughter MP, see also Mr Barry Sheerman MP]

44 Ev 10 [Secretaries’ and Assistants’ Council]

Opening hours

61. The times at which outlets are open depend on a balanced judgement of whether the demand for the service justifies the cost of providing it. Several responses questioned the current limited opening hours of outlets during recess, with one submission suggesting that “cut off times for the availability of hot food during the recess are based on the assumption that no-one works in the House of Commons when MPs are not in the building. This is not the case”.⁴⁵

62. The Department has told us that it is difficult to assess the likely demand for later opening hours during recess other than by offering a service on a trial basis. The reasoning behind the current cafeteria opening hours during recess is in order for the outlets to be staffed from a single shift from 8.30am to 4.30pm. There may be a shortage of RD staff to provide a second shift during recess, as this is when staff are required to take most of their leave.⁴⁶

63. In recent years the Terrace Cafeteria has remained open until 5.30pm during September and 7pm during that part of October when the House is in recess. However, the demand is largely for teas and coffees rather than hot meals during these extended hours.

64. One option would therefore be to open the Terrace Cafeteria during August until 5.30pm, on a trial basis, serving hot and cold drinks and pre-packaged snacks only. The Refreshment Department has estimated that this service would cost an extra £115 a week to provide. Alternatively, the Despatch Box in Portcullis House could be kept open later during recess on the same trial basis “at modest additional cost”.⁴⁷ **Given the limited additional cost involved and the apparent demand for such a service, we recommend that the Refreshment Department should provide a limited service in either the Terrace Cafeteria or the Despatch Box until 5.30 pm in August 2006 on a trial basis to assess demand.**

65. Conversely, other venues are currently open at times of apparently little demand, and there may be a case for closing them at these times: the Pugin Room with seating capacity of 55 served during a sample two-week period in October 2005 between six and thirty covers daily in the evening between 7.30 pm and closing time, while the Members’ Tea Room is seriously underused on non-sitting Fridays.⁴⁸ The opening hours of other venues may also be worth reconsidering. The benefit of closing venues at times of least use would need to set any savings that would be made by closing them against the need of Members and other users for the service they provide.

66. We recommend that the Refreshment Department should review the opening hours of facilities that are underused at certain times, such as the service in the Members’ Tea Room on non-sitting Fridays, and should consider a reduced service, in terms of menu, staff or space, if there would be a cost benefit in doing so.

45 Ev 43 [Alison Seabeck MP]

46 Ev 37

47 *Ibid.*

48 Ev 28, 30

Specific venues

Palace dining rooms

67. The Members' and Strangers' Dining Rooms are two fine rooms on the Principal Floor of the Palace. The Members' Dining Room (MDR) seats over 100 people; the Strangers' Dining Room (SDR) seats between 46 and 64. At lunchtime, the Members' dining service, which is exclusively for Members, is served in the smaller SDR, while the Strangers' dining service, which is for primarily for Members with guests, moves to the MDR. The Members' and Strangers' dining services are recognised as important facilities that need to be preserved, where Members can hold private conversations among themselves and entertain guests. In addition, the Churchill Room, with 70 seats, offers a fine dining service within the Palace for dinner on Monday to Wednesday and for lunch on Tuesday to Thursday. All three rooms are available for banqueting functions when they are not open for normal service.

68. The traditional service in these dining rooms is felt by some to create a rather stuffy atmosphere that compares unfavourably with the less formal service in the Adjournment restaurant in Portcullis House. We are aware of complaints about delays in service.⁴⁹

69. This anecdotal evidence is reflected in the usage figures for the different venues. The Adjournment, with 64 seats, served 15,000 covers in 2004–05, an increase of 16 per cent on the previous year. The Churchill Room, with a similar number of seats, served only 6,800 covers in 2004–05, a fall of 14 per cent on the previous year.⁵⁰ This comparison is not entirely fair, as the Adjournment is open at times when the Churchill Room is not, but it gives an indication of changing customer preferences. The Members' Dining service served 6,200 covers in 2004–05, a decline of 14 per cent on the previous year. The Strangers' dining service served 14,700 covers in 2004–05, an increase of six per cent on the previous year, but still fewer covers than were served in the Adjournment. It seems clear to us from these statistics that the popularity of the Adjournment is increasing, while usage of the Palace dining rooms is falling away.

70. The subsidy cost of the dining rooms per cover is much higher than in the cafeterias. The Adjournment, however, is able to operate at lower cost per cover than the dining rooms in the main building by employing multi-skilled staff, by operating a less formal brasserie-style service and by offering more cost-effective menus consisting of dishes that are easy to prepare and which, as the statistics show, are popular with its customers.

71. The dining rooms in the Palace clearly have, as the RD suggests, “capacity to increase their business”.⁵¹ A virtuous circle could be established in that by improving the quality of food and service, more customers would use these venues, which would reduce the subsidy cost per cover, which should allow quality to be improved further. But for this to happen, both service and menus will need to be simplified.

49 Q 49

50 RD evidence, Schedule 6 [not printed]

51 Ev 35

72. The irregular pattern of demand (a direct result of the parliamentary timetable), the staffing structure and the style of service are the principle reasons that the Members' dining service is sporadically used and the most highly subsidised of the dining facilities. In customer feedback between October 2004 and October 2005, more than half of the comments received about the Members' dining service were complaints about food.⁵² The Strangers' dining service is better used, but it has the same complex service and menu styles as the Members' service. Given the interdependency of the two services, which swap location daily, we are not convinced that it would be sensible to attempt to provide substantially different offerings in each.

73. We consider that the time is right to change the style of service in the Members' and Strangers' Dining Rooms. Our preference would be for a brasserie-style restaurant, with a simple menu changed on a regular basis, possibly supplemented by a high-quality buffet. Similar changes have been made at venues such as the Members' restaurant at the RAC City Clubhouse. If carried out tastefully and in keeping with the heritage environment of the Palace, this would have a number of benefits. The simpler menus and service style should improve food quality and speed of delivery, and should also in the longer term free resources front of house and in the kitchens, some of which might go towards improving quality, some towards more attractive pricing, and some towards reducing the subsidy.

74. The offering in the Churchill Room needs to be kept distinct from that in the other Palace dining rooms. It was originally intended as a grill room, and this is a purpose it is well suited to fulfilling. Grilled food is both suitably traditional and reasonably healthy, in keeping with contemporary taste. Focussing on this offering should also help to improve speed of service. **We recommend that the Churchill Room should offer a simple but excellent quality grill room menu. We understand that this change should not be complicated or expensive to implement.**

75. We look forward to discussing with the House authorities how they envisage taking forward our proposals for improved offerings in the dining rooms in the Palace and expect to examine sample menus and draft timescales for conversion in the coming months.

76. Several submissions have raised the issue of increasing access, for both business and personal use, to the dining rooms. In particular, Peers have requested access to the Churchill Room which is adjacent to the Lords' own new café bar facility, and which is already open to those Peers who were formerly Members of this House. It is suggested that the Churchill Room could provide both a common meeting ground for Members of the two Houses and scope for increased usage.⁵³ We understand that as long as increased business can be met from within existing staff resources, the contribution from additional customers would reduce the overall cost of the subsidy.⁵⁴

52 RD evidence, Schedule 17a [not printed]

53 Ev 36

54 *Ibid.*

77. The Adjournment restaurant and the Strangers' Dining Room are already open to all pass-holders on Thursday evenings and Friday lunchtimes, when usage by Members is low, but they are rarely booked.⁵⁵ We are cautious of widening access to facilities at the peak times when Members are most likely to need the service, particularly as a significant proportion of Members do not make advance bookings.⁵⁶ Our intention is that our recommendations to improve the quality of service in the Palace dining rooms should help to increase their use by Members, thereby limiting the subsidy and alleviating the pressure on other outlets to which all passholders have access. **The effect on usage of implementing the changes to the Palace dining rooms that we have recommended needs to become apparent before any changes to the access regulations for these facilities should be considered.**

Banqueting

78. The Refreshment Department operates a profitable banqueting service. All of the recorded feedback received by the Department between October 2004 and October 2005 was complimentary.⁵⁷ Our adviser has suggested, however, that the style of service and the menus on offer should be reviewed; and the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (CPA), in evidence to us, has suggested that the service they receive is sometimes “not quite of the standard which perhaps you might like it to be”.⁵⁸ Specifically, the CPA has suggested that menus could be lighter and more modern to provide a faster, more efficient service.⁵⁹ A private function or banquet at the House of Commons should be memorable – the unique venue should be supported by stunning food and impeccable service no matter where on the Estate a function is held. The environment in the Astor Suite and Clubroom in 1 Parliament Street compare unfavourably in this respect to the four dedicated banquet rooms and the Palace dining rooms. **We recommend that the banqueting service offered by the House should be benchmarked against the offerings of competitors at an early opportunity to ensure that customers' preferences are being catered for as effectively as possible.**

Members' Tea Room

79. The Tea Room offers Members both privacy and close proximity to the Chamber and it is highly prized, as submissions to our inquiry show.⁶⁰ It is hampered, however, by its limited kitchen facilities and by its layout, including the 'spare' counter that is scarcely used. Feedback to the RD has included complaints about the slow service of hot food and the repetitive nature of the menus.⁶¹ Improving the service for Members in outlets elsewhere might alleviate some of the pressure that the Tea Room is under at peak times. However, the Tea Room's customers would also be better served if more dishes could be

55 *Ibid.*

56 Ev 37

57 Ev 23

58 Q 48

59 Ev 11

60 Ev 44 [Dr Phyllis Starkey MP], 45 [Mr Andrew Turner MP]

61 RD evidence, Schedule 17 [not printed]

prepared or made ready to serve in the Tea Room itself. Currently many dishes have to be prepared in very limited kitchen facilities on another floor of the Palace, and these dishes sometimes arrive rather more slowly than customers would like. This arrangement is far from ideal.

80. The quality of the cold counter could be significantly improved; a superior example is to be found at the RAC City Clubhouse. We also suspect that room could be found within the Tea Room for a dedicated counter serving a limited range of hot food. **We recommend that the Tea Room should remain substantially as it is, but that its menu should be reviewed with an eye to improving the quality of the cold counter, introducing a counter for a limited range of hot food to be served within the Tea Room, and increasing the extent to which dishes can be prepared and plated within the Tea Room itself.**

Terrace Marquee

81. The Terrace Marquee, a temporary structure operating during the summer, currently provides buffet lunches with a bar service in the evening. Unusually for a catering outlet, it operates at a profit. Plans were previously drawn up for the replacement of the Marquee with a permanent structure, but they were not advanced following the subsidy review. The Marquee will need to be replaced within the next few years and serious thought must now be given as to what style of structure should replace it. The RD has suggested an all-weather glazed structure to create a new convivial space for a restaurant or brasserie for Members.⁶² **We recommend that the Parliamentary Estates Directorate prepare options for a replacement for the Terrace Marquee with indicative costs for our further consideration.**

Bars

Strangers' Bar

82. The present location of the Strangers' Bar is unpopular due to the shape and layout of the room. In the longer term, it would be preferable if an alternative location could be found for the bar; the RD has suggested that it might be moved to a new Terrace structure or to the area currently occupied by the Churchill Room.⁶³ **We recommend that any Refreshment Department longer-term plans for the relocation of facilities within the Palace should include looking for alternative locations for the Strangers' Bar which would allow it to realise greater potential. External advice should be sought on location and design.**

83. There seems to be a missed opportunity for food sales such as sandwiches and snacks in the House's bars. In contrast, the Bishops' Bar in the House of Lords offers a made-to-order sandwich counter. A made-to-order counter would almost certainly not be practical in the Strangers' Bar given the limited bar space available. However, if space could be found to provide pre-packaged sandwiches and other snacks in the Bar, this might have the

62 Ev 23, 24

63 Ev 24

advantage of drawing some custom away from the overcrowded Terrace Cafeteria at lunchtimes. **We recommend that detailed consideration be given to options for introducing sandwiches and other light pre-packaged snacks into the Strangers' Bar.**

Smoking Room Bar

84. This outlet is currently the only refreshment facility which is reserved solely for Members, and as such it is highly valued. It is a fine room in the Palace, used as a bar serving hot and cold drinks. As its name suggests, it is one of the few facilities in which smoking is allowed. Viewed from a purely economic standpoint, the current use of such a large and architecturally distinguished space cannot readily be justified. The salary costs of running the bar exceed its takings. Under current policy decided by the House of Commons Commission following advice received from the Catering Committee towards the end of the last Parliament, smoking is not allowed in any refreshment facility in which food is served. This limits the possible uses to which the Smoking Room could be put. **We recommend no change to the Smoking Room.**

Annie's Bar

85. It is generally accepted that Annie's Bar is under-used: takings in the bar have halved over the past ten years.⁶⁴ It now costs two and half times as much to run as it takes in sales.⁶⁵ During the Catering Committee's inquiry in 2002, the Chairman warned the Press Gallery and Members that they should "use it or lose it",⁶⁶ but to little effect. The unappealing location has evidently had a negative effect on usage, and, according to the RD, the original purpose of the bar – as a meeting place for Members and Press Lobbyists – "has become largely obsolete".⁶⁷ It is clear that the time has come for the bar should be shut and the space used for another, more useful purpose. Previous suggestions for the space have included: a take-away coffee bar, a dry cleaning service or Members' Dressing Rooms (thereby freeing up the Gentlemen Members' Dressing Rooms to be converted into Members' offices).⁶⁸ **We recommend that Annie's Bar should be closed, and the pool table suitably relocated. Options should then be put to us for alternative uses of the space.**⁶⁹

Cafeterias

86. The RD operates four cafeterias which are open to all full passholders: the Terrace Cafeteria in the Palace, the Debate in Portcullis House, Bellamy's in 1 Parliament Street, and the Portcullis Cafeteria in 7 Millbank. We have little to say about the facilities in 7 Millbank, which is a building separated from the rest of the Parliamentary Estate, which occupied almost entirely by House staff, and where no Members have offices. The main

64 Ev 23

65 RD evidence, Schedule 5 [not printed]

66 Catering Committee, *Refreshment Facilities in the House of Commons*, Q 137

67 Ev 23

68 *Ibid.*

69 We discuss a possible reorganisation of the facilities in the Palace at paragraph 125 below.

issue which we seek to address here is how to manage overcrowding in the two most heavily used cafeterias. However, there are also issues concerning sandwiches, special diets and recycling, which are of particular relevance to the cafeterias.

Sandwiches and salads

87. Sandwiches and salads in the cafeterias are often keenly priced, but the freshness and quality compare unfavourably with products available at premium chain stores locally.⁷⁰ Customers increasingly prefer to buy take-away food that can be eaten in the office. Encouraging this trend would also help to relieve overcrowding at tables in the cafeterias. The only made-to-order sandwich bar in the House is in the cafeteria in 7 Millbank. **We recommend that the Refreshment Department should seek to improve the quality and freshness of sandwiches and salads served in the cafeterias.**

Providing for special dietary needs

88. Responses to the Committee from sufferers of nut allergies and Coeliac Disease highlighted the difficulty of obtaining basic information on the ingredients of food currently available in RD outlets.⁷¹ Several submissions to the Committee suggested making available a wider and more imaginative range of vegetarian food.⁷² Responses from House staff and Members' staff suggested making halal and kosher food available.⁷³

89. The House of Commons Trade Union Side and the Public and Commercial Services Union have queried why fried breakfasts and chips are significantly less expensive than vegetable and salad options and have suggested that, as a responsible employer, the House “should encourage the consumption of fruit, salad and vegetables.”⁷⁴ Whilst we acknowledge that the Refreshment Department has a visible policy of presenting ‘healthy’ options on its menus, we agree that in general the House should aim to provide healthier food in its catering outlets. The Department has already expanded the range of food over the years in response to demand, and we accept that it would be impossible to accommodate the tastes and diets of all passholders. However, there may be a case for closer consideration of dietary needs in particular by those responsible for menu and food development. **We recommend that the Refreshment Department should ensure that pricing in its outlets is based on a consistent model and does not act as an artificial disincentive to the purchase of healthier food and drink. We further recommend that the Department should examine the feasibility of providing foods to meet special requirements such as gluten-free, kosher and halal diets.**

Recycling

90. Facilities to recycle food packaging are also of increasing importance to users. One of our respondents has commented that “the lack of recycling facilities is very disappointing.

70 Qq 56–58

71 Ev 42 [Gordon Banks MP]

72 Ev 43 [Kali Mountford MP], 46 [Portia Dadley], 51 [June Hart]

73 Ev 45 [Yasmin Ataullah, Asad Rehman, Lara Sami], 51 [Mashood Ahmed]

74 Ev 9 [House of Commons Trade Union Side]

Several outlets sell large glass bottles of water, yet there is no obvious way to return them for recycling”.⁷⁵ This is a fair point, which is currently being addressed by the RD. The Department is preparing to introduce a pilot scheme for collection of glass, plastic and cans used in the Terrace and Debate cafeterias, which, if it proves successful, could be rolled out across the Estate.⁷⁶ The Department already recycles water bottles from its restaurants, bars and banqueting rooms. **We welcome the introduction of a pilot recycling scheme in the cafeterias, and look forward to this being rolled out as swiftly as possible to outlets across the Parliamentary Estate.**

Overcrowding

91. With a much wider customer base than the dining rooms, cafeterias account for most of the transactions undertaken by the Refreshment Department. Annual statistics collated by the Refreshment Department on the usage of cafeterias indicate that, as noted by previous Catering Committee,⁷⁷ the most popular cafeterias are the Terrace Cafeteria in the main building and the Debate Cafeteria in Portcullis House. Usage of the Debate overtook that of the Terrace in 2003–04.⁷⁸ Although, according to Refreshment Department surveys, proximity to the workplace is the single most important determinant of choice of lunch venue,⁷⁹ the two cafeterias also cater for different tastes—the Terrace cafeteria serves heavier, more traditional food, while the Debate serves healthier, more modern cuisine.

92. Members and senior staff of the House (Officers) are allowed to bring up to 3 guests to the Terrace Cafeteria; other full passholders are allowed up to 2 guests. Temporary passholders are allowed to use the cafeteria, but not between 12 pm and 2 pm. In the Debate cafeteria rules on access are stricter with Members and senior staff allowed only 2 guests, whilst other full passholders are allowed to bring up to 2 guests, but not between 12 pm and 2 pm. Temporary passholders are not allowed to use the Debate at all.

93. The Department are aware that the two key pressure points in the catering service are lunchtimes (12.30pm to 1.30pm) in these cafeterias. The numbers of House staff and Members’ staff have steadily increased over recent years adding to the pressure on catering facilities. Both the Terrace and Debate cafeterias regularly service over 2,000 transactions a day against a design capacity of 1,400 in the Terrace and 1,500 in the Debate.⁸⁰ Although there were several criticisms of the quality of food in the Terrace cafeteria, the main concern for users of both cafeterias was the overcrowding suffered at lunchtimes.⁸¹

94. To help us assess usage of the Terrace and Debate cafeterias we asked the Refreshment Department to undertake a survey on our behalf to identify those categories of passholder using the two cafeterias and whether they bought to eat in or to take-away. The survey was

75 Ev 46 [Ingrid Davidson]

76 House of Commons Commission Spokesman’s response to a report from Norman Baker MP, paragraph 12. Available online at <http://www.parliament.uk/documents/upload/NBGreenRepRes.pdf>

77 Catering Committee, *Refreshment Facilities in the House of Commons*, para 5

78 Ev 21

79 Ev 35

80 Ev 21

81 Q 45

conducted at lunchtime (11.30am to 3pm) on Wednesday 9 November 2005. The survey results are appended to this Report.⁸²

95. The largest group of users was House staff in the Terrace cafeteria (34 per cent), but Members' staff in the Debate (41 per cent). Members, who constitute about eight per cent of full passholders, were ten per cent of the customers in both cafeterias. 'Others' were an important category of user in both cafeterias (14 per cent in the Terrace and 12 per cent in the Debate). There is a perception amongst users that the number of permitted guests is regularly exceeded by some customers of the Debate cafeteria.⁸³ The larger proportion of guests recorded by the survey in the Debate (nine per cent) than in the Terrace (seven per cent), despite more restrictive rules on guests in the Debate, seems to support this perception.

96. In order to address the overcrowding in the two main cafeterias, two main problems need to be addressed:

- i. Numbers: All (8,000) full passholders have access to these facilities, and an additional 5,000 temporary passholders have access to the Terrace cafeteria at non-peak times.
- ii. Abuse: Access regulations are not actively enforced in either outlet.

97. When examining these two problems, we were aware of the following considerations:

- a) For many passholders in the main building, the Terrace cafeteria is the only convenient outlet.
- b) For Members, the cafeterias are the only outlets to which they can take guests for informal, quick and cheap meals.

Bellamy's cafeteria: an underused alternative

98. Drawing customers away from the Terrace and the Debate Cafeteria might be one way of alleviating the pressure on the two outlets. We make recommendations below on widening access to the Press Cafeteria within the Palace as a way of providing full passholders with a nearby alternative to the Terrace Cafeteria.⁸⁴

99. Bellamy's cafeteria in 1 Parliament Street is an obvious alternative to the Debate, as it is located very close to Portcullis House. Since the Catering Committee Report of 2002, the refurbishment of Bellamy's has been completed. Responses to the Committee and feedback to the Refreshment Department indicate that the outlet is a popular one—

- “This is the best of the outlets [...] in terms of choice, quality and price”.⁸⁵

82 Ev 38–42

83 Ev 47 [Mrs Christine Heald], 50 [Diana Thompson]

84 See paragraph 117

85 Ev 45 [Mr Anthony Steen MP]

- “I regularly eat at Bellamy’s as I feel that the quality of food and the quantity and variety are exceptional”.⁸⁶

100. Spare capacity there at peak times could relieve pressure on the nearby Debate cafeteria. The RD has recognised this and has tried a number of ways to encourage customers to use Bellamy’s, including offering dishes in a lower price spend range than the Debate, and a daily spicy dish, as recommended by our predecessors. The Department has told us that these efforts have been successful in building custom.⁸⁷

101. We consider that the Department should continue its more pro-active methods. For example, adverts for Bellamy’s prominently displayed outside the Debate cafeteria might be effective in luring custom away during crowded lunchtimes. In particular temporary passholders, who are unable to use the Debate during the peak hours at lunchtime, should be made aware that they are allowed to use Bellamy’s. However, **the most effective way of increasing the popularity of Bellamy’s will be to ensure that standards of food and service—and pricing—compare favourably with other venues on the Estate. We recommend that the Refreshment Department should continue their proactive approach to promoting Bellamy’s cafeteria in 1 Parliament Street.**

Access regulations

102. The current access regulations are complicated. They vary from venue to venue in terms of who is allowed access, and in their rules on guests. Where existing access regulations are not followed, this may be caused by confusion rather than by wilful neglect. As one of our witnesses told us: “From the Members’ staff points of view, the turnover of staff that come in, I do not think [the access regulations] are terribly well understood”.⁸⁸

103. We see three possible solutions to this problem:

- a) Greater communication of the access regulations.
- b) More effective enforcement of the access regulations.
- c) Possible revision of the rules.

Greater communication of access regulations

104. Better signage has been suggested to communicate the regulations more effectively.⁸⁹ **We recommend that the Refreshment Department erect clearly visible signage outside all outlets indicating the appropriate access rules and showing sample passes for the avoidance of doubt.**

105. Information on the RD intranet pages is currently the main tool for communicating access regulations. There is also a booklet containing the access rules which has been given

⁸⁶ RD evidence, Schedule 17 [not printed]

⁸⁷ Ev 35

⁸⁸ Q 81

⁸⁹ Q 82

to all new House staff as part of their induction course and also to new Members following the last two general elections.⁹⁰ It does not, however, appear to have been circulated to Members' staff or to other passholders. **We recommend that the Refreshment Department make available through the Pass Office to all new passholders on arrival a simple guide to the rules on access to its facilities, as well as electronically on the Parliamentary Intranet.**

Enforcement of access regulations

106. We have been told by the RD told us that they lack the resources to enforce the existing access regulations. One user of the Debate told us: "When I raised these points once with a Manager, I was told that he had several times tried to enforce the Access Regulations and had been subjected to verbal abuse".⁹¹ Abuse of House staff is unacceptable. Those who breach access regulations, even inadvertently, should expect to be challenged. However, enforcement of rules is more easily and authoritatively carried out by a designated member of staff. There are of course cost implications to this, but the current situation in which the rules are not effectively enforced at all cannot be allowed to continue. **We recommend that a designated member of staff should be posted outside the Debate and Terrace cafeterias at lunchtimes on Mondays to Wednesdays for two weeks running and then at regular intervals afterwards, tasked with controlling access and advising passholders of the regulations.**

Revision of the rules

107. The freedom to entertain guests is highly prized by Members and staff alike. We do not currently recommend changing the rules on the numbers of guests allowed in the cafeterias. However, simplifying the rules, by allowing only two visitors per passholder in both the Terrace and the Debate, might assist in the enforcement of rules, and this is a step we might consider in future if the current rules prove unenforceable.

108. We have considered reducing the categories of passholder given access to the Terrace cafeteria, as the perception is that overcrowding is caused by the use of the facility by large numbers of civil servants and contractors rather than by too many guests. Most civil servants and contractors have temporary passes and are already not allowed to use Terrace cafeteria between 12 pm and 2 pm. However, it is not clear why civil servants, with their own catering facilities nearby in Whitehall, should be allowed to use catering facilities in the House at all. There may be a genuine case for a small number of civil servants on any given day who are attending business in the House or its Committees and who do not have time to eat elsewhere. But the impression users have is that civil servants are simply using the House as a lunchtime alternative to Whitehall. **We recommend that civil servants should only have access to the House's catering facilities when on specific parliamentary business, and that they should be required to obtain special passes to enable them to have this access.**

90 Ev 35

91 Ev 47 [Mrs Christine Heald]

109. Mobile canteens are generally provided for temporary works contractors during the summer recess, but these contractors often prefer to eat in the Terrace cafeteria. Other temporary contractors' staff have the option of eating in the Jubilee Cafeteria in the Palace or Bellamy's cafeteria in 1 Parliament Street. We do not, however, wish to restrict the access enjoyed by longer-term contractors' staff working in the House. Because existing passes do not distinguish effectively between these two categories, such a distinction might currently be difficult to enforce. Nonetheless, **we recommend that temporary works contractors should not be allowed to use the Terrace Cafeteria, and should be advised of the alternatives available to them.**

Other measures to alleviate pressure on the two cafeterias

110. Queues often form in the Terrace cafeteria servery area. We are advised that this is because of the inefficient layout of the serving counters, the hot drink machines and the tills. The design of the Terrace cafeteria is nine years old and we are advised that modern equipment would be a more efficient use of the space and could be designed to comply with listed building requirements. **We recommend that the redesign and refurbishment of the Terrace cafeteria servery area should be an early priority for the Refreshment Department and that external advice should be sought on this redesign, incorporating best practice from providers of similar facilities elsewhere.**

111. The House of Commons Trade Union Side and the Secretaries' and Assistants' Council have suggested that Bellamy's Clubroom and the Gift Kiosk are underused facilities that could be put to better use as take-away sandwich bars also serving hot drinks.⁹² The Clubroom is currently a lunchtime seating area reserved for Members who can bring food from Bellamy's cafeteria to eat there. It had previously contained a servery for Members and their guests but this was removed following the subsidy review. In its current purpose it has been described as "grossly under used".⁹³

112. The gift kiosk in 1 Parliament Street is one of the House's profitable retail outlets, but in this case the level of profit is very small. **We recommend that all full passholders be allowed to use Bellamy's Clubroom and that in the longer term the use of the Clubroom and the gift kiosk in 1 Parliament Street should be reconsidered.**

113. The implementation of other recommendations made below in this Report would also be likely to alleviate pressure on the Terrace and Debate cafeterias.

Press Gallery facilities

114. The Press Gallery has three facilities in the main building to which its members and staff from the Department of the Official Report have access: the Press Dining Room, the Press Cafeteria and the Press Bar. Doorkeepers of the Gallery are also allowed to use the cafeteria and bar.

92 Ev 9, 10

93 Q 75

115. The Press facilities are relatively highly subsidised compared to most other outlets, largely due to their under-use.⁹⁴ The cafeteria has a seating capacity of 63. In a sample two week period in October 2005 the highest number of transactions, including take-away food and drink, over the busiest lunchtime period on a Wednesday (12.30 pm to 1.30 pm) was 57.⁹⁵ The dining room has a seating capacity of 56. During a sample three-week period, the average number of covers served at lunch and dinner was 12.⁹⁶ In 2004–05 each customer served in the Press Gallery cafeteria cost the taxpayer more than six times as much as each customer served in the Debate cafeteria.

Access

116. In evidence to the Catering Committee in the last Parliament, the Press Gallery said that they “would be quite happy for our canteen to be open to other people”.⁹⁷ We understand that subsequent concerns amongst Press Gallery members over security and confidentiality led to a withdrawal of that offer. Mr Hurst has told us that the Press Gallery would now again agree to access being widened, but “on the understanding that [passholders] will not access other areas of the Press Gallery and will respect the confidentiality of documents and private working areas in the Press Gallery”.⁹⁸ The Refreshment Department is sceptical whether a relaxation of the access rules before the current facilities are refurbished would attract more custom from other passholders due to the rather awkward location of the Press Gallery facilities.⁹⁹ However, evidence from both House staff and Members’ staff suggests that other passholders would be interested in using the facilities, even in their current form.¹⁰⁰

117. We appreciate the special relationship between the House and the Press and the need to provide facilities for the Press on the premises. However, the current situation, in which facilities are made available at considerable public expense only for use by the Press and by a small number of House staff, is an anomaly. **We recommend that the Press Gallery Cafeteria should be made available to all full passholders as soon as possible, but that only those categories of passholder currently permitted to use it should be allowed to bring guests.**

118. There would apparently be “great resistance” from the Gallery to the prospect of widening access to the Press bar.¹⁰¹ We would not propose widening access to the bar in its current form. Access to the bar and dining facility are matters that we are minded to look at again once plans for refurbishment have become clear.

94 Ev 20, 37

95 During the same period, with a seating capacity of 148, the Terrace cafeteria served 236 covers. Figures provided by the Refreshment Department, schedule 12

96 Ev 31, 32

97 Catering Committee, *Refreshment Facilities in the House of Commons*, Q 121

98 Q 40

99 Ev 36, 37

100 Ev 9 and Q 51

101 Q 10

Refurbishment

119. Whilst the severe under-use of the press facilities may be due to the limited number of people allowed to access the facilities (only 170 members of the press have permanent desks at Parliament), the age and condition of the kitchen equipment affect the quality of the food served. Members of the press gallery have clearly chosen to eat elsewhere.¹⁰² According to Greg Hurst, the Honorary Secretary of the Parliamentary Press Gallery: “I am sure if, as planned, the kitchens are replaced, the quality of the food will improve and I hope, therefore, my colleagues will use the facilities. I imagine revenue will increase and the subsidy will go down.”¹⁰³

120. Design work on refurbishment has now commenced and a project team is at an advanced stage of considering the detailed options for the facilities.¹⁰⁴ The Gallery has told us that they are particularly concerned to retain a dining room facility for monthly press lunches at which up to 100 covers are served.¹⁰⁵ As Mr Hurst told us: “We would be very loath to give up our press dining room under any circumstances.”¹⁰⁶ **The monthly press lunch is a valued event which needs to be able to continue, but it is scarcely justification for the continued running at public expense of a separate dining facility for the press.**

121. Refurbishment of the Press Gallery catering facilities has been considered in detail by the Finance and Services Committee. **It is vital that the catering facilities that emerge after the Press Gallery refurbishment should be provided at a significantly lower level of subsidy than those that exist at the moment, and that the business case for their provision at this expense should be capable of standing up to detailed public scrutiny. A refurbished press gallery should not contain a separate press dining room.**

Retail outlets

122. The House’s retail activities make a significant profit, on sales of a little under £1 million,¹⁰⁷ making an important contribution towards reducing the subsidy. They deserve further consistent development.

123. The Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (CPA) purchases gifts for visiting delegations from the main gift shop on a frequent basis. They are also well placed to provide feedback from visiting overseas Parliamentarians. According to Andrew Tuggey from the CPA, “the comments which come back [...] are not frightfully kind”.¹⁰⁸ He has suggested that the location of the shop, the range and quality of the goods and the style of customer service need to be improved. The current location is awkward. A larger area would allow a free flow of customers around the merchandise, improve the presentation of

102 Ev 1

103 Q 3

104 Ev 37

105 Q 35

106 Q 15

107 RD evidence, Schedule 7 [not printed]

108 Q 85

souvenirs and would therefore increase sales and profits. Alternative accommodation is considered below in paragraph 125.

124. Souvenirs need to reflect an appropriate use of the House of Commons 'brand' and the image of Parliament, and they must also must be perceived as special, attractive, affordable and good value for money if they are to sell. Not all the products within the House's range achieve these goals. Products should be benchmarked against the souvenirs of other Parliaments, the House of Lords gift shop and outside organisations and venues with a reputation for good quality merchandise. **We recommend that the range and pricing of retail items sold on behalf of the House should be subject to benchmarking and that there should be internal and external review of the range of products available.**

Reorganisation of Palace facilities

125. There is clearly potential in the longer term for reviewing how the existing Refreshment Department accommodation could be better used to serve Members' needs. Suggestions the Department has already given us include converting the Churchill Room into a combined bar and brasserie; relocating the souvenir shop to the area currently occupied by Strangers' Bar to create a more substantial and impressive retail space which would increase revenues; and providing a take-away facility offering speciality coffees in the current souvenir shop or where Annie's Bar is currently situated.¹⁰⁹ We have already made recommendations for the change in style of the Churchill Room in the short term as we are aware that any structural works to change the use of rooms in the Palace need a minimum lead time of 18 months to two years due to the need for planning consents.¹¹⁰ **We recommend that the Refreshment Department's strategy should have a longer-term perspective, and that the Department should bring suggestions to us for ways in which its accommodation might usefully be reconfigured.**

109 Ev 23

110 Ev 35

7 Looking outside the House

Joint Working with the Lords

126. As mentioned previously in paragraph 15, the House of Lords has its own separate Refreshment Department that provides facilities for Peers and staff and a Refreshment Committee that monitors and manages the Department's services.

House of Lords facilities

127. There has always been meal-time traffic between the two Houses, with the greater part of the traffic heading in the Commons direction. In the recent survey conducted by the Refreshment Department, although Members and staff of the House of Lords accounted for only five per cent of users in the Debate cafeteria, they were a substantial ten per cent of users in the Terrace cafeteria.¹¹¹ The House of Lords three-year kitchen refurbishment project ends in 2006. Lords staff who have been using the Commons facilities for the duration of the refurbishment are likely to revert to the new, larger restaurant facility in the Lords, together with those from 'the Commons end' who were regular users of the previous Lords cafeteria, which was significantly smaller than the Terrace cafeteria.¹¹² Therefore although the reopening of the Lords facility is unlikely to make a significant difference to demand for the Debate cafeteria, it will undoubtedly relieve some of the pressure on the Terrace cafeteria. We believe that it would be useful for the House of Lords to conduct a survey of users of their newly refurbished facility to help assess the traffic between the two Houses for future improvements to facilities. **We recommend that the Refreshment Departments in the Lords and Commons formally share information on the usage of their catering facilities and their selling prices on a regular and recurrent basis.**

128. We are also aware that the House of Lords is planning to include a large catering facility in the newly purchased Fielden House.¹¹³ We consider that whilst such an outlet would be of limited appeal to those based north of Bridge Street, it could prove useful for alleviating pressure on the Terrace cafeteria. We await the development of plans for Fielden House with interest.

Formal contact between the two Refreshment Departments

129. Maintaining a good working relationship with the House of Lords, particularly in the provision of shared services, is considered necessary by the House of Commons service in achieving its objectives.¹¹⁴ The previous Commons Catering Committee recommended that there should be "regular formal contact between the senior officials in the Refreshment

111 Ev 40, 41

112 Ev 52

113 *Ibid.*

114 House of Commons Corporate Business Plan 2006, p 5

Departments of the two Houses, to co-ordinate provision across the Estate”.¹¹⁵ Since then, significant steps have been taken by both Departments to improve communication and co-ordination of procurement. The Refreshment Department told us that savings have been achieved in the tender of some key supply contracts through joint procurement with the House of Lords.¹¹⁶ This was due to the increased purchasing power of the combined Departments and the shared staff resources for the tender processes. Current areas of joint procurement include general groceries, staff taxis, linen, disposables, recruitment, training, cleaning materials and dairy products. We understand that other areas of future joint procurement are under discussion between the two Houses’ purchasing authorities.

130. The Refreshment Department also told us that the Heads of both Departments are in regular contact and that there was increasing co-operation with the Lords on information exchange and cross-training. We welcome the work done by the purchasing authorities and the Heads of both Departments in that area and the House of Lords Refreshment Committee echoes this.¹¹⁷ **We recommend that the purchasing authorities of both Houses continue to consider which areas would benefit from joint procurement in the future. We expect the House of Commons Refreshment Department to explore further joint working with its Lords counterpart.**

Contracting out of services

131. As part of our inquiry we have considered whether the House of Commons should investigate contracting out its refreshment facilities – as has been done in a number of other Parliaments across Europe, the European Parliament facilities in Brussels, Strasbourg and Luxembourg, the Scottish Parliament, the National Assembly for Wales, many government departments, and in local government. Catering contractors experienced in working within organisations with security concerns already operate in Whitehall. We are advised that many large self-operated catering venues contract out one part of their operation as a benchmarking exercise. The Refreshment Department has told us that there is not a management mindset against contracting out parts of the catering service, but it has advocated caution in doing so.

132. We believe that the case for contracting out part of its operations needs further examination. The House Administration already makes extensive use of contractors to provide a range of specialist services. It would be crucial that any such exercise should not adversely affect the core services for Members located around the Chamber and that staff terms and conditions should be protected. **We recommend that the Refreshment Department should identify reasons why parts or all of its operations should not be successfully contracted out in order to deliver a better quality of service and value for money, and bring suggestions to us by the end of October as to how this might be achieved on a pilot or permanent basis.**

¹¹⁵ Catering Committee, *Refreshment Facilities in the House of Commons*, para 51

¹¹⁶ Ev 22

¹¹⁷ Ev 52

8 Conclusion

133. The Refreshment Department operates a large and complex operation with great success. This is in large part because of the dedication of its staff. However, there is a significant body of dissatisfaction with some of the services provided, and in this Report we have made recommendations for change to meet the evolving requirements of Members, staff, and others based on the Parliamentary Estate. There is a clear need to improve the quality of food and service whilst taking into account the desire to do more to reduce the level of public subsidy.

134. A number of our recommendations for improvement can be implemented without significant cost, such as:

- a) The development of a ten-year Refreshment Department strategy
- b) Menu changes in the Members' and Strangers' Dining Rooms
- c) Changing the concept and menu of the Churchill Room to a quality grill room
- d) Improvements to the cold counter and to the menu in the Tea Room
- e) Better sandwiches and salads in the cafeterias
- f) Widening access to the Press Gallery cafeteria
- g) Improving the enforcement of access regulations in the Debate and Terrace Cafeterias

135. The implementation of some of our other recommendations, particularly those for the longer term, will involve capital cost, but increased usage and more efficient deployment of resources should allow this cost to be more than recouped in due course.

Conclusions and recommendations

Money

1. We accept that the trend towards controlling and reducing the subsidy is a reality. Furthermore, we believe that the Refreshment Department should be more actively trying to lower costs in a way that does not affect the quality of the goods and services provided. (Paragraph 29)
2. We have sought to establish whether there are measures that can be taken to improve the quality of service that Members and other users receive from the Refreshment Department, while at the same time seeking to sustain the subsidy reduction that has already been achieved. (Paragraph 29)
3. At times when Members are not around, such as weekends and during recess periods, we believe the Refreshment Department could become more proactive in its marketing and the Parliamentary Estate could become more open to hosting appropriate events. (Paragraph 31)
4. Matching human resources to demand is an ongoing challenge for Refreshment Department management. (Paragraph 32)

Strategy and innovation

5. In view of the challenges it faces and the desirability of co-ordination with the ten-year works programme, we consider that the Department would benefit from a ten-year strategy document, with objectives clearly set out in areas such as: service levels, productivity, benchmarking, selling prices, quality of product and staff training. (Paragraph 44)
6. We recommend that the Refreshment Department prepare a draft strategy document for us to consider within three months of the publication of this Report, with suggestions for revised specifications and with timescales and key performance objectives for each part of the service to deliver the strategy. (Paragraph 47)
7. We recommend that an individual within the Refreshment Department should take responsibility for encouraging, gathering and analysing innovative ideas from both within and outside the Department that might help to improve service delivery. (Paragraph 49)
8. a survey several months after any changes to the service might well be a useful way of monitoring customer satisfaction, as long as it has high visibility to all those affected. (Paragraph 51)

Productivity

9. We recommend that a productivity review of the Refreshment Department should be carried out once a strategy for the Department has been agreed to see if structural and operational changes would help it to reach its targets more efficiently. (Paragraph 52)

Purchasing

10. We recommend that the Refreshment Department should investigate whether cost and labour efficiencies could be achieved by reducing the number of suppliers used. Given the difficulties of delivery to the Palace of Westminster and the constraints on storage on-site, and in the context of an ongoing study of the options for off-site security clearance of delivery vehicles, we further recommend that the Department should consider options for transferring some of its delivery operations off-site, for subsequent onward delivery to the Palace by a sole operator. (Paragraph 55)

Benchmarking

11. Benchmarking with the private sector as well as the public sector is essential to ensure quality of service. We recommend that the Department benchmark its services strategically and consistently against catering businesses elsewhere, including against high street venues that customers might use in preference to its own facilities. Benchmarking reports should be considered every six months as part of the Department's strategy. The Department might benefit from the use of an independent benchmarking service. Staff at all levels within the Department should be involved in this benchmarking exercise. (Paragraph 57)

Opening hours

12. Given the limited additional cost involved and the apparent demand for such a service, we recommend that the Refreshment Department should provide a limited service in either the Terrace Cafeteria or the Dispatch Box until 5.30 pm in August 2006 on a trial basis to assess demand. (Paragraph 64)
13. We recommend that the Refreshment Department should review the opening hours of facilities that are underused at certain times, such as the service in the Members' Tea Room on non-sitting Fridays, and should consider a reduced service, in terms of menu, staff or space, if there would be a cost benefit in doing so. (Paragraph 66)

Palace dining rooms

14. We consider that the time is right to change the style of service in the Members' and Strangers' Dining Rooms. Our preference would be for a brasserie-style restaurant, with a simple menu changed on a regular basis, possibly supplemented by a high-quality buffet. Similar changes have been made at venues such as the Members' restaurant at the RAC City Clubhouse. If carried out tastefully and in keeping with the heritage environment of the Palace, this would have a number of benefits. The simpler menus and service style should improve food quality and speed of delivery,

and should also in the longer term free resources front of house and in the kitchens, some of which might go towards improving quality, some towards more attractive pricing, and some towards reducing the subsidy. (Paragraph 73)

15. We recommend that the Churchill Room should offer a simple but excellent quality grill room menu. We understand that this change should not be complicated or expensive to implement. (Paragraph 74)
16. We look forward to discussing with the House authorities how they envisage taking forward our proposals for improved offerings in the dining rooms in the Palace and expect to examine sample menus and draft timescales for conversion in the coming months. (Paragraph 75)
17. The effect on usage of implementing the changes to the Palace dining rooms that we have recommended needs to become apparent before any changes to the access regulations for these facilities should be considered. (Paragraph 77)

Banqueting

18. We recommend that the banqueting service offered by the House should be benchmarked against the offerings of competitors at an early opportunity to ensure that customers' preferences are being catered for as effectively as possible. (Paragraph 78)

Members' Tea Room

19. We recommend that the Tea Room should remain substantially as it is, but that its menu should be reviewed with an eye to improving the quality of the cold counter, introducing a counter for a limited range of hot food to be served within the Tea Room, and increasing the extent to which dishes can be prepared and plated within the Tea Room itself. (Paragraph 80)

Terrace Marquee

20. We recommend that the Parliamentary Estates Directorate prepare options for a replacement for the Terrace Marquee with indicative costs for our further consideration. (Paragraph 81)

Bars

21. We recommend that any Refreshment Department longer-term plans for the relocation of facilities within the Palace should include looking for alternative locations for the Strangers' Bar which would allow it to realise greater potential. External advice should be sought on location and design. (Paragraph 82)
22. We recommend that detailed consideration be given to options for introducing sandwiches and other light pre-packaged snacks into the Strangers' Bar. (Paragraph 83)
23. We recommend no change to the Smoking Room. (Paragraph 84)

24. We recommend that Annie's Bar should be closed, and the pool table suitably relocated. Options should then be put to us for alternative uses of the space. (Paragraph 85)

Cafeterias

25. We recommend that the Refreshment Department should seek to improve the quality and freshness of sandwiches and salads served in the cafeterias. (Paragraph 87)
26. We recommend that the Refreshment Department should ensure that pricing in its outlets is based on a consistent model and does not act as an artificial disincentive to the purchase of healthier food and drink. We further recommend that the Department should examine the feasibility of providing foods to meet special requirements such as gluten-free, kosher and halal diets. (Paragraph 89)
27. We welcome the introduction of a pilot recycling scheme in the cafeterias, and look forward to this being rolled out as swiftly as possible to outlets across the Parliamentary Estate. (Paragraph 90)
28. The most effective way of increasing the popularity of Bellamy's will be to ensure that standards of food and service—and pricing—compare favourably with other venues on the Estate. We recommend that the Refreshment Department should continue their proactive approach to promoting Bellamy's cafeteria in 1 Parliament Street. (Paragraph 101)
29. We recommend that the Refreshment Department erect clearly visible signage outside all outlets indicating the appropriate access rules and showing sample passes for the avoidance of doubt. (Paragraph 104)
30. We recommend that the Refreshment Department make available through the Pass Office to all new passholders on arrival a simple guide to the rules on access to its facilities, as well as electronically on the Parliamentary Intranet. (Paragraph 105)
31. We recommend that a designated member of staff should be posted outside the Debate and Terrace cafeterias at lunchtimes on Mondays to Wednesdays for two weeks running and then at regular intervals afterwards, tasked with controlling access and advising passholders of the regulations. (Paragraph 106)
32. We recommend that civil servants should only have access to the House's catering facilities when on specific parliamentary business, and that they should be required to obtain special passes to enable them to have this access. (Paragraph 108)
33. We recommend that temporary works contractors should not be allowed to use the Terrace Cafeteria, and should be advised of the alternatives available to them. (Paragraph 109)
34. We recommend that the redesign and refurbishment of the Terrace cafeteria servery area should be an early priority for the Refreshment Department and that external advice should be sought on this redesign, incorporating best practice from providers of similar facilities elsewhere. (Paragraph 110)

35. We recommend that all full passholders be allowed to use Bellamy's Clubroom and that in the longer term the use of the Clubroom and the gift kiosk in 1 Parliament Street should be reconsidered. (Paragraph 112)

Press Gallery facilities

36. We recommend that the Press Gallery Cafeteria should be made available to all full passholders as soon as possible, but that only those categories of passholder currently permitted to use it should be allowed to bring guests. (Paragraph 117)
37. The monthly press lunch is a valued event which needs to be able to continue, but it is scarcely justification for the continued running at public expense of a separate dining facility for the press. (Paragraph 120)
38. It is vital that the catering facilities that emerge after the Press Gallery refurbishment should be provided at a significantly lower level of subsidy than those that exist at the moment, and that the business case for their provision at this expense should be capable of standing up to detailed public scrutiny. A refurbished press gallery should not contain a separate press dining room. (Paragraph 121)

Retail outlets

39. We recommend that the range and pricing of retail items sold on behalf of the House should be subject to benchmarking and that there should be internal and external review of the range of products available. (Paragraph 124)

Reorganisation of Palace facilities

40. We recommend that the Refreshment Department's strategy should have a longer-term perspective, and that the Department should bring suggestions to us for ways in which its accommodation might usefully be reconfigured. (Paragraph 125)

Looking outside the House

41. We recommend that the Refreshment Departments in the Lords and Commons formally share information on the usage of their catering facilities and their selling prices on a regular and recurrent basis. (Paragraph 127)
42. We recommend that the purchasing authorities of both Houses continue to consider which areas would benefit from joint procurement in the future. We expect the House of Commons Refreshment Department to explore further joint working with its Lords counterpart. (Paragraph 130)
43. We recommend that the Refreshment Department should identify reasons why parts or all of its operations should not be successfully contracted out in order to deliver a better quality of service and value for money, and bring suggestions to us by the end of October as to how this might be achieved on a pilot or permanent basis. (Paragraph 132)

Formal Minutes

Tuesday 31 January 2006

Members present:

Mr Frank Doran, in the Chair

Mr Bob Ainsworth
Janet Anderson
Mr Brian H Donohoe
Mr Eric Forth
Mr Neil Gerrard
Helen Jones

Mr Kevan Jones
Peter Luff
Mr Andrew Robathan
John Thurso
Pete Wishart

* * *

The Committee deliberated.

Draft Report (Refreshment Department services), proposed by the Chairman, brought up and read.

Ordered, That the Chairman's draft Report be read a second time, paragraph by paragraph.

Paragraphs 1 to 135 read and agreed to.

Summary agreed to.

Resolved, That the Report be the Second Report of the Committee to the House.

Several papers were ordered to be appended to the Minutes of Evidence.

Ordered, That the Appendices to the Minutes of Evidence taken before the Committee be reported to the House.

Ordered, That the Chairman make the Report to the House.

* * *

[Adjourned till Tuesday 14th February at half-past Three o'clock.]

List of witnesses

Tuesday 29 November 2005

Mr Greg Hurst , Hon Secretary, and Mr John Hipwood , Chairman, Parliamentary Press Gallery	Ev 2
Dr Chris Pond OBE , President, and Ms Anne Foster , Administrator, House of Commons Whitley Committee Trade Union Side	Ev 11
Mr Peter Vine , Chairman, Secretaries' and Assistants' Council	Ev 11
Mr Russell Cartwright , Vice Chairman, Transport & General Workers Union Parliamentary Branch	Ev 11
Mr Andrew Tuggey , Secretary, Commonwealth Parliamentary Association, UK Branch	Ev 11

List of written evidence

Memoranda submitted by witnesses

Parliamentary Press Gallery	Ev 1, Ev 17
House of Commons Whitley Committee Trade Union Side	Ev 8
Secretaries' and Assistants' Council	Ev 9
Transport & General Workers' Union Parliamentary Branch	Ev 10
Commonwealth Parliamentary Association	Ev 11

Memoranda submitted by the Refreshment Department Ev 18–42

Memoranda submitted by Members

Gordon Banks	Ev 42
Ms Dawn Butler	Ev 42
Rt Hon Sir Menzies Campbell	Ev 42
Nia Griffith	Ev 42
Meg Hillier	Ev 43
Mr Eric Illsley	Ev 43
Susan Kramer	Ev 43
Kali Mountford	Ev 43
Dr Nick Palmer	Ev 43
Rt Hon John Redwood	Ev 43
Alison Seabeck	Ev 43
Mr Barry Sheerman	Ev 44
Mr Andrew Slaughter	Ev 44
Dr Phyllis Starkey	Ev 44
Mr Anthony Steen	Ev 45
Mr Andrew Turner	Ev 45

Memoranda submitted by Members' staff and House of Commons staff

Yasmin Atallah, Asad Rehman and Lara Sami	Ev 45
Will Conway	Ev 46
George Crozier	Ev 46
Portia Dadley	Ev 46
Ingrid Davidson	Ev 46
Libby Dewdney-Herbert	Ev 46
Peter Harborne	Ev 47
Brian Harrison	Ev 47
Mrs Christine Heald	Ev 47
Christine Hemming	Ev 47
Rowena Macdonald	Ev 48
Rosemary Mead	Ev 48
Ann Palmer	Ev 48
Keith Porteous Wood	Ev 48
Chairman of the Public and Commercial Services Union (PCS)	Ev 48
Finnian Rook	Ev 50
Linda Rostron	Ev 50
Doug Sauvé	Ev 50
Diana Thompson	Ev 50

Memoranda submitted by others working on the Parliamentary Estate

Mashood Ahmed	Ev 51
Association of former Members of Parliament	Ev 51
Caroline Cawston	Ev 51
June Hart	Ev 51
Jonathan Woodhead	Ev 52
Baroness Fookes, Chair of the House of Lords Refreshment Committee	Ev 52

Reports from the Administration Committee

Session 2005–06

First Special Report	Publication of summary records of discussion and committee papers	HC 659
First Report	Post-election services	HC 777

Oral evidence

Taken before the Administration Committee

on Tuesday 29 November 2005

Members present:

Mr Frank Doran, Chairman

Rt Hon Bob Ainsworth
Derek Conway
Rt Hon Frank Dobson
Mr Brian H Donohoe
Mr Neil Gerrard
Helen Jones

Mr Kevan Jones
David Lepper
Rt Hon Patrick McLoughlin
John Thurso
Pete Wishart

Memorandum by the Parliamentary Press Gallery

REFRESHMENT DEPARTMENT SERVICES INQUIRY

The Parliamentary Press Gallery represents the 300 or so journalists accredited by the Serjeant at Arms, of whom around 170 are based permanently in accommodation provided by the Commons. These facilities have the following catering services:

- Cafeteria
- Waiter service dining room
- Banqueting services for monthly lunches and occasional reception functions in the Press dining room
- Bar

The cafeteria, dining room and bar are also used by staff of the Official Report.

These services are highly valued by members of the Parliamentary Press Gallery who work extended hours which span a period from 7.30 am to midnight or 1.00 am after critical votes. Although these services are provided only when the House is sitting, the Press Gallery is the permanent base of its members and is in use almost every day of the year.

CAFETERIA

This provides hot and cold meals, drinks and snacks on a counter service basis. It is the most popular and widely used of our catering facilities and is of particular importance as at times journalists have only a brief time in which to have a meal whilst covering debates, committee hearings or other parliamentary business. Although this service is highly valued there is and has been for some time concern amongst members of the Press Gallery about the quality of the hot food served. We have raised this with the Refreshment Department and understand and accept that this is due to the age and condition of the kitchens and equipment at the disposal of the staff, of whom we have no criticism and whose work is much appreciated. As a result, however, some of our members tend to eat elsewhere in the Palace.

DINING ROOM

This is a table service restaurant within the Press Gallery. It is the only place within the Palace of Westminster in which our members can book a table in their own name and entertain at their own expense a Member, Officer of the House, Peer or other guest. It provides good food and service. In addition it is the venue for our monthly lunches, at which the guest speaker is normally a government or opposition spokesperson, and the only suitable space in which we can hold functions (such as the reception for new Members of Parliament which took place in June this year). It is therefore of central importance. Like many of the refreshment facilities within the House, its custom appears to have fallen off following the changes in sitting hours. However, on evenings during which there are critical votes in the House the dining room gets very busy and is of vital importance.

BAR

This is a popular facility which we understand to be one of the busiest within the Palace. Whilst it is used particularly in the evenings, it is an important part of our monthly lunch arrangements (at which most of the guests are Members or Peers) and is a focus for the social life of the Gallery.

THE FUTURE

The Parliamentary Estates Department has informed us of plans to replace and re-equip the kitchens that serve the Press Gallery's catering facilities as part of a project to renovate the whole Press Gallery area. We are in discussions about the precise plans to reconfigure the bar, cafeteria and dining room in locations deemed to be more efficient by the Palace and which will allow us to maximise office accommodation. We are informed that these works may take place in the summer recesses 2006 and 2007.

If work to replace the kitchens and reconfigure the facilities goes ahead as planned we would hope to achieve more flexible services which make optimum use of space and encourage useage. In particular we would like to see an area where hot drinks (coffee/cappuccino/tea/mineral water etc) could be available throughout the day in the manner of the Despatch Box in Portcullis House. We feel that this would help retain business within the Press Gallery and so avoid adding to queues at other popular venues at peak times.

Given that the House is planning to invest in improved catering facilities, and that the Press Gallery is in use throughout Parliamentary recesses, we would urge that consideration be given to keeping open some basic functions throughout the calendar year, for example, the bar and basic cafeteria counter service.

Separately we have been informed about plans to renovate the south roof of the Palace over the Press Gallery dining room. We understand that starting in the spring of next year these works may result in the restriction or temporary closure of our catering facilities. If that is the case we would wish to open discussions with the House on how temporary replacements may be put in place to replicate our existing facilities for the duration of the works, namely: a counter-service cafeteria, waiter service restaurant, monthly banqueting facilities (for up to 80-90 people), an occasional function room and, if affected, the bar.

We would be happy to answer questions on any of the points covered in our submission and to talk to the Administration Committee if required.

3 November 2005

Witnesses: Mr Greg Hurst, Hon Secretary and Mr John Hipwood, Chairman, Parliamentary Press Gallery, gave evidence.

Q1 Chairman: Welcome, gentlemen. Thank you very much for the evidence you have supplied. Is there anything you want to say before we start questioning?

Mr Hurst: Very briefly, Chairman. I have read the other submissions to the Committee and I wonder if I can correct two points. The Trade Union Side say in their point number seven regarding press facilities: "Precious space is being set aside to cater for a relatively small number of political correspondents . . .". Can I draw your attention to the fact there are 300 Press Gallery passholders, of whom around 170 have permanent desks in the Gallery. The press cafeteria is also open to the staff of the Official Report. There has been no change in the numbers that I know of, certainly no decline from ". . . a large parliamentary reporting staff" that is referred to. Also, the Secretaries' and Assistants' Council talk, in their submission about some of the catering facilities being for full passholders which they say means grey passholders only. I do not think that is correct, I think holders of lobby passes such as mine and John's are classified as full passes. One final point, they talk about members of the press working from 1 Millbank, I think they mean 4 Millbank. No members of the press work in 1 Millbank.

Q2 Mr Jones: No doubt this will get heavily reported in tomorrow's newspapers but one of the issues which is being put forward here is that the press cafeteria

subsidy is six times higher than other refreshment department outlets. I am not saying that because I doubt the subsidy figures. Can you comment in terms of whether or not the facility provided for the press should be subsidised as other facilities are in this place?

Mr Hurst: The view of whether they should be subsidised is one for the House. They are subsidised, as far as I know, in the same way that catering facilities across the House of Commons are.

Q3 Mr Jones: No, you are six times more expensive according to this than anywhere else.

Mr Hurst: In my submission I said that although we appreciate very much the facilities provided there is a problem with the food in the cafeteria. We do not blame the staff for that. We are told by the catering department that the kitchen equipment is at the end of its natural life and in need of replacement. I am sure if, as planned, the kitchens are replaced the quality of the food will improve and I hope, therefore, my colleagues will use the facilities. I imagine revenue will increase and the subsidy will go down.

Q4 Mr Jones: We are talking about a major refurbishment which will cost £1½ million. Should the organisations that are benefiting from the facilities which are being provided not contribute to those rather than the taxpayers?

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Mr Hurst: I cannot see how that can be done other than by raising the prices substantially of the press area. I do not know if that is what you have in mind? I point out to you that they are not exclusively used by the press but by staff of the House, members of the Official Report.

Mr Hipwood: The problem, Mr Jones, is we have got this chicken and egg situation with the Press Gallery cafeteria whereby members do not patronise it as much as they might do because of the food on offer there. It has nothing to do with the efforts of the staff, which we commend at all times. I am sure, as Greg says, the numbers of Press Gallery members who use the cafeteria would rise if the facilities improve. I am not aware of the figures you have given of the level of subsidy.

Q5 Mr Jones: I am not saying that I agree with them.

Mr Hipwood: I am sure the level of subsidy would reduce if we could get that extra number of people into the cafeteria which would follow the refurbishment.

Q6 Mr Jones: I appreciate that is a comment you raise in other parts as well. Can you give us some examples of what the real problems are and why people are not using it? Is it choice or quality?

Mr Hurst: In previous discussions the catering department said to us that when the food is served under hot lights on the counters that it is of good quality, and I have no reason to doubt that. The time it stays under the lights means the quality of the food can deteriorate before enough servings have been made to replace it with a fresh plate. That is the analysis and I think that sounds right to me.

Q7 Mr Jones: What about choice in terms of menus and what is on offer? One thing that we noticed on our tour of the Refreshment Department was there is a big difference between certain facilities and, as you say, the way food is presented, also choice, different menus are offered that do make certain facilities more popular than others.

Mr Hipwood: The choice on offer to members of the Press Gallery and the Hansard staff is reflected by kitchen facilities behind the scenes. The staff provide what they can for us. It tends to be what might be called traditional dishes. We have usually got chips on offer. We have maybe one pasta dish, one vegetarian dish and a main course, and always a soup. It does not go beyond that really. There is a fresh salad bar as well. I am sure the choice is restricted by what goes on 10 yards behind. I have never been into the kitchen, I should have done probably, but I am sure that is what causes the restriction, the size of the kitchen.

Q8 Mr Gerrard: You mentioned the comment from the Union side about numbers. Obviously they feel that they would like to see the facilities in the Press Gallery opened up to more passholders. Would you have a problem with that? Do you think if the kitchens were improved it would be full anyway?

Mr Hipwood: We have discussed this at great length. There are disparate views amongst members of the Press Gallery, as you can well imagine. I believe that we should have perhaps an experimental period where other passholders are allowed into the Press Gallery cafeteria to see if we can boost numbers. The dining room is another issue which perhaps we can talk about in a minute. Whether or not other members of staff from around the Estate would want to come into the Press cafeteria in light of the current conditions is another matter but certainly, as officers, we do not object to that idea.

Mr Hurst: The press cafeteria is small. There are 58 seats and I am told one table is broken and we have got 56 at the moment. Clearly the capacity is not there for very large numbers of passholders from elsewhere in the Palace to start coming in on a regular basis. There is another sensitivity which is that within the Press Gallery as a whole there is an issue of confidentiality. For example, in the lower Press Gallery there are copies of embargoed reports, sometimes from committees of the House, sometimes advanced reports from other sources are in circulation in the Gallery. There is a worry among some members of the Gallery that if other passholders are allowed into the press premises generally then there could be a difficulty with other passholders having access to some of the confidential material we have. If we can be assured that only passholders would use the press cafeteria, and that facility only, then I think that would be addressed. As John says, we would welcome them. I have not been asked in any other context before by any other group representing passholders for access to the cafeteria. I have read their evidence talking about queuing elsewhere in Palace facilities. If they want to come into the press cafeteria, yes, we can try it out for an experimental period and see if it works if we do not get too many people coming into this small facility to mean it cannot cope with the numbers.

Mr Hipwood: Strangely enough, and perhaps not surprisingly, queues do form too in the Press Gallery cafeteria, usually at the obvious times: 12.45, 1.00, 1.15. Any additional staff coming in would find that they would have to queue too.

Q9 Mr Gerrard: Forgive my ignorance: are the facilities open during the recess and, if so, what are the hours?

Mr Hurst: No, they are not. The Parliamentary Press Gallery, in my view, is one of the most intensively used areas of the Palace. It is a permanent office accommodation of about 170 journalists and that is during recesses as well. During recesses these have always been closed. As I said in my submission to the Committee, if the works planned by the House are undertaken and we have new kitchens installed in the Gallery, I would like the Committee to consider opening some of our facilities during recesses, and I mean by that the cafeteria and the bar because journalists remain at work in the Press Gallery.

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Mr Hipwood: During recesses we do what everybody else does and we go down to the Terrace and to Portcullis to eat and drink.

Mr Gerrard: That is another reason they get overcrowded.

Q10 David Lepper: Mr Hipwood, you made a distinction between the cafeteria and the dining room, you have not mentioned the bar. While we are pursuing this idea about access to other categories of users of the Palace, what is your view about use of the dining room and the bar?

Mr Hipwood: I think there would be great resistance amongst members of the Press Gallery to open up the bar to anyone who is not invited in by a member of the Press Gallery or indeed, of course, to Members of the House. That is an area where private conversations, conversations sometimes on a lobby basis take place on a regular basis. The same can be said too for the dining room which is the only place where members of the Press Gallery can book a table for themselves, invite in MPs or Whitehall press officers, indeed anyone from outside. A lot of entertaining of MPs goes on in there. Unless it was for specific occasions, perhaps for officers of the House who want to use it for business purposes, I think we would have difficulty with that.

Mr Hurst: There is not a request in the submission for access to the bar.

Q11 David Lepper: No.

Mr Hurst: With regard to the dining room, if it was opened up to other passholders, I think it would put the press dining room out of sync with the dining rights elsewhere in the Palace. I believe there are restrictions on access to dining rooms for other passholders. What John referred to with regard to certain officers from the House is I am told the catering department is looking at allowing certain senior staff, who are not classified as officers, to be able to book dining facilities in order to entertain in a business capacity. If the Committee wished it, we would be happy to extend the invitation. That sort of entertaining could be done in the press dining room and it would be approved dining by staff of the House.

Q12 David Lepper: Can I ask about the Press Gallery use of Annie's Bar: is it increasing, decreasing, or static? Is it a useful place to have from your point of view?

Mr Hipwood: From our point of view, there are members of the Press Gallery who regularly use Annie's Bar; there are not enough of them. Various efforts have been made by the staff in Annie's and, indeed, by the former chairman of the Catering Committee to boost numbers. It is not the most attractive bar in the House of Commons. The Press Gallery members' attendance there reflects that, and no more than that. Annie's when it was on its former site, closer to the Terrace cafeteria, was very well-used by members of the Press Gallery.

Q13 Mr McLoughlin: 300 journalists accredited by the Serjeant at Arms, what do they report because I do not see very much in the papers?

Mr Hurst: I am not an editor so I cannot answer for any journalists other than myself. Just as Members of Parliament do not usefully spend all their working day in the Chamber of the House of Commons, fewer parliamentary journalists spend their time in the reporters' gallery. They may well spend their time in select committee hearings, reporting other parliamentary business or having conversations with Members of the House, Members of the government, Members of either House.

Q14 Mr McLoughlin: That is a very good answer. I will remember it when we are asked the same question.

Mr Hipwood: Mr McLoughlin, as a member of the regional press—I am not sure what your local regional newspaper is, probably the *Derby Evening Telegraph*—the regional press steadfastly and regularly report what is said in the House of Commons Chamber and will continue to do that.

Q15 Mr McLoughlin: One of the points you make in your submission to us is the dining room is the only place where journalists can book a table in their own right. Would it be of help if you were allowed to book a table elsewhere?

Mr Hurst: If an offer was made in addition to having our press dining room, clearly we would welcome that. If any attempt was made to make an offer instead of having a press dining room, we would resist it very strongly because the House can make a rule but can take a rule or a privilege away. We would be very loathe to give up our press dining room under any circumstances.

Q16 Mr McLoughlin: We are talking about the refurbishment of the kitchens which is going to cost a considerable amount of money. If there is not the utilisation of the facilities, and yet we have got other areas in the Palace where perhaps we are concerned about the utilisation and the use of those services, it does seem odd to be spending more money giving more possible locations for dining when we are not making great utilisation of places we have got already where we have spent a huge amount of money on refurbishing kitchens.

Mr Hurst: Of course all these works are not at our request, they are initiatives of the House.

Q17 Mr McLoughlin: You said about the quality of the food and if you get better kitchens you will get better use.

Mr Hurst: I acknowledge that. Can I make two points. Firstly, we do not call the shots here, Members of Parliament do. For example, the Chamber's sitting hours, which were agreed by Members of the House had a big impact on the dining trends in our dining room, as it did, I gather, in a lot of the dining facilities across the House of Commons. Although you have reversed that on Tuesday evenings, once people get into a certain habit it takes a while to alter that. Secondly, earlier

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you were asking about the focus of the parliamentary and political reporting, when parliamentary debates are clearly of interest to our readers and newsworthy the Press Gallery just fills up. We are not in control of the business. I remember on the night of the debate and final vote on the Iraq war in March 2003, the Press Gallery was absolutely heaving, the press dining room was so full that every seat was taken and journalists stayed around until the final vote was taken and then a long time after that to report it. If Parliament puts on business that is newsworthy we will be there. News is a very competitive business and journalism follows the news.

Mr Hipwood: More recently with the 90-day vote then the Gallery was absolutely packed on that day, albeit slightly earlier in the day. That reflected too the fact journalists are there and they are working not always, as you say, in the Reporters' Gallery but they are there. They will staff it if the business is there to interest people outside. We are only reflecting what people outside are prepared to read in the long run.

Q18 Mr McLoughlin: Out of the 300 journalists, how does that break down between TV and newspapers? Have you got any figures on that?

Mr Hipwood: I have not got those figures, I do not know whether Greg has to hand. I would say it would be something like two-thirds writing journalists and one-third broadcasting. That is purely a guess. It may be three-quarters to a quarter. We could get those figures for you.

Q19 Mr Ainsworth: Forgive me, I know little or nothing about the area of the Press Gallery and that gives me both advantages and disadvantages I suppose. Other than history and customary practice, what is the reason for maintaining any refreshment facilities up there at all?

Mr Hurst: In a parliamentary democracy I hope you accept that a free press is central to the process.

Q20 Mr Ainsworth: I am not suggesting there be no facilities for the press but separate dining room, refreshment facilities, specifically to serve the Press Gallery. What is the reason and the justification for that?

Mr Hurst: The siting of the cafeteria, for instance, reflects the fact that you have a large number of passholders both of the Parliamentary Press Gallery and the Official Report in one part of the Palace. When parliamentary business requires then reporters from the Press Gallery and from Hansard are there reporting the business of Parliament. A lot of entertaining takes place in the dining room and members of the press are not allowed to book a table in any other dining room in the Palace under their names.

Q21 Mr Ainsworth: What is the pattern of use of the people who the Press Gallery is there for? I know there are 300 passes, for instance the *Coventry Evening Telegraph* has got one of those and the

reporter manages to get down when her editor lets her, which is not very often. How many people are spending a prolonged period of the day up there?

Mr Hurst: As I say in the submission, of the 300 passholders some have permanent places of work elsewhere. The *Coventry Evening Telegraph*, I do not think they have a permanent desk in the Gallery, presumably they would come and go as parliamentary business needs them.

Q22 Mr Ainsworth: How many—

Mr Hurst: Of those 300, 170 are based in the Press Gallery. They would work there as their permanent place of work. Their working day would be spent in the Gallery.

Q23 Mr Ainsworth: Would it be better from your point of view, as well as democracy's point of view, if you got out and mixed a bit?

Mr Hurst: The places we want to get out and mix are in the Members' Lobby, the Committee Corridor, the Reporters' Gallery and in the precincts of the House of Commons. We do not want to go elsewhere, we are parliamentary and political reporters.

Q24 Mr Ainsworth: What is the matter with you going out in your lunch hour and reporting from this House for instance? You might talk to some non-journalists and get another view.

Mr Hurst: As full passholders we are entitled to have lunch in Portcullis House, some of my colleagues do. I very much value that for precisely the reason you say. The advantage for the press, and I suggest to Members of Parliament too, of our being in the Estate is that all the time I bump into Members of Parliament and informal discussions and relations are maintained. That is a very important part of our role. It is a fundamental mutual benefit to Members of Parliament and journalists.

Mr Hipwood: If it is of any help to Mr Ainsworth, and any other Member of the Committee, I am happy at any time to conduct a tour of the Press Gallery for any Member of the Committee at any time of your choosing to show how many journalists are working there.

Q25 Mr Ainsworth: We have received some figures from the catering department that show the usage of the Press Gallery cafeteria. The figures are not very high at any point in the week.

Mr Hipwood: The figures for the cafeteria we accept are poor.

Q26 Mr Ainsworth: They do not go into double figures at breakfast time. They rarely climb above 20 at any time.

Mr Hipwood: The cafeteria is a difficulty, I have accepted that. The figures for the bar probably show the bar is one of the busiest in the whole of the Estate. The dining room figures are good, they could be better.

Mr Hurst: I do not doubt the figures at all. I am told the mean average covers of the cafeteria—which is the phrase I have got here—on a typical Wednesday,

for example, is 240 servings. Wednesday is the busiest day, as you would expect, with Prime Minister's Questions. On a Thursday it is 221, on a Tuesday 215, this is total servings. I would not agree with John saying they are poor, they are not as high as we would like. That is one of the reasons why, in answer to Mr Gerrard's question, if other passholders want to come in we are happy to try that and see if it increases.

Mr Hipwood: It is not just covers, it is all from the same counter. We get drinks on a regular basis, soft drinks, hot beverages, sandwiches are all picked up from the same area. It is not just people who sit down to have lunch or breakfast, a lot of people grab some food and a drink, and take it back to their desks.

Q27 Pete Wishart: My point is roughly the same as Bob's, I am curious that of all the passholders to the Palace of Westminster it is only journalists who have their own space within the House. I am interested in your views, also, on Annie's Bar. I have been in there a few times recently and it only ever seems to be busy when there is an important game on in the pool tournament, other than that the place is absolutely deserted. I do not know if you agree with me but in terms of people staying in the Palace itself there are much better uses for that room. Dry cleaning is suggested here, I would not go along with that but a really good coffee bar of the quality and standard we see in Portcullis House based in the Palace would be a far better use of that bar.

Mr Hipwood: Annie's Bar does not come under the Press Gallery's jurisdiction as far as I am aware. We share that facility with Members of the House and it is the only bar, as far as I am aware, where members of the Parliamentary Lobby Journalists and Members of the House have equal standing in terms of ordering drinks. I do not think it comes necessarily under the Press Gallery jurisdiction, you may correct me on that.

Q28 Pete Wishart: I accept that, you are absolutely correct. I am asking your view about whether, with its continuing decline in use, perhaps a better use for it now would be something like a high quality coffee bar? There are plenty of other opportunities for the press because you are not using that space to meet Members of Parliament and other officers of the House. Is it necessary to have that use for Annie's Bar or as a Committee should we look for a new use for Annie's Bar?

Mr Hurst: This may sound a pedantic point but John and I are here representing the Parliamentary Press Gallery and Annie's is shared between Members of Parliament and members of the lobby. There is a separate organisation representing lobby journalists and I do not think I should be commenting on behalf of the lobby. The only thing I will say is if you depart from a nice room with windows into a place within the internal bowels of the Palace with no windows and fewer people go in there, is that a surprise.

Q29 John Thurso: In your submission you talked about the quality of food in the cafeteria and accept that this is probably largely to do with the design and

age of the facilities producing it. What thought, if any, have you given to what might replace that? Obviously the design of the future new facility will have an impact on what could be served and therefore what you might want to see served will conversely have an impact on the design. Subsidiary to that, what steps have you taken to consult with your members as to what they want?

Mr Hurst: We have been involved in detailed talks with the refreshment department and with the Estates Department about this works' programme. They are not concluded at the moment, consultants have been appointed for the catering side and they are working on it now. We would express a view but we will listen to professional advice and will not try and dictate what terms are. Professional advice, both from the catering department and from consultants, would be more likely to get an effective outcome. Certainly I am very open to new ideas which might increase the custom from among my colleagues in the Press Gallery and make them more willing to dine in there. We are open-minded about what sort of facility could be provided in conjunction with the new kitchen. It would not be in the same place incidentally. Under the current plans, which are not approved by the House yet, they are under consultation, the site of the Press Gallery cafeteria would move. That is in order to meet requests from the House of Commons that our working accommodation meets Health and Safety standards. All the way through we have tried to show flexibility, listen to professional advice and not be obstructive to sensible proposals.

Q30 John Thurso: My point is if you can say what it is that they would most like to eat that is a key part of what is designed.

Mr Hurst: You are quite right. We have not quite got to that stage. In fairness, the catering staff have tried different menus and some of them have been successful. Staff move around in the Palace and they have done their best within the limits of the equipment they have.

Mr Hipwood: When we have had themed days in the past under Terry Wiggins who has now moved on, they have been very successful. They have boosted the numbers in the Press Gallery. It takes a bit of imagination and often in the Press Gallery, unfortunately, that imagination may be stifled by the facilities. It is back to the issue I was discussing with Mr Gerrard and Mr Jones earlier, the staff are restricted by what they can present to us at the moment. I am sure, again, we could easily organise a consultation amongst members—we have not done that—about what they would like to see on a future menu which is not there now.

Q31 Mr Jones: We have a cafeteria which, according to the figures, is six times higher in subsidy than anywhere else. We have got the potential of spending £1.5 million on refurbishing it. What would your response be to the nuclear option of abolishing it altogether and improving the facilities elsewhere in order that your members could use a facility jointly with others?

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Mr Hurst: When you said six times, do you mean the restaurant or do you mean the cafeteria?

Q32 Mr Jones: The cafeteria.

Mr Hurst: That is not the restaurant, they are different facilities. I do not think the subsidy on the dining room restaurant is that high. In answer to your question, we would resist that very vigorously.

Mr Ainsworth: Why?

Q33 Mr Donohoe: Why?

Mr Hurst: Because with regard to our dining rights in particular—

Q34 Mr Jones: Dining rights, what are they?

Mr Hurst: When I say dining rights, the ability to book a table in the press dining room. The right to book a table. In reference to Mr McLoughlin's question earlier, if the House was to let us book a table in one of the other restaurants—

Q35 Mr Jones: That is what I am suggesting.

Mr Hurst: What would be to stop a future committee removing that and then we would not be able to dine anywhere in the Palace. The House itself can make whatever rules it chooses.

Mr Hipwood: We have not mentioned, as yet, the banqueting which we do on a regular basis in the dining room which attracts between 80 and 100 Members.

Q36 Mr Jones: What if we abolished the cafeteria altogether and improved the facilities elsewhere in the building? Clearly a lot of your members are speaking with their feet and walking over to Portcullis and other places?

Mr Hurst: Some of them are.

Q37 Mr Jones: Quite a few.

Mr Hurst: I think it would be a very good idea, as John suggested, for some Members of the Committee to come and have a look at our facilities. The press cafeteria is very near the Reporters' Gallery, often I will pop in there, as will other of my colleagues, when I am about to go and cover a debate. You will see reporters in there having a very quick bite to eat between Prime Minister's Questions and the main debate starting when there is a Ten Minute Rule Bill. You cannot do that if you have to go elsewhere in the House to get something to eat. We do not control the business and our purpose of being there is to follow parliamentary debates in many cases.

Q38 Mr Jones: I appreciate that.

Mr Hurst: Having facilities on the premises means often people will leave their meal as soon as the annunciator screen shows a debate starting and run down to the Reporters' Gallery. We are not able to do that elsewhere in the House.

Q39 Mr Jones: I appreciate there is a difference between having a hot meal and having a snack, would it not be in order to provide some vending machines as well if people want a quick snack?

Mr Hurst: When I say a meal, it could be a counter served hot meal which a vending machine could not supply. It is served from the counter relatively quickly.

Mr Jones: I have difficulty in the House spending £1½ million improving kitchen facilities when we have no guarantees that there is going to be increased usage. It is public money after all. It is something we do need to look at.

Q40 Chairman: One of the key issues in this questioning session is on the issue of general access to the Gallery facilities. When our predecessor Committee in the last Parliament had representatives from the Press Gallery come and answer questions on exactly the same area, they said they were perfectly happy if the Press Gallery was opened up and later they changed their views. You have been less welcoming of the idea of opening up but you have not closed it off completely. First of all, what processes have you gone through to get the Press Gallery approval?

Mr Hurst: I am aware of the report you are referring to. My understanding is when two of my colleagues gave evidence to the Catering Committee, as it was then, one of the questions from one of the Members of the Committee was why not let more passholders have access to it. My colleague giving evidence agreed. There was no advance notification in the submission as there has been this time. I think after that there were some discussions among my colleagues who did not like it and that may have been why the Committee's recommendation was not taken up. It is useful this time that we have seen the submissions in advance. I have consulted, and so has John, among my colleagues. As we have referred to not everybody agrees. We are offering, if the Committee wishes, to relax our access rules to the press cafeteria in order that other passholders who wish to can have access to the press cafeteria. This is on the understanding that they will not access other areas of the Press Gallery and will respect the confidentiality of documents and private working areas in the Press Gallery but if they wish to use the press cafeteria they will be very welcome to do that. As I have pointed out, it is small, there are only 58 seats. If we were completely overwhelmed with the 2,000 staff who work here all coming in, clearly it would not be viable. If there is demand and if there is a request, we are happy to say "yes" to that on an experimental basis.

Q41 Chairman: It is a question of the Press cafeteria not being viable, it is deeply uneconomic and heavily subsidised. You are looking for a trade-off, wider access to the Parliamentary Estate facilities?

Mr Hurst: Yes. In answer to Mr Jones' question earlier, of course we are very conscious this is provided at public cost, as indeed are all the facilities on the Parliamentary Estate.

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Q42 Mr Jones: You criticise us for getting subsidised meals but I do not see any reference to the fact that your facility is subsidised six times higher than ours. I look forward to seeing what is in your paper tomorrow.

Mr Hurst: Every summer, just before the summer recess, a note goes up in the Terrace cafeteria saying: “The Terrace Cafeteria and the Terrace will be open during the recess to all passholders with the exception of (a) temporary contractors and (b) the press”. We are, and as long as I can remember have been, banned from using the Terrace during the summer recess when most Members are no longer here.

Q43 Chairman: If we look at the situation when the House is sitting it is entirely different.

Mr Hurst: No, I am talking about—

Q44 Chairman: I know what you are talking about but we are in a situation where we have to look at the overall picture. The overall picture is that, first of all, a very substantial investment is about to be made in the Press Gallery to upgrade it. Secondly, there is enormous pressure on the rest of the Parliamentary Estate. We all recognise the catering is deeply

uneconomic and the Press Gallery does not escape from that. We have to look at the issue of what is an under-used facility.

Mr Hurst: That is precisely the reason why we have agreed to the requests made by the Committee that our access is opened up. If we make this gesture of goodwill to other passholders and the request of the Committee, could the Committee look again at this point about access to the Terrace during the summer recess? Personally I find it offensive when all passholders who happen to be Press Gallery members are banned from the Terrace and put in the same category as temporary contractors. I cannot see any justification for doing that if we are to open up our own press cafeteria at other periods to all passholders.

Mr Hipwood: Chairman, I am sure you are aware, but maybe not all Members of the Committee are, the Press Gallery kitchen facilities and catering facilities are to be closed down or severely curtailed from next spring/summer anyway. That is out of our hands. It has nothing to do with the refurbishment of the Press Gallery, it is all to do with the work going on overhead on the roof. That is something the Committee might want to bear in mind when we are talking about access to the press cafeteria.

Chairman: The discussion of that issue is a pleasure that awaits us. Thank you very much, gentlemen. It has been extremely helpful.

Memorandum by the House of Commons Whitley Committee Trade Union Side

The Refreshment Department do an excellent job in providing food and drink for the many people who work in the House of Commons, their guests, the press and members of the Civil Service. The range of food has expanded to cater for different tastes and dietary requirements. However, there is a huge problem of overcrowding (which we discuss in points 1 to 7 below) in many of the House of Commons refreshment facilities, and prices (11 and 12 below) are now getting beyond the reach of some of our members. Finally we make some ancillary points (13–16). We hope that you will accept our suggestions.

We have developed this paper as much as possible in accordance with your Information Notice No 2. If you are taking oral evidence we would be happy, as on previous occasions, to expand on it.

1. OUTBUILDINGS

Norman Shaw North and Norman Shaw South: There is no refreshment facility in these buildings, which house large numbers of Members’ staff. A cafeteria here, similar to the one in Millbank, would greatly relieve overcrowding elsewhere. The loft area or covering the courtyard would seem to be possible.

Provision of joint facilities with the Lords in No 1 Millbank might also be a solution.

2. *Terrace Cafeteria:* Since the closure of the Westminster Hall cafeteria, the problem of overcrowding in the Terrace Cafeteria has worsened substantially. We ask for the partition in the Terrace Cafeteria to be removed. The Members’ area is often greatly underused and Members have many other facilities at which to eat, whereas staff in the Palace have the Terrace Cafeteria only. If it was impossible to abolish the Members’ area, then we would suggest replacing the permanent partition with lighter screens, which the staff would move each day to deal with anticipated demand. For instance, on sitting Fridays, the Members’ area is generally empty and the staff area grossly overcrowded.

3. *Terrace Cafeteria layout:* The hot drinks area becomes overcrowded and needs more space, which would lessen the general problem of overcrowding in the area. A single queue serving area should be arranged, with self-service for vegetables (as with salad).

4. *Terrace Pavilion:* Staff can use the Terrace Pavilion on Mondays and Fridays only. Access should be allowed throughout the week. This would lessen demand on the Terrace Cafeteria.

5. *Bellamy's Clubroom*: Ever since Bellamy's coffee lounge was converted into a Members' Clubroom, the TUS have campaigned for it to revert to its former use. Many members of staff previously used the facility, thus freeing up room in the main Bellamy's cafeteria. The clubroom is greatly underused in its present form, a point raised with the Catering Committee in 2002.

6. *Bellamy's Gift Kiosk*: Could this now vacant area be converted into a sandwich and hot drinks outlet, similar to the Despatch Box in Portcullis House? This, combined with the change to the Clubroom, would greatly help to alleviate the problem of overcrowding in Bellamy's.

7. *Press Facilities*: Precious space is being set aside to cater for a relatively small number of political correspondents, as distinct from a large parliamentary reporting staff as was originally intended when the Press Dining Room and cafeteria were established. Ordinary staff should now have access to these facilities, so as to relieve pressure on the Terrace, which, as we discuss in 2 above, is now the only general facility in the Palace.

8. *Security Staff and Contractors*: Perhaps a dedicated canteen for police and Security Officers could be established? The Security Officers have quite extensive staff rooms, and one might be converted. Could more port-a-cabins selling refreshments be made available for contractors, as was the case last summer recess?

9. *Meeting/Reading areas*: The use of cafeterias as meeting/reading areas leads to problems of overcrowding. Could possible alternatives be publicised, such as Bellamy's Bar?

10. *Outlets open during recess*: overcrowding is exacerbated during recesses, particularly short ones, when some outlets are closed for the duration. While we appreciate that management has to make the best use of staffing levels available to them, could more be done to prevent the lengthy queues that build, for example, in the Debate when Bellamy's cafeteria is closed?

11. *Pricing*: Pricing differentials were tried a few years ago and were a good idea in principle—for example, lowering the price of meals outside the most congested time—but it might well disadvantage the lower-paid members of staff who often do not have the luxury of deciding when to take their lunch breaks. Fruit and vegetables are too expensive in comparison with less healthy options, and there is too much disparity between breakfast costs, which are relatively low, and the higher prices for lunch. In general, the pricing structure should encourage the consumption of fruit, salad, and vegetables.

We appreciate, of course, that the RD are under pressure to reduce the cost of their operation through imposition of the cap. We would point out, however, as did the Deputy Leader of the House in Westminster Hall on 3 November (col 373WH) that staff have to use the catering facilities, because of unsocial hours and lack of alternatives. Many of the staff are on average or low salaries, and the imposition of higher prices would be a serious matter for them. We are certainly against the general raising of prices.

12. *Self-clear*: Self-clearing should be the rule throughout the cafeterias. The turnover of tables is slowed down by the amount of debris left behind. Clearing staff impose extra costs on the RD.

13. *Guests*: The facility for staff to take guests into RD outlets is greatly prized, and should be retained, though we accept it is not unreasonable to exclude the very peak time of 1245–1330.

14. *Vending machines*: There should be more choice of low calorie cold drinks from the machines, and some of the machines are not well sited.

15. *Access*: The current rules on access exacerbate tensions between Officers of the House and other members of staff, as Officers have access to many refreshment facilities from which other staff are barred. We favour the opening of these refreshment facilities to staff across the House wherever possible, especially as a number of these facilities are under-used.

16. *Saturday openings*: some staff, such as those working in PWS, are required to work weekends, when there is no refreshment facility open onsite. Could a venue operate on Saturdays, perhaps between breakfast and lunch, to accommodate such staff?

4 November 2005

Memorandum by The Secretaries' and Assistants' Council

ACCESS REGULATIONS

It is apparent to Members' Staff that access regulations regarding the Debate, Bellamy's and the Terrace cafeteria are now in abeyance. We have in the past raised concerns at the excessive number of visitors using the facilities, particularly at lunch times, that under the existing arrangements are not entitled to. When this has been raised with Catering Department management we are told that they do not have the staff to enforce the access regulations. A clear definition of passes and access would be most appreciated. The Catering Department uses the term "Full Pass" within the access regulations. According to the Serjeant at Arms Department this refers to grey passes only.

To illustrate this point may we draw your attention to lobby (copper) pass holders. This group of pass holders appear to be able to use all the Debate, Terrace and Bellamy's cafeterias at any time yet have near

exclusive use of the Press Gallery Cafeteria. You may be interested to know that House of Commons catering facilities are regularly used by Press pass holders working from 1 Millbank. This is because our cafeteria food is better (so we are told) than that provided at 1 Millbank.

We feel that there is insufficient publicity given to access concessions regarding Fridays and recess periods. It would be useful, particularly if there is a review, if we might be better informed of where we may eat and on which day, as well as being told where we may not eat. Would it be possible or practical to have one of the three cafeterias dedicated to pass holders only? The current arrangements are clearly not working.

EFFECTIVE USE OF ACCOMMODATION

We do not feel that the best use is made of the accommodation. There is overcrowding in the Terrace Cafeteria and also in Bellamy's Cafeteria. We wish to see the partition removed completely from the Terrace Cafeteria and the Club room at No 1 Parliament Street opened to all. We have suggested in the past that the Club room could be used for cold food; serving salads and sandwiches. Another ill used area is the old gift shop in No 1 Parliament Street, could this not be utilised to sell sandwiches or coffee at peak times? Would it be possible for the Press Cafeteria to be open to all with an alternative menu to the "traditional" fare that this cafeteria has generally offered?

SUBSIDY ARRANGEMENTS

As a group, we are not as of right, privy to the arrangements for the subsidising of the catering department and as such it is difficult for us to comment on the impact. We are aware that the dining rooms receive a greater subsidy than the Cafeterias; is this because of staffing and contractual obligations? We are always surprised to see that it takes six staff from the dining rooms to provide holiday cover for the three staff that work in the Adjournment, Portcullis House, when the House is sitting.

Another matter, we should be interested to know; from which subsidy pot the cost of catering staff food and beverages are charged; does this come from the general subsidy of cafeteria food (if there is one) or from the catering department employment budget? Surely we must ask, what is the ethos behind the subsidy?

Costs and profits can easily be hidden. We would ask you to consider the House of Commons breakfast; this is available in a multiple for three, five or seven items, three items costing from £1.75. Items are also priced individually Sausages 60p Fried Egg 35p Tomatoes 45p etc. Depending on the items selected there can be an enormous disparity, a difference of one third of the cost of three items. Is a subsidy being used to encourage us to eat more or is this a method of claw back?

Sandwiches, pre-packed salads and desserts whilst reasonable in price rarely appear fresh, better value can be found outside the Palace from independent sandwich shop. Would the House consider franchising an outlet? A 350 mil Americano costs £1.55 from Café Nero, a £1.60 Americano from the Despatch box yields 400 Mil.

Over the past two years we have seen a cut back in the availability of cafeterias available to Members' Staff during recesses, though the House may not be sitting we are certainly still working, to take out a newly refurbished cafeteria for the whole of summer recess (Bellamy's) seems to be a waste of the investment. Portcullis House was pushed to cope at different times as they ran out of sandwiches and some dishes. In the past we have been told that vending machines were available as an alternative, three out of the four in Portcullis House have now been removed and not replaced.

We do appreciate that some of the points we make may not be directly relevant to the question of the subsidy but we raise them to illustrate our concerns; how much more must be charged to food provided in cafeterias before break even is reached if that is the aim? Will this be reached before it is cost effective to eat outside of the work place or bring in one's own food?

4 November 2005

Memorandum by the Transport & General Workers Union Parliamentary Branch

Parliament and parliamentarians employ a large number of people. We believe that Parliament should provide a good level of refreshments for those who work here and, like other large employers, this should involve a reasonable subsidy, not least for those who are low paid.

The Committee says that it does not intend to reverse the reductions in subsidy and we would urge the Committee to make no further cuts in the subsidies.

We would also appreciate the opportunity to share our experiences and concerns with the Catering Committee and to meet the Chairman on a quarterly basis, as previously agreed with the former Chairman, Dennis Turner MP.

4 November 2005

Memorandum by the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association

BACKGROUND

The CPA UK Branch spends in excess of £16,000 per year (£13,500 in FY 2004–05) from its Grant-in-Aid budget in the Refreshment Department of the House of Commons, with a smaller sum of some £1,000 to the House of Lords' Refreshment Department, in support of its programme by:

- Entertaining visiting groups (up to 60) of parliamentarians in the dining rooms for lunches and dinners as part of the core activities of the Branch.
- Entertaining visiting Commonwealth parliamentarians in the dining rooms throughout the year.
- Purchasing gifts from the shops for both outward and inward delegations.

The Branch works on behalf of its members in both Houses and considers that all the activities of the Refreshment Department should be of the highest standard, reflecting all that is good about British cuisine and goods and give the best value for money (vfm).

THE CHALLENGES

We recognise the complexities of running the House of Commons Refreshment Department and compliment the catering and restaurant staff for their cheerfulness and patience. However, we should like the Administration Committee to consider and address the following challenges:

- A wider range of menus in Dining Rooms A–C incorporating regional dishes and curries, with less heavy menus being available.
- A much speedier service in the Churchill Room at lunch times, when timings are particularly tight.
- The Terrace Pavilion buffet being available from Easter on; the buffet makes entertaining very flexible in terms of timing and dietary restrictions. The venue is popular, but a better maitre'd service is required.
- A speedier service in the Adjournment restaurant, where the menu is lighter, and the installation of an much more effective extractor system.
- Charges should be the same as for members as there appears to be an anomaly between the Strangers and Members Dining Rooms—the Branch entertains members' guests and members.
- A complete revamp of the House of Commons' Shop with better facilities, a wider and better range of quality goods (the House of Lords' Shop has much better goods that are also better vfm) and a more helpful and friendly staff.
- Access for Staff. The Terrace Restaurant and the Debate are crowded at lunchtimes. Should there continue to be a separate area reserved for members at the Terrace?

3 November 2005

Witnesses: **Dr Chris Pond OBE**, President, **Ms Anne Foster**, Administrator, Trade Union Side, **Mr Peter Vines**, Chairman, Secretaries' and Assistants' Council, **Mr Russell Cartwright**, Vice-Chairman, Transport and General Workers Union Parliamentary Branch and **Mr Andrew Tuggey**, Secretary, Commonwealth Parliamentary Association, UK Branch, gave evidence.

Chairman: Thank you for the submissions which you have all made and for coming along today to give evidence in this important inquiry. It is the first major inquiry this Committee has undertaken. Welcome.

Q45 Mr Jones: I know we have submissions from different organisations, and they vary. What are the main complaints? We heard the Press Gallery saying they have dining rights, how many people have dining rights? What are the main concerns? I know from week to week there are gripes about particular things but is it quality of food; is it price; is it hours? What are the main complaints?

Dr Pond: From the Trade Union Side's point of view the complaint we get mostly is overcrowding, and you have already alluded to that in your discussions with the Press Gallery. Also, there has been a certain amount of discontent about the general rising nature of prices. Overcrowding I think is the worst part.

Mr Vines: I would agree with that. Overcrowding is the main concern that has been raised. The quality of food in certain outlets also is mentioned.

Q46 Mr Jones: Which ones?

Mr Vines: The quality of food in the Terrace Cafeteria. It is not as good, we have heard from members of staff, as they would like which means they often go to Portcullis House and also to the new Bellamy's which is doing very well.

Q47 Mr Jones: Something I have raised already is the issue of the summer recess where the Terrace cafeteria seems to be descended upon by every contractor in London. Is it only at certain times of the year, because I have seen it first hand in the summer recess, or is it generally?

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Mr Vines: The Terrace cafeteria has general accessibility for those who are in the main building which is the aim of those in the building where all passholders can eat there.

Dr Pond: It is not just in the summer recess, as we pointed out in our memo, there are sometimes particular difficulties in recesses but it is throughout the year. It is very often the case if you go along there between 12.30 and 1.30 it is impossible to get in.

Mr Cartwright: The Whitley Committee point 16 about opening hours on Saturdays, there is a concern, also, about opening in the recess and on Friday afternoons. If one outlet can be open until 5.30 on those days it would be helpful.

Q48 Mr Jones: Mr Tuggey, your submission is slightly different in that you are bringing guests into the building. What are the main concerns from the CPA's point of view?

Mr Tuggey: On your behalf, the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association UK branch entertains visiting parliamentarians from across the Commonwealth. The effect is that I appear for you as you because I work for you. We put in our forecast this year in excess of £20,000 into the refreshment departments, largely in the House of Commons and all our guests, who are your guests, come here and they hold the Houses of Parliament in the UK and you and your colleagues in the highest esteem. In the short time I have been doing the job something which has very much come through to me is that this place and the people who work here—all of us who work here—are held in the highest esteem by the Commonwealth parliamentarians. As such we consider we should be reflecting and delivering everything that we do of the highest standard of excellence because we are the shop window for UK plc. We consider the Refreshment Department should be adequately resourced to enable them to do that because we feel at the moment perhaps they are not adequately resourced and some of the service that we receive on your behalf is not quite of the standard which perhaps you might like it to be.

Mr Jones: Can you give a specific example?

Q49 Mr Gerrard: Where would you take them?

Mr Tuggey: We use most of the dining facilities. We use dining rooms A, B and C, we use the Churchill Room, we use The Adjournment and we use Strangers Dining Room. The service in the Churchill Room in particular is woefully slow. We tend to use that at lunchtimes when even if we ask for a prepared set menu, which we do frequently in order to try and hasten things, we still struggle to get through in the time provided. We have as our hosts your colleagues and they have other things to do. They have tight time schedules and, indeed, so do we within the programme for our guests. In The Adjournment, where the menus are much lighter and easier—although the service is sometimes quicker, it is not always quicker—the extraction system is particularly poor. We consider that should be fixed. You come out of there with your guests smelling as though you have been doing the cooking yourself.

Menus generally in the older restaurants perhaps could be made of a lighter variety and, therefore, perhaps quicker to serve. We would like to see that reflected in the menus and in the service that is provided.

Q50 David Lepper: On the subject of access by contractors, can I assume that generally you draw a distinction between the access that should be available to those people who are directly employed by the House or by Members of Parliament and those who happen to have another employer and happen to be working on the premises?

Mr Vines: Yes. In the submission from the Secretaries' and Assistants' Council we put in that it would be useful to have somewhere designated for full passholders to eat that is restricted for them so there is not a question of guests or contractors coming in. A point has been made that it is taxpayers' money which is being spent and in our work here as employees we view it from that line but if there is to be an element of subsidy it would be one we would enjoy.

Q51 David Lepper: How do you feel about the subsidy of the Press Gallery facilities?

Dr Pond: We do say in our memo that there has to be a certain amount of prioritisation in the allocation of space on the Estate. I think we all feel—I cannot speak for the SAAC but I would be surprised if they did not agree with us—that individual compartmentalised facilities are inefficient. For instance, if you were going to take the analogy of the press facilities to their logical extreme you would have a serjeant's cafeteria, library dining room and maybe a speakeasy for the clerks! You cannot do that, begging your pardon, Clerk. In order to maximise the use of the space they have to be open to, and used by, as large a proportion of the people who work in the House of Commons as possible.

Q52 John Thurso: Is there a difference for staff between those staff who work for the House and those staff who work for Members or other non-House organisations? Is it blanket across the board?

Mr Vines: In what context?

Q53 John Thurso: In any context as to any of the points which have been raised?

Mr Vines: There is not any difference.

Q54 John Thurso: Are there differences of view or is it straight forward?

Mr Vines: It is straight forward. The comments Dr Pond made earlier about the Press Gallery I would thought would be okayed by Members' staff as well.

Dr Pond: There is very little difference. The one area where there might be some difference is that one or two of the outlets are open to Members and Officers of the House. Jo Willows and I touched on that in our evidence to your predecessor committee in 2002 and, perversely, although we are rather against

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“first-class” dining rooms, you might say that does relieve overcrowding in some of the very overcrowded outlets we have elsewhere.

Q55 John Thurso: For my sins, I have been responsible for providing staff food in numerous businesses in the past. It is one of the most thankless tasks I know. Part of the reason is that there is a degree of familiarity breeds contempt to a certain extent, and partly because, very importantly, it is perceived as part of the remuneration package and, therefore, there is this question of what is the perceived value. I hear this in the question about subsidy. If it is very highly subsidised obviously it has got quite a high cash value. The great difficulty is to find a way of comparing it, or to use the modern jargon benchmarking it, to what people’s real expectations are rather than a general run. Have you done anything on this? For example, if you were comparing prices and quality, how does it compare to a Pret a Manger or to a good quality sandwich bar or Tesco City sandwiches or something like that? Is there any factual consideration or is it an emotional thing?

Mr Vines: In the submission of the Secretaries’ and Assistants’ Council, we did go out to Caffé Nero and buy their food and compare it in volume with that of the House of Commons. As we put in the submission the Americano from Caffé Nero was £1.55 for 350 millilitres, from the Despatch Box it was £1.60 for 400 millilitres. We feel with that and the cost of the food from there, it is very much on a par with items purchased from a coffee shop on a high street. There are fluctuations up and down. Then we compare that with the speed of service that you would expect from Caffé Nero and the speed of service that you get from the House of Commons. In many respects we look at food from the cafeteria from the point of view of what it will cost us to produce at home.

Chairman: I will have to stop you. There is a division in the Commons.

*The Committee suspended from 3.56 pm to 4.06 pm
for a division in the House.*

Q56 John Thurso: Can I just refresh your memory, what I am driving at is in the ideal world what would you pick from outside to be in here? What is the benchmark? What would make you say “That is what we would like to have”?

Mr Vines: Fresher sandwiches, certainly. We put down in the submission certainly prepared salads and desserts could be better. You can find better quality outside for the cost of it. You may wish to look at, say, the question of franchising of certain things like that. The hot meals do vary in quality depending on the outlet but in general they are good value. We have no complaints on that side.

Q57 John Thurso: Would it be fair to say that there is a distinction between the appreciation of the hot meals, which generally seem to be okay, and the sandwiches and pre-bought or other stuff which is viewed as not being okay?

Mr Vines: Yes.

Q58 John Thurso: On the “not okay” sandwiches and so on, is there an external name that jumps to mind as being what you would like: M&S food or Tesco or Pret a Manger?

Mr Vines: There is an extremely good independent sandwich maker on Old Queen’s Street, I cannot remember the name, I quite often travel down there myself, something like that where there is a bit of an independent drive. There are sandwiches made to order at 7 Millbank, there are no Members or Members’ staff based there and we would like to see something of that flexibility and quality north of Bridge Street.

Q59 John Thurso: If I have the message correctly it is that you want the really good, small, well-run independent sandwich bar where you say: “I will have that, that, that and that between two bits of bread” and they do it for you?

Mr Vines: Yes.

Dr Pond: Taking the original point that you made about it forming part of terms and conditions, my memory takes me back to the time of the Mikardo Committee when prices were relatively high. It has to be acknowledged that reasonable dining/eating facilities are implicitly part of the terms and conditions of the staff. In the seventies prices, as I say, were relatively high and the lower paid people at that time were supplied with luncheon vouchers to compensate for the higher prices. There is an element of subsidy, we all understand the element of subsidy. I have been in numerous outlets in large institutions and the prices are slightly variable but the subsidy element for covering the staff costs is generally there. If the catering system was radically altered such that the full economic price was charged it would result (a) in a massive pay claim and (b) in much lesser usage both by Members and staff of the facilities which all add to the corporate life of the House of Commons.

Q60 Mr Donohoe: Can I ask whether you think in the modern world that we live in it is justified that there is such a thing as a subsidy?

Dr Pond: It is justified, yes, because as the Deputy Leader of the House said in the debate in Westminster Hall on 3 November many of the staff who are not over-generously paid have to be here for long and unsocial hours and the need to eat economically and conveniently is there.

Q61 Mr Donohoe: In terms of passholders, how many guests are staff able to bring in to any of the facilities, if any?

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Dr Pond: I think it is an absolute maximum of three. There are restrictions on what facilities one can use as well, particularly at peak times. You will have to put that question to the management because the rules are quite complex.

Q62 Mr Donohoe: In terms of usage, you do not have any idea as to how the passholders themselves in your category are using these facilities and on what basis?

Mr Vines: I do have various reports with the matter in. We are not allowed guests in the Terrace cafeteria. We are allowed guests at certain times in Portcullis House but not between 12.30 and 2.00 pm.

Q63 Mr Donohoe: Is that on the basis of the busiest periods?

Mr Vines: Yes.

Q64 Mr Donohoe: You are restricted during the busiest periods?

Mr Vines: Yes.

Q65 Mr Donohoe: Even without that factor, there are occasions when if you go into Portcullis House you are standing in a queue almost 100 yards long. Is it not the case that is a well-used facility in the House?

Mr Vines: It certainly is, yes. Also, in other periods, we are requested at different times to look after/entertain for a few minutes or whatever guests of Members, people who come to visit Members. We take them downstairs to have a cup of coffee if there is a division, such as there has just been, we sit with them to make sure they are looked after, which may mean a sandwich at lunchtime if the meeting is long. There are Members who take guests who we accompany as well into the general cafeterias.

Q66 Mr Donohoe: If we make a recommendation to close the facilities that the press have at present, what would be the impact, if any, on the rest of the facilities? Would you be in opposition or in support of that, if that was to be a recommendation?

Dr Pond: Certainly from the Trade Union Side, we would be in favour of it.

Q67 Mr Donohoe: You would be in favour?

Dr Pond: We would be in favour of opening the press facilities.

Q68 Mr Donohoe: I am not talking about that, I am talking about the idea of closing them completely?

Dr Pond: Altogether?

Q69 Mr Donohoe: Yes.

Dr Pond: The difficulty there would be that it would exacerbate the overcrowding. At the moment we cannot cope with the overcrowding in the cafeterias in the Palace at all. If we have an additional couple of hundred people it would be almost impossible.

Q70 Mr Donohoe: If the upgrading of the cafeteria in the press gallery goes ahead would you ask that you be allowed access to that as a right?

Dr Pond: Yes, Chairman, as we did the last time we gave evidence to your predecessor committee.

Mr Vines: In 2001–02.

Q71 Mr Donohoe: Would that make a great deal of difference given the facilities that are there are restricted to something like 50 places?

Mr Vines: It would be an alternative venue to use. It would depend, also, on the quality of food that is served there as well which is the nub of the problem. If you closed it completely, and you have those who normally have designated press passes then using all the facilities in the House of Commons on the cafeteria side, there would be a degree of resentment because there are other outlets they have which are subsidised. They have other places of work, such as the television base on Millbank—we have mentioned this in the evidence—and they have other places to eat, whereas we do not, from their employers.

Q72 Mr Donohoe: Am I correct in thinking that as passholders you have the right of access to, say, the cafeteria in the House of Lords?

Mr Vines: Yes.

Q73 Mr Donohoe: That is something else you have as a facility?

Dr Pond: We do but the *quid pro quo* is that the House of Lords' staff have access to our cafeterias. I think probably the traffic is greater in that direction than in ours going into the Lords' facilities which are very small.

Mr Vines: It is a question, also, of planning in a sense. I think most of us have lunch for 35 to 40 minutes. It is a good five minute walk, and if you are in Norman Shaw North it is a 10 minute walk, to the far end which is why members of staff do not go to 7 Millbank and use the facilities there, it is too far to go out of your time which you have for lunch. That is why everything north of Bridge Street, which is where most of the offices are, is most heavily used certainly by members of staff and by others as well.

Dr Pond: Quite a proportion of the Commons' staff are rostered to take lunch at a particular time in order to maintain service. We do not have the option, unfortunately, of going at 11.30 or 2 o'clock or whenever the facilities are less crowded. I do not entirely agree with the SAAC that quality is the nub of the matter. I think overcrowding is probably the very nub of the matter.

Q74 Mr Gerrard: There are a couple of things mentioned in the submission of the Trade Union Side which are relevant to overcrowding. First of all, facilities in Norman Shaw buildings, there are vending machines but nothing else. Secondly, use in Bellamy's of what used to be the coffee lounge. Would you comment on those?

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Ms Foster: We have had comments from Members that the Members' Clubroom would be a great place for people to go and have coffee after eating in Bellamy's and the cafeteria, and that would reduce the overcrowding that you have at lunchtimes.

Q75 Mr Gerrard: How much underused is it from your observations? Does it get any use?

Mr Vines: It gets a little use.

Dr Pond: I would answer that either with the adjectives "substantially" or "grossly" but I am not sure which is appropriate. It is certainly under used.

Q76 Mr Gerrard: What about Norman Shaw, what would you need in there to attract people to stay in there rather than going to Bellamy's or to Portcullis?

Mr Vines: I do not think you will be able to do that because there is a certain element of isolation, to be honest, in the Norman Shaw buildings. People do like to come over to meet at lunchtime, maybe for a short time but they do get out and meet, which has been the great attraction of the atrium in Portcullis House. It has been a great draw. If there were some sandwich facilities over there, that might relieve some of the pressure. I do not suppose you have enough money or space to put in a full dining area. Can I come back to the question you raised about the club room? At lunchtime today I did meet with some Members specifically there to discuss the submissions going in today for this meeting. Certainly we looked into the clubroom and saw about three people there and we noted there were four or five Members of Parliament eating with us in Bellamy's itself. We do feel an alternative use could be found we would hope to relieve the pressure that is in Bellamy's. It could be for coffee or ready made sandwiches plus coffee but in some way which would improve the flow of people out of Bellamy's cafeteria once they have eaten.

Dr Pond: I can say that over the years we checked the number of people eating in the clubroom and very often it is in single figures at lunchtime. Management will give you the most up-to-date information but it is under used.

Q77 Mr Gerrard: Mr Tuggey, you talked about some issues with regard to quality, what about access and booking facilities, is that a problem? How much are you reliant on individual Members?

Mr Tuggey: We can book our own facilities. We do not have a problem, generally. One of the areas, which perhaps I should have mentioned earlier, is the Terrace restaurant that is open after the Whitsun break is a great boom to us. It is extremely flexible. If we have people who are vegetarian, there is lots of choice and there is no great time constraint because you can get up and eat and move around. In terms of entertaining it is very useful. The only problem is it is open for such a short time. It would be very useful, as far as we are concerned, if it was open from the week after the Easter break. It would make life much more flexible for us. We have certain events

that go on during the year and that would be much more useful. We do not have any trouble booking though.

Q78 Mr Jones: You say you have no problem booking, how often in a year would you book a dining room for an event? Is there a set period?

Mr Tuggey: Yes, we have set periods. There is a two-week period in March, normally from 6–17 March, that sort of period, and then another one normally in May. Those are the standard two-week periods. Recently we have introduced a week in January as well, the last week in January, where we organise a party politics seminar. Next year, depending when the State Opening is, there will be a week in November when we book the facilities. A total of six weeks a year when we are booking facilities in the dining rooms.

Q79 Mr Jones: Can I come on to the issue about how food quality is perceived. I share all your concerns about the Churchill Room having attended a dinner there the other night which had a set menu. A great fuss was caused when I asked for the main course without any sauce on it which seemed to then take another 15 minutes to produce. What is your general view, first of all, of the quality of the food and, secondly, how it is perceived in terms of what you get when you visit other Commonwealth Parliaments? I am sure you do not want to put llama on the menu which we ate or curried rat which we had in Guyana. What do other parliaments provide which is different from us?

Mr Tuggey: By and large the quality that we receive here compared with other parliaments throughout the Commonwealth is pretty good, having been to many of them now. That does not necessarily mean that it is as good as it should be.

Q80 Mr Jones: Can you give us an example? What do you mean by that?

Mr Tuggey: To go back to the dining room, if we order a set menu in dining rooms A, B and C when we invite Members to come along and entertain our guests, sometimes it is very difficult to get a lighter menu. On the Refreshment Department side, it is quite difficult because sometimes people turn up late so it is difficult for them. By and large, we would like to see a lighter menu available throughout the day at lunchtimes. Certainly as far as the quality in the Churchill Room is concerned, the food is fine by and large but it would be nicer to have a lighter choice of menu, perhaps something along The Adjournment lines, but it is the speed. I am never quite sure why it takes such a long time to serve a meal. There will be arguments that it is all prepared freshly but I would contend that if you go to sources outside the Palace of Westminster they can do that. I have not bothered to do that, it is not my business to go into the kitchens but it could be improved probably.

Q81 Chairman: How well are the access regulations communicated to staff?

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Dr Pond: They can be somewhat complicated, Chairman, but for the most part staff do understand and try not to bend them. There are variations, of course, as to whether it is a sitting day or a non-sitting day and from outlet to outlet. On the whole, people do understand and try to abide by them as much as possible.

Mr Vines: From the Members' staff point of view, the turnover of staff that come in, I do not think they are terribly well understood. At the risk of incurring your wrath, Chairman, if you will allow me to say so, though it is not the remit of this Committee, we have asked for a compulsory induction course. We have an induction course now where the responsibilities of the various departments are touched on. It is voluntary and it is not terribly well taken up at the moment. If it was compulsory for Members' staff, it is an area where the Refreshment Department regulations and access regulations could be mentioned and there would then be no excuse. At the moment, full staff passholders can eat between 12.30 and 2.00 but cannot take a guest. If you are a temporary Members' staff passholder, which is a yellow pass, you cannot eat between 12.30 and 2.00. We have colleagues in our offices who we have to leave behind and they have to eat later or eat somewhere else. They can eat at Bellamy's which is one of the reasons why there is a great take-up at Bellamy's because of the restrictions in the cafeteria at Portcullis House. Those of us who wish to eat with our yellow passholder colleagues go in there as well. There are certain discrepancies and we feel we would rather they were not there. We understand why they are there but it has not necessarily been enforced in recent months.

Q82 Chairman: How can we improve the communication?

Mr Vines: I beg your pardon, I said I might incur your wrath. It does need to be put up. I think if you write to all Members' staff directly, to make sure they get it, with whatever the rules are. Please do not—he says again incurring your wrath—write to Members of Parliament and ask them to pass it on to their staff. A bit of direct communication would be of assistance.

Dr Pond: A neat succinct summary of who can use the facilities at what time outside the door of every establishment would not go amiss because sometimes one turns up and is a bit unsure. On the

whole, staff of the House are here for longer tenure than Members' staff so perhaps there is less misunderstanding.

Q83 Mr Jones: Would a possible recommendation be to make it simpler in terms of the different times? If you are a temporary member of staff in an office the idea you have to change lunch because of one person is nonsense. Would it be in order to review the rules and make them simpler? I have the idea that if access was made simpler some places might get used more.

Mr Vines: Yes, that could be the case.

Dr Pond: It might be difficult if it exacerbated the overcrowding.

Q84 Mr Jones: I appreciate that.

Dr Pond: That would require the overflow that you mentioned.

Mr Jones: For example, if we were to close the press facilities but expand the facilities elsewhere. I do not think it is just about the access rules, it is trying to look at capacity. If you do both at once it possibly gets around the problem.

Q85 Chairman: Is there anything else?

Mr Tuggey: Yes, something which does not involve the others is the business of the shop. We use the shop quite a lot for two main purposes. First of all, to buy small gifts, presentations for people who visit us for our seminars and delegations but we spend more money when we take delegations out so we can make suitable presentations when we visit Commonwealth parliaments. We find the range of goods which is available in the House of Commons shop is not as good as the range, and indeed the quality, in the House of Lords shop and we wonder whether something might be done about that? The logo of the Portcullis is a unique logo and we feel that perhaps more income could be generated by making more use of that in the shop and the shop facilities. I know there is going to be a small revamp but we find the small shop next to the Terrace café is pretty pokey. Sometimes the staff are not quite as friendly or helpful as they should be. When we have visiting delegations and send them off into the shop, the comments which come back, especially from some of your colleagues in Australasia are not frightfully kind. If you could look at that we would find that useful.

Chairman: That is very helpful. Thank you very much. Thank you all for submitting your evidence and coming along and helping us out. We will send you a copy of the report when we finally publish it. Thank you.

Supplementary memorandum from the Parliamentary Press Gallery

Thank you for the opportunity to give evidence to your committee last week. Subsequent to that, and ahead of our meeting next Monday, we are writing to ask if you would let us have the figures regarding subsidy of the Press Cafeteria, which several members of the committee used as the basis for their questions, ie that the Press Cafeteria is subsidised six times the amount of other catering facilities in the House.

We have not seen these figures or heard them referred to before. Naturally we would wish our catering facilities to be run in the most cost-effective manner possible and are willing to assist the Refreshment Department in any steps to do so, for example in surveying members of the Gallery about menus, in addition to opening up access to the Press Cafeteria to other passholders.

We would also wish to point out that the proposed refurbishment plans for the Gallery, initiated by the House of Commons Commission and discussed by the previous Accommodation and Work Committee, involve moving the current Press bar so that all Press catering facilities adjoin one another. This was specifically requested by the Refreshment Department, whose director has made plain at meetings of the Project Board responsible for the project that this would enable substantial savings to be made to staffing budgets. We therefore assume that, if the plans went ahead as proposed, the amount of subsidy carried by the Press cafeteria would fall substantially, in addition to the increase in custom and therefore in revenue we would expect following the replacement of current inadequate kitchen facilities.

In our experience, figures for usage catering facilities serviced by these kitchens, ie the Press dining room and cafeteria, do not include the large amount of revenue generated by monthly Press Gallery lunches in the dining room, which for internal purposes are charged to the banqueting department.

5 December 2006

Written evidence

Evidence submitted to the Administration Committee by the House of Commons Refreshment Department

OUTLINE OF SERVICES

1. The House of Commons Refreshment Department provides catering and retail services for Members of Parliament, staff and visitors to the parliamentary estate. It also retails bespoke House of Commons souvenirs, both through its own souvenir kiosks and as a managed service on behalf of the Speaker's Art Fund, the Summer Tours programme and, to a lesser extent, the House of Lords.

2. The Department operates a wide range of catering services located in the Palace of Westminster, Portcullis House and two other parliamentary buildings, serving snacks and meals to over 8,000 people a day at peak times. Facilities include the Members' Tea Room and four self-service restaurants for staff and Members, four table-service restaurants, three cafés/coffee bars (including the Jubilee Café, open to all visitors to Parliament), five bars and numerous hospitality rooms for private functions. The Refreshment Department also operates three catering facilities provided for Press and media representatives based in the House.

3. The House of Lords has its own Refreshment Department, but Members and staff of the Lords are able to use many of the catering services provided in the House of Commons. Many services, particularly the self-service restaurants, are open to all pass-holders, including temporary pass-holders and contractors' staff, meaning that there is a pool of over 14,000 customers for the catering services. Given this wide customer base and the impossibility of knowing how many people are within the parliamentary estate at any given time, one of the greatest difficulties faced by the Refreshment Department is predicting the number of customers who will use its services from one day to the next or even from one hour to the next.

THE TRADING ACCOUNT

4. The trading activities of the Refreshment Department are funded from two sources: public funds from the House of Commons Administration Account, and receipts from customers. This account, known as the Trading Account, bears all costs of sales (ie the cost of all food, drink and souvenirs consumed or sold), payroll and other staff costs, and operating expenses such as light equipment, cleaning, laundry, etc, and collects income from customers using the Department's services.

5. The trading account does not bear the cost of:

- capital works;
- maintenance;
- furnishings;
- utilities (heat, light, power and telephones); and
- accommodation costs (rent, rates, space, etc).

FINANCIAL TARGETS

6. In June 2003, the Commission agreed that the Refreshment Department should reduce the level of the catering subsidy. Specifically, the Commission agreed that:

- the subsidy should be reduced from 50% of costs in 2002–03 to 47% in 2003–04; and
- the subsidy should be further reduced to 45% of costs by June 2006.

7. The Department has met or exceeded these targets since they were agreed, reducing the subsidy from £5.7 million in 2002–03 to £4.9 million (42% of operating costs) in 2004–05.

8. In March 2005, the Finance and Services Committee agreed to keep the RD subsidy target at 45% and approved the Department's draft trading budget for 2005–06 subject to three changes:

- a inflation-linked price increase of 3.5% on all dining room and cafeteria menus, with supplier price increases for beers, wines and souvenirs being passed on as and when incurred during the course of the year;
- provision of an additional amount of £55,000 to operate, on a one-year trial basis, a new evening cafeteria service in 7 Millbank; and
- provision for the uprating of the pay budget for staff annual pay rises with effect from 1 April 2005; pay settlement has not yet been reached for the catering grades and so the budget as currently presented includes pay at 2004–05 rates.

 FINANCIAL PERFORMANCE

9. Full details of the Department's income and expenditure for the past three years, together with the final 2004–05 budget and the current approved budget for 2005–06, are set out in **Schedule 1**. [Not printed]

10. A five-year financial overview covering the years from 2000–01 to 2004–05 is set out in **Schedule 2**. It is noteworthy that over this period, covers have risen by more than 38%, with the vast majority of this growth being in the self-service restaurants.¹ Despite this growth in demand, the cost of the catering subsidy has been reduced by £785,000 since the Commission's review of the subsidy in 2002–03. This figure is not adjusted to take into account inflationary cost increases affecting the cost of raw materials and labour.

11. A detailed statement of sales, gross profits and gross profit %, together with details of number of covers served and average spends is set out in **Schedule 3** [Not printed], with separate statements for each of the Department's principal sources of income: food, beverage and souvenirs. The schedule details the trading performance of each outlet in 2004–05, with comparison to 2003–04.

12. Food wastage is accounted for within the food cost of sales figures,² but memoranda accounts are kept to monitor food wastage within the trading areas, except for the principal kitchen, which acts as a central production kitchen for numerous outlets. Wastage figures for the other areas are set out in **Schedule 4**. [Not printed]

13. A detailed analysis of the Refreshment Department's Income and Expenditure, by trading outlet, is set out in **Schedule 5** [Not printed]. This shows the cost or contribution from each service in 2004–05, taking into account all sources of income, raw material costs (ie cost of sales) and salaries and wages for staff directly working in that outlet. The cost of central management and administrative staff that cannot be directly apportioned to individual trading outlets is also detailed in this schedule.

14. **Schedule 6** [Not printed] calculates the cost or contribution of each trading outlet on a per cover basis (ie the annual cost or contribution as calculated in Schedule 5, divided by the annual covers as indicated in Schedule 3). This statistic is useful for monitoring the impact of decisions taken to reduce the subsidy, but also demonstrates the impact of fluctuations in business levels. The Department's workforce is largely made up of permanent, full-time staff and, as a consequence, a large proportion of salary and wage costs are fixed. This brings benefits in terms of staff retention (staff understanding the needs of Members and other customers) but has the disadvantage of making it difficult to rapidly adjust to changing business levels. Thus, a number of venues demonstrating a cost reduction in 2004–05 when compared with the cost of the service prior to the subsidy review in 2003, show a higher cost per cover served due to a decline in the number of people using the service (ie the cost of the service is spread over fewer users). It is therefore important when considering this schedule to understand the impact of factors affecting demand for a service.

15. In addition to the services accounted for through the Trading Account, the Department also manages retail services on behalf of others. These are:

- the Summer Tours souvenir shop in Westminster Hall (*proceeds are offset against the cost of opening to the public*);
- St Stephens' Bookstall (*proceeds go to The Speaker's Art Fund*);
- the House of Lords (*by mutual agreement, House of Lords souvenirs are offered for sale through the Westminster Hall souvenir kiosk, with profits from these sales being returned to the House of Lords Refreshment Department*).

Sales from these three activities amounted to over £¼ million in 2004–05, bringing the total income from retail activities to a little under £1 million. A detailed summary of the retail income, expenditure and profit contribution is set out in **Schedule 7**. [Not printed]

SERVICES PROVIDED BY THE REFRESHMENT DEPARTMENT

16. A full list of the Refreshment Department's services, with details of operating hours and a summary of access regulations, are set out in **Schedule 8**. [Not printed]

MANAGEMENT ORGANISATION STRUCTURE

17. An overview of the management organisation structure is set out in **Schedule 9** [Not printed]. Detailed organisation charts for each service managed by the Refreshment Department have previously been circulated to the Committee.

¹ A cover is defined as one person taking a meal in a table service restaurant, or one transaction in a self-service restaurant. In the latter case, a cover may be one person buying meals for several people, or, equally, may be someone buying only a cup of tea or coffee. Covers have been counted consistently in this way since 1992–93, enabling year-on-year statistics to be compiled and compared.

² Sales less cost of sales = gross profit.

ROOM CAPACITIES

18. Seating capacities for the Refreshment Department's services are set out in **Schedule 10**. Bar capacities are based on maximum occupancy levels permitted under the House's fire certificate. This schedule helps demonstrate the pressure on the Terrace Cafeteria, which has 148 seats, only 78 of which are available for use by staff. This is the only venue in the House where staff may eat. By contrast, there are 200 seats in the Debate, with a further 55 seats in the Portcullis House atrium and 200 nearby in 1 Parliament Street. Staff based north of Bridge Street thus have considerably more capacity available to them in catering facilities close to their workplace.

USAGE OF CATERING SERVICES

19. A detailed survey of usage of the Department's facilities was last carried out in 2002 in order to provide statistical evidence to the Catering Committee's review of refreshment facilities.³ At that time, the recorded breakdown of users across all venues on all dates surveyed was:

— MPs	7%
— MPs' staff	28%
— House of Commons staff	38%
— Peers	1%
— Peers' staff	1%
— House of Lords staff	4%
— Security & Press	9%
— Other (incl contractors' staff)	12%

The Committee may wish to consider whether this survey should be repeated periodically in order to provide comparable data for future analysis.

20. In the meantime, a survey of usage is being carried out on Wednesday 9 November 2005 to gain accurate information about current usage of the two key pressure points in the catering services: peak lunch-time services in the Terrace Cafeteria and in the Debate. Statistics from this survey will be available to the Committee to assist them in their inquiry.

21. Annual covers for each service are set out in Schedule 3. However, these statistics hide the daily, weekly and monthly fluctuations in demand for the catering services. In order to assist the Committee, detailed volumes have been recorded for all cafeterias during a two-week period in October 2005, showing usage by day of the week and by time of day for each service. These are set out in **Schedule 11**.

22. A similar exercise has been carried out for the dining rooms, recording minimum, maximum and average lunch and dinner covers for each venue over a three-week period in October. These are set out in **Schedule 12**.

23. More detailed information is available for the Press catering facilities, as records have been compiled throughout 2004–05 in order to be able to inform the design team for the modernisation of the Press facilities, scheduled to commence next year. These statistics are set out in **Schedule 13**. The cafeteria in this area shows a comparatively consistent pattern of usage, but suffers greatly from overall lack of use at only around 200 covers a day. Of these, around 60 covers are cooked lunches, a dozen or so are cooked breakfasts and the rest of the transactions are primarily teas, coffees and snacks.

24. An analysis of banqueting functions in 2004–05, by type and number of events held, is set out in **Schedule 14**.

25. As with other Members' services, Banqueting events tend to be concentrated into the days and weeks when Member presence is greatest: Monday to Wednesday, when the House is sitting. A typical week's banqueting business is summarised in **Schedule 15** [Not printed], showing a peak of 18 events each on Tuesday and Wednesday, 14 on Monday and only 10 on Thursday. Friday and Saturday events are even fewer, although it should be borne in mind that events on Friday evenings and Saturdays are covered by staff working on an overtime basis and so attract a weekend supplement charge.

DIFFICULTIES OF PROVIDING PARLIAMENTARY CATERING

26. The particular problems of providing a subsidised catering service in the House of Commons were articulated by the Catering Sub-Committee in their report on catering services published in 1978.⁴ The report summarises the following factors, peculiar to parliamentary catering, which need to be taken into account when assessing the service:

- (a) The long and unsocial hours during which there is a need for catering services when the House is sitting;

³ Refreshment Facilities in the House of Commons, Catering Committee, First Report 2001–02.

⁴ The Future of the Catering Services, Select Committee on House of Commons (Services)—Catering Sub-Committee, Second Report 1978–79, para 7.

- (b) The extreme difficulty of estimating the volume of demand for food and drink, owing to the unpredictability of the House's business, leading to a tendency to estimate demand at maximum levels so as to avoid inadequate supply when demand is unexpectedly and suddenly increased;
- (c) The inconvenient physical layout of the operation [in the Palace] which has to cater for a wide variety of staff and other users as well as for Members; and
- (d) Restrictions on maximising potential demand (for security and other reasons).

27. These issues remain just as relevant today. Even though the House has, in recent years, tended not to sit as late as previously, the business of the House remains unpredictable and, consequently, it is difficult to accurately match supply to demand. The subsidy review attempted to reach a balance whereby the tendency to estimate demand at maximum levels (particularly in respect of staffing levels) was tempered by evidence of average or normal demand levels, and service capability was scaled back to cater for this rather than the maximum demand. This can restrict the Department's ability to maintain the quality of service when unexpected pressures arise. We welcome the opportunity provided by this inquiry to examine whether the correct balance has been reached and, where appropriate, to make corrective adjustments to services.

KEY PRESSURE POINTS IN THE DELIVERY OF CATERING SERVICES

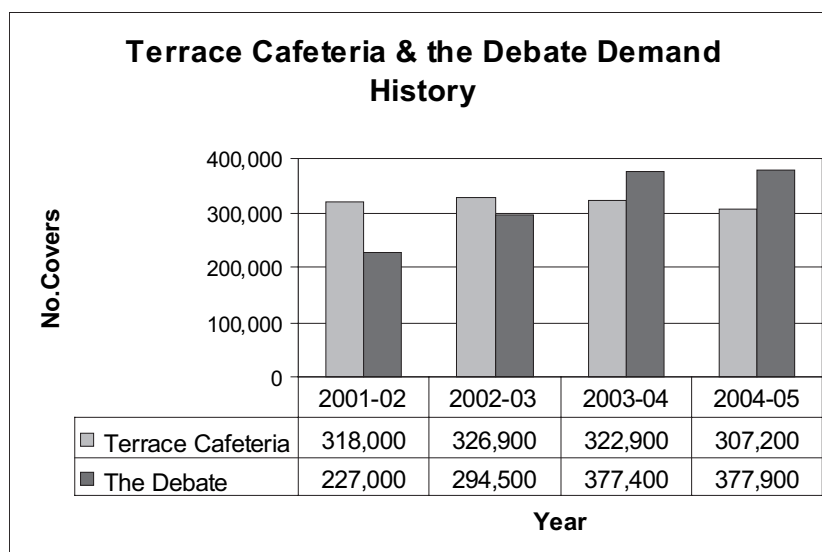
28. We particularly wish to draw attention to the key pressure points experienced by the Refreshment Department in attempting to meet customer demand. Some of these points are taken from our own experience as service providers and others are taken from feedback from our customers.

29. The key pressure points arising from the unpredictability of the business of the House tend to be found in the Members' services, particularly those located near to the Chamber. Thus, the Members' Dining Room, the Members' Tea Room and the Terrace Cafeteria, together with the Strangers' Bar, are all services that come under severe pressure when the parliamentary agenda is busy.

30. The Members' Dining Room is a particularly difficult service to operate both efficiently and cost-effectively, as business levels can fluctuate from fewer than 20 customers during an evening, to 150 Members arriving within 15 minutes of each other. Other challenges in the Members' Dining Room include having to cope with food being returned to the kitchen to keep warm during a division, sometimes when the room is full, and with no guarantee that the Member will return after the vote. This pressure, however, has long been and will, we suspect, long remain a feature of parliamentary catering.

31. The other key pressure point in the delivery of catering services is the peak-time usage of the cafeteria services, and, in particular, overcrowding in the Terrace Cafeteria and the Debate in Portcullis House. Both of these facilities regularly serve over 2,000 covers (transactions) a day, against a design capacity of 1,400 and 1,500 respectively.

32. Usage of the Debate overtook usage of the Terrace Cafeteria for the first time in 2003-04, and the Terrace Cafeteria has experienced a 6% decline in demand over the past three years:



33. We believe the declining popularity of the Terrace Cafeteria is due to three primary reasons: overcrowding, and the consequent difficulty of maintaining the quality of service; the overall preferred ambience and comfort of the facilities in Portcullis House; and, the increasing desire of customers to eat more healthily (ie a trend away from the traditional style of food offered in the Terrace Cafeteria). Obviously, not all customers would agree with this last point, and there remain a significant number of customers who prefer a more traditional menu.

34. Both venues suffer from long queues during the peak lunch period, but the simple menu construction and availability of three purpose-designed cashier points in the Debate enable customers to be moved through relatively quickly. The Terrace Cafeteria, on the other hand, suffers from a bottle-neck in the servery area, and in the area in front of the tills and hot beverages machine. Despite the perception that the Debate handles customer throughput more effectively, the statistics for the two-week period reported in Schedule 11 indicate that the Terrace Cafeteria achieved a seat turnover rate of 3.62 during the peak two-hour lunch period (12.30–2.30, Tuesday–Thursday), only marginally lower than the rate of 3.65 over the same period in the Debate.

35. Another frequent source of complaint from staff is the screen dividing the Terrace Cafeteria into two zones, providing 70 seats for Members and 78 seats for staff. The screen forms a very visible divide, and staff have long campaigned to have it moved to provide more seats in the Strangers' section of the cafeteria at the expense of fewer seats in the Members' section. The difficulty is that Members, like everyone, often do not have time for a table-service restaurant lunch, but want something more substantial than the snacks served in the Members' Tea Room. The Terrace Cafeteria is the only outlet in the Palace that meets this requirement for Members, as well as being the only general staff restaurant in the Palace. In summary, with just 148 seats and no room to expand, the venue is simply not big enough to cater comfortably for the numbers using this service.

REVIEW OF MEASURES TAKEN TO REDUCE THE CATERING SUBSIDY

36. Following the Commission's decision in June 2003 that the funding provided for the operation of the Refreshment Department's services should be reduced to 45% of operating costs, much work has been done over the past two years to reduce the catering subsidy. The first phase of this work, in 2003–04, involved a review of all services, making changes to opening hours, operating methods, and service style in order to make more efficient use of resources whilst continuing to provide services that meet the changing needs of the House. The savings generated by this review only came fully on-stream in 2004–05. No further service cut-backs have been made since this initial round, but, above-inflation price increases were imposed in April 2003 and again in April 2004 to increase the proportion of costs recovered from users of the Department's services.

37. **Schedule 16** estimates the savings derived from each of the measures implemented under the subsidy review. It should be noted that the overall saving has been eroded by annual staff pay rises and measures taken to respond to other issues (eg the appointment of an additional banqueting co-ordinator to respond to long-standing criticism from Members about the difficulty of getting through to this busy office). Further savings have been achieved over the past two years through competitive tender of some key supply contracts, including, in some cases, joint procurement with the House of Lords. The on-going strengthening of financial controls and commercial awareness has also led to improved gross profit conversions.

38. However, perhaps the most significant cause of the over-achievement of the subsidy reduction in 2004–05 was a change in the Department's overall business mix. As has previously been noted in the run-up to a General Election, demand for banqueting services was strong. At the same time, demand for the Department's most highly subsidised services, the cafeterias, was reduced (most probably as a result of the second consecutive above-inflation price rise); this decline reversed a 10-year trend of ever-increasing demand for these services. It is unlikely that this performance will be repeated in 2005–06, as demand for banqueting services is traditionally slow for the first six months following a General Election, and usage of all facilities is minimal during the Election period itself. 2005–06 cannot, thus, be considered a typical year.

BARRIERS TO ACHIEVING THE AGREED SUBSIDY REDUCTIONS

39. The difficulties of providing Parliamentary catering, as discussed in paragraphs 26–27 above, have remained the greatest obstacles to delivering all of the savings originally anticipated, but have provided opportunities to make savings in unanticipated areas. The cost-saving measures agreed and implemented to achieve the subsidy reduction created a flurry of complaints when first announced, but these generally died down very quickly and the measures have since met with little resistance from customers. That having been said, we are aware of a perception amongst some customers that the quality of food and service has been diminished in some areas, most notably in the Members' Dining room, the Members' Tea Room and the Terrace Cafeteria. These are, in many respects, the areas where it is most difficult to predict demand, as usage can fluctuate enormously dependant on the business of the House. Elsewhere, disquiet about the loss of the evening service in the Millbank Room has been addressed by the opening (on a trial basis) of an evening cafeteria service in the Portcullis Cafeteria in 7 Millbank.

40. Achieving the required staff reductions has taken considerable time and close consultation, but in all but two cases these were achieved through voluntary measures (natural wastage, re-deployment of staff to other areas, adjustments to shift patterns, etc). In a few areas, staff have found it difficult to adjust to a reduced staff complement and the new ways of working, even where there is compelling evidence that the business requirement has changed since the previous staffing level was agreed. To some extent, this is

typically one of the difficulties of managing change in a culture that is risk-averse and where there is a high degree of long-service staff who have not only worked in the organisation for a long time, but have worked in the same job for many years. Staff throughout the Department pride themselves on their ability to provide a high level of customer service, and they are in the front line whenever any customer does not like or agree with changes that have been implemented.

CUSTOMER FEEDBACK

41. In general, the Department receives very little customer feedback except when conducting a survey expressly for this purpose. It is some time since such a user survey was carried out specifically for the catering services, and this may be something the Committee wish to consider further.

42. In the meantime, a summary of customer feedback, taken from the Department's web-pages, customer comments books/cards in venues and correspondence files is set out in **Schedule 17** [Not printed]. Sample extracts from the feedback pages are also reproduced. In total, 536 comments were recorded in the year from October 2004–October 2005. This represents a response rate of just 0.04% of all customers using the services from which comments are collected. The highest response rate was in the Members' Dining Room, where 0.5% of users (35) provided feedback; of these, 20 were food complaints (seven requesting the return of savouries to the menu; four complaining that the menu was boring; three complaining about the quality of the steaks). 0.4% of users in the Press Dining Room provided feedback, but this was predominantly complimentary about the food served. Feedback about the Banqueting Service was overwhelmingly positive, with 112 of 117 comments being complimentary.

43. The highest number of comments was received in the Terrace Cafeteria (138 complaints, but just 0.04% of users): of these, 66 were complaints and 70 were compliments or suggestions. Four customers commented positively on the reintroduction of separate counters for main course and vegetable service, following a trial of an alternative layout, and three complaints were received about the pricing of menu items. By comparison, the Debate received just 41 comments, of which 14 were complaints and 27 were compliments or suggestions. It is noteworthy that there were 16 complaints about the service in the Terrace Cafeteria, compared with only four complaints about the service in all other venues combined. Despite the low level of customer feedback, this is sufficient to indicate that service in the Terrace Cafeteria needs to be improved and plans are being made to tackle this.

FUTURE PLANS LIKELY TO IMPACT ON THE LEVEL OF SUBSIDY

44. The Catering Committee agreed to postpone action on two areas when options for subsidy savings were considered.

45. The first of these was the Press catering facilities, which are due for refurbishment over the next two years. Detailed design work has commenced and a requirement to reduce the annual cost of the subsidy provided for the Press catering facilities (£240,000 in 2004–05) has been included in the project brief. The scheme is due to be brought before the Committee shortly.

46. The Catering Committee also agreed to return to the issue of Annie's Bar, which has consistently run at a subsidy cost of £15,000–£20,000 a year. The bar is no longer used by many Members or Press Lobbyists, and its original purpose has become largely obsolete. Takings were only £9,000 for the entire year in 2004–05, having steadily declined from around twice this amount over the past 10 years. Whilst the cost of continuing this service is not huge, the space may be suitable for use for other purposes to provide a new service that would be more valued by Members. Previous suggestions have included a take-away coffee bar, (although it is acknowledged that the location is not ideal for this purpose), or to provide a laundry/dry cleaning service, or to re-locate the Gentlemen Members' Dressing rooms to this interior space, enabling the accommodation currently occupied by the dressing rooms to be converted into Members' offices.

47. A number of other ideas emanating from the Catering Committee's review of Refreshment facilities in 2002 were not taken forward when overtaken by the subsidy review. Some of these projects, such as the need to replace the marquee on the Terrace, cannot be deferred indefinitely and would be worth re-considering.

48. In particular, any scheme that could reduce pressure on the Terrace Cafeteria would, in our view, be worth considering. In this respect, the replacement of the Terrace marquee by an all-weather glazed structure would bring into play new space that could allow the re-ordering of facilities in the vicinity of the Terrace Cafeteria. Whilst recognising the capital investment that would be required, one option might be to re-locate the Souvenir Shop to the space currently occupied by the Strangers' Bar, releasing the space currently occupied by the Souvenir Shop to be converted into a Despatch-box style coffee bar to alleviate overcrowding in the Terrace Cafeteria. Members have always disliked the Strangers Bar in its present

location, and a more convivial space might be provided in the new Terrace structure or, alternatively, in the area currently occupied by the Churchill Room if it was felt that a restaurant would be more appropriate to be sited in the glazed terrace structure.

49. If the Committee felt that these, or other, schemes were worth pursuing, we would be delighted to take forward the work with the appropriate officials in other Departments in order that we could bring back draft options with indicative costs for further consideration by the Committee.

8 November 2005

List of Schedules

Schedule 1	Refreshment Department Trading Account 2004–05 (Not printed)
Schedule 2	5-Year Financial Overview
Schedule 3	Detailed Food, Beverage and Souvenir Trading Statements 2004–05 (Not printed)
Schedule 4	Food Wastage Report 2004–05 (Not printed)
Schedule 5	Income & Expenditure Summary by Trading Outlet 2004–05 (Not printed)
Schedule 6	Comparison Cost of Subsidy by Trading Outlet 2002–03 and 2004–05 (Not printed)
Schedule 7	Retail Trading Summary 2004–05 (incl non-RD outlets) (Not printed)
Schedule 8	List of RD Facilities (Not printed)
Schedule 9	Refreshment Department Management Organisation (Not printed)
Schedule 10	Room Capacities
Schedule 11	Cafeteria Usage, 10–21 October 2005
Schedule 12	Dining Room Usage, 10–27 October 2005
Schedule 13	Press Catering Facilities Usage 2004–05
Schedule 14	Banqueting Business Mix 2004–05, by type & no. of events
Schedule 15	Banqueting Diary Summary (example week) (Not printed)
Schedule 16	Review of Catering Subsidy: Summary of estimated savings
Schedule 17a	Customer Feedback Summary, October 2004—October 2005 (Not printed)
Schedule 17b	Extracts from Customer Feedback, October 2004—October 2005 (Not printed)

HOUSE OF COMMONS
REFRESHMENT DEPARTMENT
5-YEAR FINANCIAL OVERVIEW

	<i>2000-01 PC opened</i>	<i>2001-02 Gen Electn</i>	<i>2002-03</i>	<i>2003-04</i>	<i>2004-05</i>	<i>5-Year % Change</i>
Operating Costs:						
Cost of Goods Sold	2,770	2,640	3,150	3,315	3,180	14.8
Staff Costs	6,390	6,500	7,180	7,500	7,340	14.9
Other Operating Expenses	1,090	960	965	1,010	1,010	16.1
Depreciation	30	20	45	60	60	
Total Costs	10,280	10,120	11,340	11,885	11,590	12.7
Less Income Received	4,820	4,550	5,670	6,305	6,705	39.1
TOTAL SUBSIDY COST	5,460	5,570	5,670	5,580	4,885	-10.5
Statistics						
Subsidy % of Total Cost	53.1	55.0	50.0	47.0	42.1	-11.0
Annual Covers ('000)	1,050	1,119	1,395	1,501	1,454	+38.5%
Cost per Cover	£5.20	£4.98	£4.07	£3.72	£3.36	-£1.84
Agreed Staff Complement (F.T.E.)	364.5	363.5	363.5	355.5	312.5	
Actual Staff in Post ¹ (F.T.E.)	310	304	312	308	296.5	

¹ Difference between agreed staff complement and actual staff in post may be made up by overtime working and temporary/agency workers.

Schedule 10

ROOM CAPACITIES

<i>Cafeterias</i>	<i>No. Seats</i>		<i>Notes</i>
Terrace Cafeteria	148	Strangers 78	Members 70
Members' Tea Room	86	North End 57	South End 29
Press Cafeteria	63		Total 234 seats in POW (excl Press)
Debate (PCH)	200		
Despatch Box (PCH)	48		Total 248 seats in PCH atrium
Bellamy's (IPS)	155		
Bellamy's Clubroom (1PS)	45		Total 200 seats in 1 Parliament Street
Portcullis Cafeteria (7MB)	137		
6th Floor Café (7MB)	55		Total 192 seats in 7 Millbank
Jubilee Café	100		Total 448 seats North of Bridge St Total 640 seats in Outbuildings
<i>Dining Rooms</i>	<i>Lunch</i>	<i>Dinner</i>	
Members' Dining Room	46	111	
Strangers' Dining Room	104	64	
Churchill Dining Room	70	70	
Press Dining Room	56	56	
Adjournment (PCH)	64	64	
<i>Bars</i>	<i>Room capacity</i>		
Strangers	120		
Terrace Pavilion Bar	100		
Churchill Bar	20		
Annie's Bar	20		
Press Bar	100		
Bellamy's Bar	120		
Pugin Room	55 seats		
<i>Banqueting</i>	<i>Seating capacity</i>	<i>Reception capacity</i>	
Dining Room A	54	80	
Dining Room B	24	45	
Dining Room C	14	25	
Dining Room D	14	25	
Terrace Marquee	50	200	
Members' Dining Room	170	200	
Strangers' Dining Room	60	100	
Churchill Dining Room	96	150	
Astor (1PS)	24	45	
Clubroom (1PS)	30	50	Evening only

Schedule 11

CAFETERIA USAGE

SAMPLE 2-WEEK PERIOD 10-21 OCTOBER 2005

	Terrace Cafeteria					Av	Members' Tea Room					Av	
	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri		Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri		
0830-0930	151	183	177	165	158	167	0830-0930	19	55	38	65	38	43
0930-1030	185	197	199	187	197	193	0930-1030	17	35	27	41	13	27
1030-1130	103	133	129	134	124	125	1030-1130	17	31	54	39	18	32
1130-1230	156	162	179	172	159	165	1130-1230	20	38	43	49	20	34
1230-1330	286	300	325	304	221	287	1230-1330	64	81	107	91	38	76
1330-1430	185	224	236	219	149	202	1330-1430	51	74	66	71	23	57
1430-1530	132	158	145	141	76	130	1430-1530	34	49	41	29	5	
1530-1630	119	123	131	121		123	1530-1630	60	74	83	38		64
1630-1730	89	89	88	69		84	1630-1730	60	70	36	31		49
1730-1830	152	160	159	116		147	1730-1830	54	61	39	10		41
1830-1930	151	130	121	67		117	1830-1930	46	47	58	10		40
1930-2030	92	117	97			102	1930-2030	38	75	19			44
2030-2130	67	68	19			51	2030-2130	38	63				51
2130-2230	23	23				23	2130-2230	17	32				24
2230-2330	0	0				0	2230-2330	0	0				0
Total	1,888	2,064	2,001	1,692	1,083		Total	533	782	609	472	154	

	Press Cafeteria					Av	Jubilee Café					Av	
	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri		Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri		
0830-0930	8	10	8	10	3	8	0830-0930	0	10	4	5	0	0
0930-1030	16	21	19	22	13	18	0930-1030	5	10	37	9	5	6
1030-1130	18	24	29	34	18	24	1030-1130	26	49	70	14	12	26
1130-1230	18	19	26	28	17	21	1130-1230	69	43	105	33	20	41
1230-1330	26	34	57	48	24	38	1230-1330	103	69	84	24	24	66
1330-1430	37	34	42	35	26	35	1330-1430	26	53	63	37	23	42
1430-1530	22	26	29	24	5	21	1430-1530	14	21	45	11	10	31
1530-1630	15	22	23	23		21	1530-1630	15	35	14	9	16	23
1630-1730	16	19	14	10		15	1630-1730	22	18	14			16
1730-1830	0					0	1730-1830	0	0	0			0
1830-1930	0					0	1830-1930	0	0	0			0
1930-2030	0					0	1930-2030	0	0	0			0
2030-2130	0					0	2030-2130	0	0	0			0
2130-2230	0					0	2130-2230	0	0	0			0
2230-2330	0					0	2230-2330	0	0	0			0
Total	172	207	246	233	105		Total	278	295	419	141	120	

Schedule 11

CAFETERIA USAGE (Continued)
SAMPLE 2-WEEK PERIOD 10-21 OCTOBER 2005

	Debate (PCH)					Despatch Box (PCH)							
	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Av	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Av	
0830-0930	136	166	156	162	122	148	0830-0930	36	47	45	53	33	43
0930-1030	160	218	205	186	141	182	0930-1030	50	65	74	67	42	60
1030-1130	104	109	122	125	76	107	1030-1130	48	69	65	73	45	60
1130-1230	155	166	198	208	132	172	1130-1230	39	37	37	42	25	36
1230-1330	389	441	435	421	303	398	1230-1330	58	60	69	57	38	56
1330-1430	297	300	295	296	203	278	1330-1430	62	68	59	66	39	59
1430-1530	157	163	148	156	94	144	1430-1530	49	51	49	42	42	47
1530-1630	139	129	173	124		141	1530-1630	45	53	46	54	53	50
1630-1730	92	108	92	82		94	1630-1730	32	34	34	25	16	28
1730-1830	117	121	108	99		111	1730-1830	12	9	15	12	12	12
1830-1930	108	106	101	67		96	1830-1930	0				0	0
1930-2030	69	113	50	49		70	1930-2030	0				0	0
2030-2130	69	36	23	12		35	2030-2130	0				0	0
2130-2230	0					0	2130-2230	0				0	0
2230-2330	0					0	2230-2330	0				0	0
Total	1,992	2,176	2,106	1,987	1,071		Total	431	493	493	491	333	

	Portcullis Cafeteria (7MB)					Bellamy's (IPS)							
	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Av	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Av	
0830-0930	94	111	103	99	81	97	0830-0930	41	54	55	61	66	55.4
0930-1030	115	107	107	111	106	109	0930-1030	70	76	70	83	81	76
1030-1130	75	5	84	73	56	59	1030-1130	25	35	23	30	27	28
1130-1230	88	95	95	95	74	89	1130-1230	66	77	57	80	54	66.8
1230-1330	213	200	238	211	188	210	1230-1330	173	209	202	182	148	183
1330-1430	144	162	134	152	115	141	1330-1430	70	90	85	85	51	76.2
1430-1530	70	85	72	68	47	68	1430-1530	18	16	27	24	9	18.8
1530-1630	45	44	62	61		53	1530-1630	21	25	24	21	0	18.2
1630-1730	39	27	34	41		35	1630-1730	0	0	0	0	0	0
1730-1830	23	23	22	26		23	1730-1830	0	0	0	0	0	0
1830-1930	12	16	18	29		18	1830-1930	0	0	0	0	0	0
1930-2030	17	21	18	19		18	1930-2030	0	0	0	0	0	0
2030-2130	6	8	7	7		7	2030-2130	0	0	0	0	0	0
2130-2230	0					0	2130-2230	0	0	0	0	0	0
2230-2330	0					0	2230-2330	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total	938	901	991	989	666		Total	484	582	543	566	436	

Schedule 11

CAFETERIA USAGE (Continued)
SAMPLE 2-WEEK PERIOD 10-21 OCTOBER 2005

	6th Floor Café (7MB)							Av	Seating Capacity	Pugin Room	Av			
	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Av	Seating Capacity							
0830-0930		2	2	2	1	2	2	0830-0930	0	3	0	0	1	Seating Capacity
0930-1030	3	12	12	9	4	8	8	0930-1030	13	6	13	8	6	55
1030-1130	10	15	15	12	13	13	13	1030-1130	3	24	30	15	14	Note: Transactions late
1130-1230	11	5	20	5	4	9	9	1130-1230	8	21	15	16	12	evening are low as most
1230-1330	10	11	22	21	14	16	16	1230-1330	5	9	20	12	9	business originates from
1330-1430	14	9	15	16	15	14	14	1330-1430	10	6	18	18	10	Strangers Dining Room
1430-1530	4	12	10	13	12	10	10	1430-1530	5	22	47	15	18	
1530-1630	6	8	8	7	8	7	7	1530-1630	23	30	35	20	21	
1630-1730	5	4	4	3		4	4	1630-1730	21	19	20	10	14	
1730-1830	7	4	5	5		5	5	1730-1830	17	23	23	8	14	
1830-1930	0					0	0	1830-1930	15	14	12	7	9	
1930-2030	0					0	0	1930-2030	7	21	19	4	10	
2030-2130	0					0	0	2030-2130	9	11	3	1	5	
2130-2230	0					0	0	2130-2230	2	10	4	5	4	
2230-2330	0					0	0	2230-2330	0	9	0	0	2	
Total	70	82	113	93	71			Total	124	224	255	136	0	

Schedule 12

DINING ROOM USAGE

SAMPLE 3-WEEK PERIOD 10-27 OCTOBER 2005

	Strangers Dining Room					Adjournment					Seating Capacity
	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	
Minimum Covers	11	45	42	31	10	18	23	17	22	26	64
Maximum Covers	42	43	45	24	closed	37	40	18	30	closed	64
Mean Av. Covers	53	68	59	42	closed	71	63	48	40	closed	
	36	59	60	37	23	33	36	36	34	36	
	47	56	51	32	closed	53	52	33	36	closed	

	Churchill Dining Room					Press Dining Room					Seating Capacity
	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	
Minimum Covers	closed	25	29	2	closed	9	13	5	4	4	64
Maximum Covers	19	37	17	closed	closed	2	8	5	3	closed	
Mean Av. Covers	closed	41	46	13	closed	20	16	22	12	11	
	43	69	35	closed	closed	8	52	21	6	closed	
	34	34	38	8	closed	14	15	16	9	8	
	33	50	28	closed	closed	5	25	13	4	closed	

	Members Dining Room					Seating Capacity
	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	
Minimum Covers	6	9	14	13	closed	111
Maximum Covers	50	75	19	1	closed	46
Mean Av. Covers	14	18	33	21	closed	
	122	117	30	1	closed	
	10	13	20	16	closed	
	93	96	24	1	closed	

KEY:

Bold figures indicate Dinner
Other figures indicate Lunch

KEY
Bold figures indicate Dinner
Other figures indicate Lunch

Schedule 13

PRESS CAFETERIA AND DINING ROOM USAGE 2004-05

Week Commencing	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Weekly Mean	Week Commencing	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Weekly Mean
19 April 2004	201	236	230	236	131	207	7 February 2005	214	237	274	229	124	216
Lunch	9	24	30	11	10	17	Lunch	11	9	29	24	4	15
Dinner	13	19	12	17	closed	15	Dinner	14	82	12	13	closed	30
26 April 2004	202	228	226	217	142	203		CLOSED UNTIL 21 FEBRUARY					
Lunch	23	20	39	4	6	18		187	220	252	214	111	197
Dinner	13	11	30	24	closed	20		3	12	36	17	8	15
3 May 2004	closed	217	241	232	120	203	21 February 2004	7	8	8	18	closed	10
Lunch	closed	14	14	14	10	13	Lunch	182	203	231	219	109	189
Dinner	closed	21	15	17	closed	18	Dinner	10	12	26	6	9	11
10 May 2004	225	241	228	251	112	211	28 February 2005	11	12	21	6	closed	13
Lunch	14	20	25	10	0	14	Lunch	11	12	21	6	closed	13
Dinner	5	28	12	6	closed	13	Dinner	207	180	239	195	205	205
3 May 2004	209	214	260	217	129	206	7 March 2005	8	9	12	9	17	18
Lunch	17	15	21	28	9	18	Lunch	10	20	45	19	14	22
Dinner	16	2	13	5	closed	9	Dinner	204	236	285	205	107	259
17 May 2004	192	224	254	204	199	219	14 March 2005	17	13	9	17	18	25
Lunch	24	12	26	19	closed	20	Lunch	10	18	12	9	closed	12
Dinner	18	19	16	17	closed	18	Dinner	207	180	239	195	205	205
24 May 2004	192	224	254	204	199	219	21 March 2005	9	26	27	20	21	21
Lunch	24	12	26	19	closed	20	Lunch	8	9	18	8	closed	14
Dinner	18	19	16	17	closed	18	Dinner	207	180	239	195	205	205
7 June 2004	192	201	242	198	126	192		CLOSED UNTIL 4 APRIL					
Lunch	16	10	30	9	23	18		SUMMARY FOR THE YEAR					
Dinner	7	10	21	5	closed	11		Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	
14 June 2004	210	210	216	196	118	190	Cafeteria	168	180	205	189	79	
Lunch	16	12	15	21	9	15	Minimum	255	244	299	292	167	
Dinner	11	18	10	14	closed	13	Maximum	206	215	240	221	123	
21 June 2004	118	220	259	221	114	206	Mean Av	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	
Lunch	8	15	15	16	4	11	D, Room Lunch	3	0	7	4	0	
Dinner	15	16	9	4	closed	11	Minimum	57	28	39	32	23	
28 June 2004	212	204	237	221	113	197	Maximum	18	16	21	16	9	
Lunch	12	8	26	25	10	16	Mean Av	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	
Dinner	12	29	22	20	closed	21	Covers	206	215	240	221	123	
5 July 2004	215	206	236	200	111	194	D, Room Lunch	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	
Lunch	21	18	25	26	8	20	Minimum	3	0	7	4	0	
Dinner	11	64	13	18	closed	27	Maximum	57	28	39	32	23	
12 July 2004	255	240	299	198	135	225	Mean Av	18	16	21	16	9	
Lunch	34	14	8	15	20	19	Covers	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	
Dinner	14	19	25	15	closed	18	D, Room Dinner	5	2	5	4		
19 July 2004	202	242	232	228	79	246	Minimum	22	64	36	54		
Lunch	20	18	34	14	4	18	Maximum	11	22	16	16		
Dinner	19	28	8	27	closed	21	Mean Av	11	22	16	16		
6 Sept 2004	closed	197	228	189	98	178	Covers	11	22	16	16		
Lunch	closed	12	23	12	closed	12	Minimum	5	2	5	4		
Dinner	closed	55	36	12	closed	26	Maximum	22	64	36	54		
13 Sept 2004	173	199	226	235	208	208	Covers	11	22	16	16		
Lunch	6	15	17	12	closed	10	Mean Av	11	22	16	16		
Dinner	13	14	18	12	closed	14	Covers	11	22	16	16		

Schedule 14

HOUSE OF COMMONS
BANQUETING BUSINESS MIX 2004-05

Analysis by type and number of events

<i>Period</i>	<i>Breakfast Events</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>Lunch Events</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>Tea Events</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>Reception Events</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>Dinner Events</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>Total Number Events</i>
1 (Apr)	6	5.5	21	19.1	6	5.5	35	31.8	42	38.2	110
2 (May)	14	6.4	56	25.5	17	7.7	66	30.0	67	30.5	220
3 (Jun)	15	6.5	34	14.8	28	12.2	73	31.7	80	34.8	230
4 (Jul)	11	6.7	33	20.2	18	11.0	50	30.7	51	31.3	163
5 (Aug)							1	100.0			1
6 (Sep)	5	4.3	21	18.3	5	4.3	47	40.9	37	32.2	115
7 (Oct)	14	7.7	41	22.4	17	9.3	62	33.9	49	26.8	183
8 (Nov)	9	4.3	47	22.6	9	4.3	51	24.5	92	44.2	208
9 (Dec)	12	6.5	42	22.8	10	5.4	50	27.2	70	38.0	184
10 (Jan)	8	7.5	18	16.8	3	2.8	41	38.3	37	34.6	107
11 (Feb)	11	8.4	21	16.0	6	4.6	40	30.5	53	40.5	131
12 (Mar)	16	6.3	61	24.2	11	4.4	74	29.4	90	35.7	252
Total	121	6.4	395	20.7	130	6.8	590	31.0	668	35.1	1,904

REVIEW OF CATERING SUBSIDY

SUMMARY OF ESTIMATED SAVINGS ACHIEVED

<i>Outlet</i>	<i>Mechanism</i>	<i>Estimated Annual Savings £</i>
Cafeterias	Above-inflation year-on-year selling price rises of 5% in April 2003 and April 2004 on cooked or prepared food dishes. (<i>Note: price rise April 2005 kept in line with inflation at 3.5%</i>).	75,000
Dining Rooms	Above-inflation year-on-year selling price rises of 5% in April 2003 and April 2004 on menu prices. (<i>Note: price rise April 2005 kept in line with inflation at 3.5%</i>).	15,000
Bars	Price increase of 10p/pint on beers and lagers (over and above annual supplier cost price increases passed on to customers).	10,000
Sub Total (a)	Estimated Savings from above-inflation Price Rises	100,000
Bellamy's Cafeteria	Closure at 4.30 pm instead of 6.30 pm	45,000
Bellamy's Clubroom	Removal of in-room servery counter (<i>Note: seating remains for Members and Officers to use at lunch-times</i>).	14,000
Millbank Room	Conversion into all-day café. Evening service discontinued.	45,000
Management	Reduction of two Assistant Manager posts.	36,000
Members' and Strangers' Dining Rooms	MDR closed Thursday evenings and Friday lunch to avoid need to open for very low usage. Service staff reductions to reflect declining MDR usage over past 10 years and above-mentioned changes. Agency staff employed to cover demand peaks. Permanent staff used to cover banqueting at off-peak times.	100,000
Members' Tea Room and Terrace Cafeteria	Earlier evening closing Tuesday-Thursday (reverted back to rise of House on Tuesday following changes to sitting hours).	17,000
Churchill Dining Room and Banqueting	Service simplifications to be able to operate with fewer staff and utilise staff in banqueting when business levels low in Churchill Room.	46,000
Kitchens	Menus simplified to reduce staffing requirement and kitchen staffing levels reduced to reflect changes to services.	145,000
Members' Smoking Room	Opening hours changed to be able to reduce staffing by one post.	15,000
Sub Total (b)	Estimated Savings from service changes	463,000

Supplementary memorandum from the Refreshment Department in response to a letter from the Second Clerk of the Committee

1. *What do you do to communicate the services in facilities such as Bellamy's, to encourage pass-holders to use alternative outlets to the Debate and the Terrace?*

The principal way of advertising the Refreshment Department's services to customers is via the Parliamentary intranet. The Refreshment Department home page registers 30,000–40,000 hits in a typical month, making this by far the most effective means of promoting specific services, products or events. Theme days and other special promotions are also regularly advertised here.

We have tried a number of ways of encouraging customers to use the newly-refurbished Bellamy's Cafeteria to alleviate pressure on the Debate in Portcullis House. During the refurbishment work, information about the project was displayed in the Portcullis House atrium to gain the interest of

customers who were not habitués of the old Bellamy's Cafeteria. After opening, articles appeared in "In-House", the parliamentary staff magazine, and discounted prices were offered for the first two weeks after opening. During the spring and summer, a loyalty-card was operated for teas and coffees and, since the return of House in October, Bellamy's has been prominently advertised on the Department's home page, emphasising that it is less crowded. A number of special theme days have been successful in attracting extra business to Bellamy's, and its regular menu structure, which deliberately offers dishes in a lower price spend range than the Debate, has been successful in building custom. However, there is still some spare capacity, even at peak times, and Bellamy's will continue to be actively promoted to try to draw some custom away from the services in Portcullis House.

It is more difficult to offer a viable alternative to the Terrace Cafeteria, as this is the only staff restaurant in the Palace and, from previous user surveys, we know that proximity to the workplace is the single biggest determinant of choice of lunch venue. The Members' Buffet (in the Strangers' Dining Room) has built up a loyal following amongst a core 20–30 Members, but is not open to guests or staff. Most customers using the Terrace Cafeteria consider other venues to be too far away to provide a viable alternative. It is possible that the new House of Lords café-bar (opening Easter 2006) will draw off some of the Terrace custom, but this cannot be certain. Any short-term decision to widen access to the Press Cafeteria may alleviate demand for the Terrace Cafeteria, but this venue is unlikely to be perceived as an attractive alternative in its current state.

The other main House of Commons staff cafeteria venue, the Portcullis Cafeteria in 7 Millbank, is well utilised by the 650+ staff based in that building. Although not generally overcrowded, it does not have spare capacity and is, like the Terrace Cafeteria and the Debate, very busy at peak lunch periods.

2. What does the RD do to communicate access regulations to staff and Members to dissuade un-authorised use?

Again, the key way of advertising the Department's access regulations is via the intranet pages. Details of access are published in the detailed listing for each venue. In addition to this, the Department publishes a booklet giving brief descriptions of all its services, opening times and who is eligible to use each facility. This is handed out to new staff of the House as part of their induction and was distributed to all new Members following the last two General Elections. Information is also available in the Staff Handbook and in the Members Handbook, with links to the Refreshment Department's intranet pages. Printed and intranet information about catering services clearly signposts customers to the Director's Office or the Duty Manager for further details or explanations.

Works "term" contractor staff (ie those contractors who are working on the Estate for a defined period, but not including those appointed only for the summer recess works projects) receive details about the Refreshment Department services and access regulations as part of their induction. However, the induction provided for summer works contractor staff is briefer and we understand that little mention is made of catering facilities, access restrictions and dress codes. We believe that it would be beneficial to clarify these details to all works contractors, including summer works contractors, as part of their induction procedures.

3. If the Committee were to recommend structural change to one of your outlets, for example to convert the Churchill Room into a bar, how long should the Committee expect it to take for the change to be put into effect?

It is necessary to obtain listed building consent in order to make significant structural changes to any part of the Palace and, consequently, schemes requiring any such work generally have a minimum lead time of 18 months to two years. However, this timetable is only possible for projects that could be funded within existing budgets. For larger projects, Estimates are laid in the Autumn for the next three years and there is, consequently, a need to commence planning for such projects over three years in advance.

4. Can you suggest effective ways of bringing down the subsidy costs in the dining rooms?

At over £6.8 million in 2004–05, payroll costs accounted for almost 60% of the total cost of operating the Refreshment Department and were more than its total income from customers. Whilst there is always scope to improve the profit margins through better purchasing, any major reduction in the subsidy costs requires two things to happen in tandem: a reduction in the staff cost and an increase in income from customers. A number of the dining rooms have capacity to increase their business, either because they are not as busy as they used to be or because the pattern of business is concentrated into certain days of the week and certain months of the year (ie demand is linked to the parliamentary timetable). A review of access, as discussed in Question 5 below, would offer opportunities to increase income and, hence, reduce the subsidy.

Services that are not used to capacity simply because they no longer meet the needs or preferences of customers should be reviewed as part of a planned and regularly updated catering strategy. This will facilitate the development of services on two levels: firstly, by regular and structured review of the catering

concept, making best use of the resources and equipment currently available; and, secondly, by planning the development of catering services in tandem with the 10-year rolling programme of Works so that any structural, layout, equipment and décor requirements can be planned and financed in a co-ordinated manner. This would ensure that services are constantly kept fresh and well-utilised in the short-term, and would provide periodic opportunity, at points when major investment into the premises is needed, to invest in labour-saving equipment and work systems.

The Adjournment restaurant in Portcullis House operates at a significantly lower cost per cover than the dining rooms in the Palace. One way in which this has been achieved is by employing multi-skilled restaurant staff who look after all the requirements of the tables for which they are responsible: food service, bar and wine service, cashiering, etc. The menu in the Adjournment is also very cost-effective, offering just five starters and five main courses, changed weekly. Dishes are designed for ease of cooking and assembly and the ambiance is deliberately more casual than the dining rooms in the Palace. Such a style is more challenging to introduce in the Palace dining rooms, where customers relish the traditions and are quick to decry new ways of doing things. We have already gone part-way towards multi-skilling the service staff in the Members' and Strangers' Dining Rooms and in the Churchill Room, but progress is slower than expected.

Of the three dining rooms in the Palace (excluding the Press), the Churchill Room is the restaurant where it would be easiest to introduce a more contemporary ambiance, menu and service. The latter two could be achieved without any major investment, and development of the food concept will be a priority for the new Executive Chef, when appointed. However, it would require some expenditure for re-decoration, new tableware, etc to change the ambiance of the venue—this may not be possible until 2006–07. Such a new concept would no longer position the Churchill Room as the “fine dining” restaurant in our portfolio, but would instead seek to maximise covers by price-positioning the menu offer alongside the Adjournment (ie to increase covers but accept a lower average spend than at present).

We would wish to continue to take private functions in the Churchill Room on Monday lunchtimes, Thursday evenings and all-day Fridays, as this banqueting business provides a valuable financial profit that helps reduce the overall subsidy cost. We know from previous representations that Members of the House of Lords would greatly appreciate access to this restaurant, which could then provide a common meeting ground for the Members of both Houses in a room adjacent to and complementing the Lords' own new café-bar facility; this provides scope for increased usage. For the longer term, we have already proposed in our previous memorandum that the future of the Churchill Room in its present location should be re-considered if permission is obtained to replace the Terrace Marquee with a year-round, all-weather glazed structure.

The décor and ambiance of the Principal Floor dining rooms is much harder to change, and best suits a traditional style of service. The purpose of the Members' Dining Room is very different to the Strangers', and there is no reason why the service style could not be different in the two rooms. The Strangers' Dining service is generally well-utilised throughout the week and we do not, at this stage, propose any radical change in its style or menu. In the Members' Dining Room, the priority for Members is for a fast, efficient but friendly service, and the main constraint to efficiency is the complex ordering and billing system (Members typically want an individual bill, may join a table and agree to share a bottle of wine part way through, or may even move to another table part way through their meal). The subsidy cost is high for two particular reasons: firstly, the number of staff needed to cope with the complex service demands in this dining room; and, secondly, the highly unpredictable level of business. One way of reducing the subsidy in the Members' Dining Room would be to change the service style to, predominantly, a self-help buffet, perhaps backed up with a few simple “staples” such as steaks and omelettes cooked to order. This would better meet the demands of Members for fast service and would allow us to cater more economically for the peaks and troughs of business experienced in this venue. Billing would be simplified even further if it was accepted that the buffet should be offered at a simple, all-inclusive price, as it is at lunch-time. Although this would reduce the food gross-profit margin, the additional food cost would be more than outweighed by the reduced staffing requirement.

5. What would be the effect on the subsidy of opening up staff access to the dining rooms or outlets such as the Press facilities?

There is no doubt that there is a significant pool of potential customers who would like greater access to restaurant facilities; these include Members of the House of Lords who are not former Members of this House, UK MEPs, Members of the devolved assemblies, former MPs, and the Press, as well as staff. As long as the increased business could be met from within existing staff resources, the contribution from additional customers would reduce the cost of the subsidy.

However, the success of such a policy depends on offering access at times when there is both a demand for such services and the capacity to deliver them. The Adjournment and the Strangers' Dining Room are already open to all pass-holders on a Thursday evening and Friday lunchtime, but are rarely fully booked. This indicates that there would be little point in offering more facilities to staff at these times.

Widening access to the dining rooms at other, busier times (ie Monday—Wednesday, or Thursday lunch-time) has the potential to reduce the subsidy, but carries the risk of not being able to accommodate all Members' needs. A significant proportion of Members' bookings are made at short notice (less than 48 hours) and, in the Adjournment, up to 50% of tables are not pre-booked.

The above points also hold true for the cost of the subsidy in the Press catering facilities, but we are less convinced that staff and other pass-holders will be easily persuaded to use these venues until they have been refurbished. The location of the press accommodation makes access difficult—the area is served by only one small, slow lift and the entrance requires better signage. Only temporary, limited cooking facilities will be available after July 2006 until the new facilities open in autumn 2007 and consequently there seems little point in trying to encourage new customers to use the Press catering facilities in the short-term. For the longer term, extending access to the Press catering facilities offers opportunities to provide new services that could both alleviate pressure on the Terrace Cafeteria and, at the same time, provide facilities that are not currently available in the Palace. Chief amongst these is the opportunity to provide a coffee bar/café and informal meeting area, similar to the Despatch Box in Portcullis House but additionally offering hot snacks. Options for the future use of the space currently occupied by the Press Dining Room are currently being considered by the project team and scheme design options will come before the Administration Committee early in the new year.

6. A number of staff and MPs have suggested that there would be a demand for later opening hours during recess. Has the RD assessed this demand? What would be the cost?

It is very difficult to assess demand for a service other than by offering the service on a trial basis. In recent years, the catering facilities have gradually extended their opening hours during recess, and cafeteria services are now generally open from 8.30 am until 4.30 pm This is extended to 5.30 pm during September and 7.00 pm during October in the Terrace Cafeteria. Our experience is that very few hot meals are served during these extended hours in September and October, with most of the custom being for teas and coffees.

The cost of opening later during the recess is not the principal reason why services currently finish at 4.30 pm This finishing time is designed to enable the cafeterias, which mostly open at 8.30 am, to be staffed by a single shift. A later closing would necessitate a second shift to work, both in the kitchens and front-of-house. Given that staff must take most of their leave during the recess, there may not be enough staff available to operate a second shift in the cafeterias.

Presuming availability of staff, the additional staff cost of opening the Terrace Cafeteria until 7.30 pm during recess is estimated at approximately £1,000 per week. If a venue is to remain open later in Portcullis House during the recess, we would recommend opening the Despatch Box, which requires minimal staffing. This would enable us to gauge the level of demand for a limited late catering service during the recess at modest additional cost.

7. Who within the RD is responsible for proposing and delivering innovation to improve service?

No single person is responsible for this; it is very much a team responsibility led by the Head of Department, the Executive Chef (who is specifically responsible for food development), and the two Operations Managers (who are responsible for service delivery innovations). The Purchasing Manager and the team of Sous Chefs and Catering Managers also play an important role by actively suggesting new products or dishes they have seen elsewhere. The entire management team make regular visits to other foodservice sites, mostly operated by contract caterers, and are expected to return from such visits with at least one innovation that can be incorporated into the Refreshment Department's business.

8. Your current three-year Business Plan projects to April 2008. Are your catering policies reviewed annually to deliver your objectives?

The business plan is a rolling three-year plan, updated annual in January/February at the same time that the detailed Trading Budget is prepared for the next year. Policies are therefore reviewed annually as part of this process.

9. Your business plan refers to almost 200 suppliers: why are there so many and what is the breakdown of this figure between food and beverage suppliers and souvenir suppliers?

The Refreshment Department requires a wide range of goods to meet the needs of its diverse operations. The department currently retains 154 food, drink and souvenir suppliers, as follows:

- 56 food suppliers
- 24 beverage suppliers
- 74 souvenir suppliers

The number of nominated food suppliers retained by the Department is a matter of judgement; it could be reduced, but we believe that it is important to maintain sufficient number of suppliers to ensure on-going price competition in those areas of our purchasing that suffer significant daily market price fluctuations. With this in mind, we generally retain a pool of three or four nominated suppliers for fresh food markets (butchery, fish, fruit and vegetables, etc). Some food suppliers are highly specialist and others are not used on a regular basis.

Most souvenir suppliers are small craftsmen and artisan companies that supply only one or two products; this is the nature of this market.

There are also 68 general suppliers, some shared with other departments of the House, delivering all the other goods and services necessary to running a catering business. These include suppliers of disposables, cleaning products and services, IT (hardware and software), printing and stationery, recruitment, equipment, laundry, etc.

10. *In the food section of Schedule 3 of your memorandum to the Committee, why is there such a difference between the gross profit as a percentage in the Actual YTD and the Last YTD?*

[If, for example, the per cent gross profit is 32.1%, does that mean that the food cost equals 67.9%? Yes.]

Schedule 3 shows the financial performance of individual catering services at a time when action was being taken to reduce the subsidy. Changes to menus and services were implemented from mid-year 2003–04, with some changes not implemented until April 2004. The figures for 2004–05 show gross profit margins for the first full financial year following these changes.

As part of the subsidy review, an above-inflation price rise of 5% was levied in May 2003 (ie the first month of that year were at the old prices), followed by a further 5% price rise in April 2004. At the same time, a number of purchasing efficiencies were made over the two-year period. Also, in 2004–05, there was a significant change in the overall business mix, with banqueting contributing a greater share of the overall sales income and demand for the self-service cafeterias showing a decline. All these factors combined to improve the profit conversion ratios throughout the business.

20 December 2005

Further memorandum from the Refreshment Department

STATISTICAL INFORMATION DRAWN FROM A SURVEY OF LUNCH-TIME USAGE OF THE “DEBATE” AND TERRACE CAFETERIAS ON WEDNESDAY 9 NOVEMBER 2005

OBJECTIVE AND METHODOLOGY

1. The survey was conducted in order to analyse and compare the peak-time usage of the “debate” self-service restaurant in Portcullis House and the Terrace Cafeteria in the Palace of Westminster. The latter in particular has been identified as a pressure point in the Department’s delivery of catering services, where overcrowding at peak times impacts on the quality of food and service provided.¹

2. A survey was conducted to provide a snap-shot of *who* is using each of these services and *when* they are using it. This was done by recording details of all users between the hours of 11.30 am and 3.00 pm on Wednesday 9 November 2005. The proportion of take-away meals was also recorded, as this is pertinent when assessing pressure on the seating capacity. The questionnaire format was similar to that used when the services were last surveyed in 2002, so comparisons can be made against the breakdown, by pass category of user, published in the Catering Committee’s report in 2002.²

ANALYSIS OF USAGE BY PASS CATEGORY

(a) Terrace Cafeteria (Refer to Annex 1, Chart 1)

3. Over 60% of the 1,009 customers using the Terrace Cafeteria were MPs (10%), their staff (15%), or staff of the House of Commons (34%). 10% of users were Members and staff of the House of Lords. A relatively large number of police and security staff use this venue (87, or 9% of total users). Usage by members of the Press was low (12, or 1% of the total). 73 guests (7% of total) used the facility, but it was not separately identified how many of these were guests of Members and how many were guests of staff. The remaining 143 customers (14% of users) fell into other categories; these are detailed in paragraph 5 below.

¹ Submission of Evidence to the Administration Committee by the House of Commons Refreshment Department, paras 31–35.

² Refreshment Facilities in the House of Commons, Catering Committee, First Report 2001–02, Appendix 1, Charts 2 and 3, page Ev 36.

(b) *the “debate” (refer to Annex 1, Chart 2)*

4. Generally, the customer base in the “debate” tends to have a younger profile than the Terrace, and Member’s staff made up over 40% of the clientele. House staff, on the other hand, made up only 17% of customers. The number of MPs was very similar in both venues, with 107 using the “debate” compared with 105 in the Terrace. As might be expected given its location in Portcullis House, usage by Members and staff of the House of Lords was lower than in the Terrace (5%, or 57 customers). The “debate” was also less popular with police and security staff (48, compared with 87 in the Terrace), but more popular with the Press (22, compared with 12 in the Terrace). There were more guests in this venue than in the Terrace (95 *versus* 73), which is surprising given that only Members and Officers are permitted to entertain guests in the “debate” between 12.00 and 2.00 pm. Other users were similar in number to the Terrace Cafeteria and are detailed below.

(c) *Analysis of “other” users*

5. As mentioned above, 14% of customers in the Terrace Cafeteria and 12% in the “debate” did not fit into the principal customer categories. A breakdown of these other users is provided below:

<i>Pass Description</i>	<i>Terrace Cafeteria</i>	<i>No Customers the “debate”</i>
Day pass holder (ie un-attributable)	31	9
Civil Servant (incl Govt Car Service)	21	39
Post Office/Telecoms/Gurneys/HMSO/TV	26	23
Other Contractors	17	22
Whips’ Office Staff	31	13
Party HQ Staff	0	2
Members’ Spouses	4	15
CPA/IPU/BAPG staff	5	5
Commonwealth/Overseas visitor	1	2
Parliamentary Counsel	6	6
Former Member	1	0
Total	143	136

CUSTOMER THROUGHPUT

6. Usage levels were typical for a mid-week day when the House is sitting, recording over 1,000 transactions during the 3½-hour lunch period in both venues (1,102 in the “debate”, and 1,009 in the Terrace Cafeteria). Of these, 53% of the business in the “debate” was take-away, compared with 45% in the Terrace Cafeteria.

7. In both venues, around 60% of business took place between 12.30 pm and 2.00 pm, with the peak period in the Terrace Cafeteria being a little earlier than in the “debate”. The peak lunch-hour in both venues was 12.30–1.30 pm, when 413 covers were served in the Terrace Cafeteria compared with 499 in the “debate” (see Annex 2).

8. Although the “debate” handles more customers than the Terrace during the peak lunch hour, it is pertinent that the “debate” has three permanent cashier points, whereas the third cashier point in the Terrace Cafeteria is unsuitable for use over a sustained period. Assuming that the third cashier point in the Terrace Cafeteria operates for around 50% of the time during the peak hour, customer throughput at each cashier point equates to 2.8 customers per minute in both venues. This does not support the perception, voiced by some Members of the Committee, that the “debate” handles its queues any more effectively than the Terrace Cafeteria.

SEAT TURNOVER

9. In the “debate”, 522 (47%) customers ate-in and 580 (53%) had take-away meals. Given that the “debate” has 200 seats, seat turnover over the 3½-hour lunch service was 5.5 for all customers or 2.8 for customers eating in the venue. During the peak hour (12.30–1.30pm) the seat turnover was 1.2 eat-in customers for every available seat.

10. In the Terrace Cafeteria, 552 (55%) customers ate in and 457 (45%) had take-away meals. Based on 148 seats (Members’ and Strangers’ sections), seat turnover was 6.8 for all customers or 3.75 for customers eating in. This is considerably higher than the 2.8 rate reported in the “debate”.

11. However, in the Terrace Cafeteria, 70 of the 148 seats are reserved for use by Members and their guests. Even if all Members ate-in and all guests were with Members, a *minimum* of 374 customers used the 78 seats available in the Strangers’ section. This equates to a seat turnover rate (for eat-in customers only) of 4.8 over the lunch-time period, compared with 2.8 in the “debate”. In reality, the rate is higher, as some Members purchase take-away meals and some guests are with staff and, hence, add to the strain on the Strangers’ seating.

12. Although the seat turnover was lower and, hence, more comfortable in the Members’ section, Members would experience the same overcrowding in the servery area and at the tills. This undoubtedly affects their perceptions about the quality of service, although we agree that customer care can be improved in this area.

CONCLUSION

13. Although usage of the “debate” is generally up to 10% higher than usage of the Terrace Cafeteria, the problems of overcrowding are more severe in the Terrace. The perception that the “debate” handles customer throughput more effectively than the Terrace is not borne out by the statistics, and the seating capacity in the “debate” is adequate for the number of users.

14. In contrast, the Terrace Cafeteria is older in design, smaller in size and seating capacity, is constrained in its layout by the conservation and heritage requirements imposed on accommodation in the Palace and, generally, is less suited to handling the volume of customers now using the facility. Although there are undoubtedly things that can be done to improve the quality of food and service in this venue, customers will inevitably be more inclined to form a negative impression of their overall “meal experience” in a venue that is ill-equipped to serve and seat them in comfort. This reinforces our point, already made in our previous paper to the Committee (*para 48*) that we would welcome discussion of any scheme that could alleviate pressure on the Terrace Cafeteria, whether this be by restricting access to the venue, or by finding ways of introducing new services that will draw away some of its custom.

Annex 1

CHART 1

Terrace Usage by Pass Category

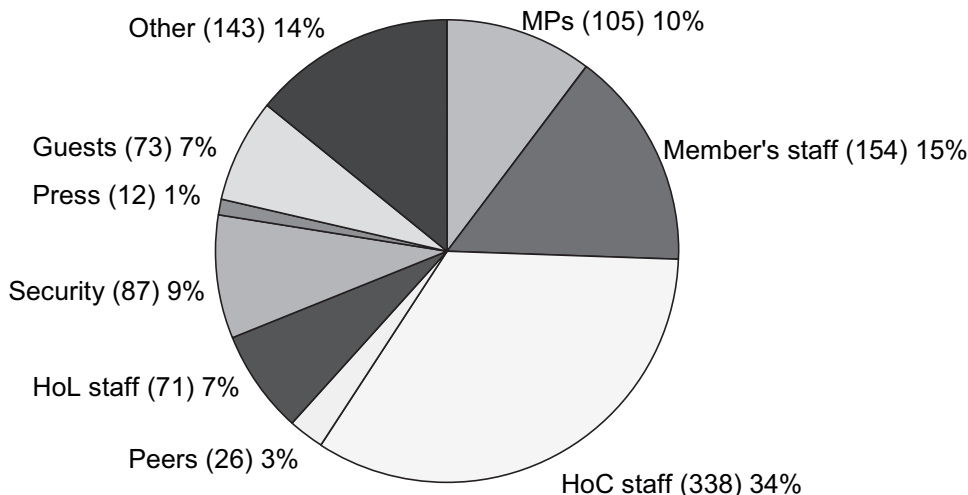
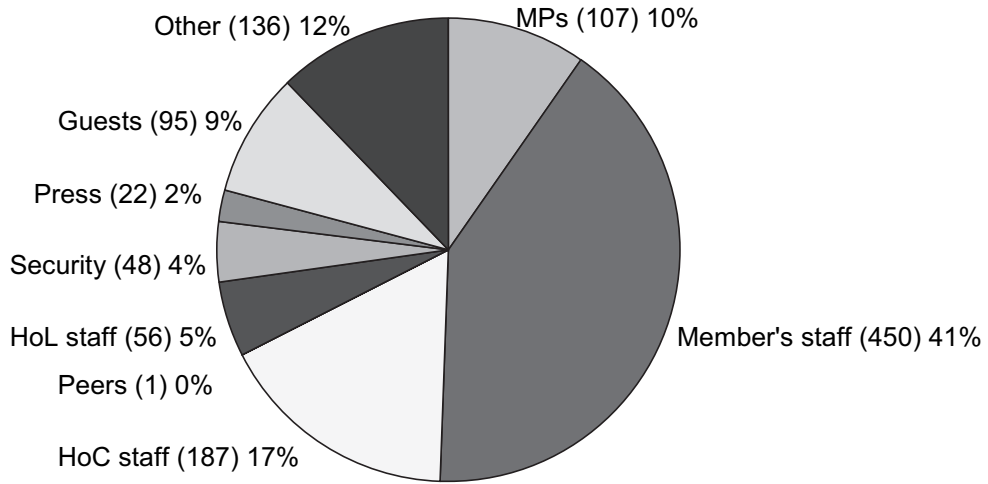


CHART 2

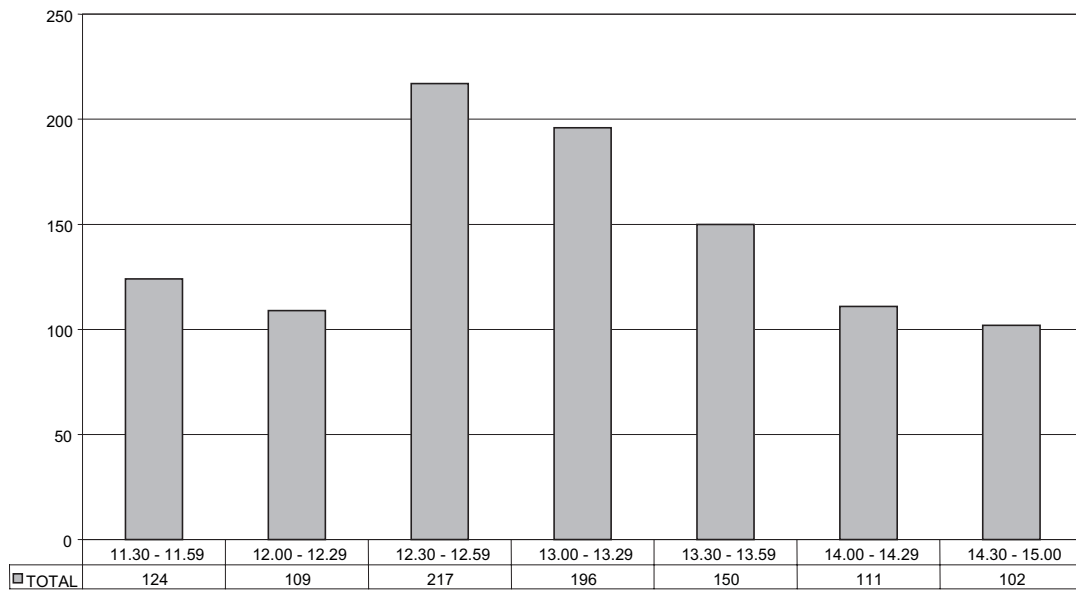
Debate Usage by Pass Category



Annex 2

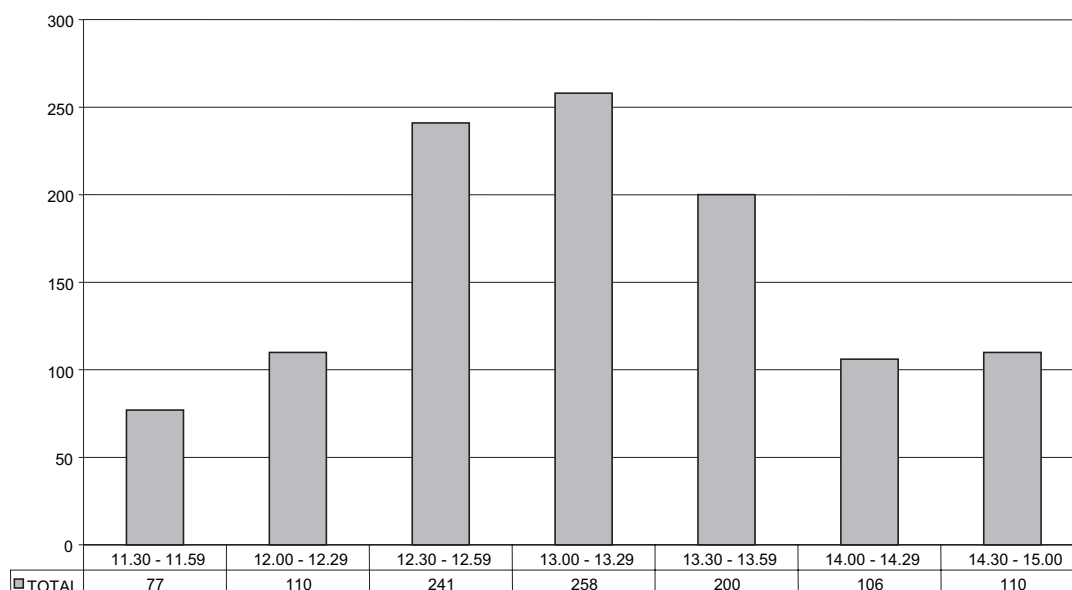
GRAPH 1

Terrace Cafeteria Transactions



GRAPH 2

Debate Transactions



Memoranda submitted by Members

GORDON BANKS

1. The biggest issue I have is the availability of clearly marked Gluten Free food. I have Coeliac Disease and therefore this is vital to my health and well-being that I do not consume Gluten which is found in Wheat Barley Oats and Rye.

2. None of the food on sale anywhere in the Parliamentary Estate is labelled or displayed as Gluten Free and I find it unsatisfactory that I have to repeatedly ask for this information or alternatively limit my choice to foods which I *know* do not contain Gluten and are not prepared using Gluten.

3. There is an All Party Parliamentary Group being formed on this and the condition is becoming very common with possibly 1 in 100 people being sufferers although many are presently undiagnosed. I would be very grateful if you would look into introducing a Gluten Free emblem on all menus and ensure staff are conversant with the condition and the complex range of foods containing Gluten. Also would it be possible to have Gluten Free bread in our establishments.

MS DAWN BUTLER

1. I have a few concerns in regards to the refreshment department:

- (a) Food in the members restaurant is left uncovered and at room temperature—under Health and Safety regulations food should either be kept hot or cold.
- (b) Menus rarely seem to change.
- (c) Are the menus vegetarian friendly?
- (d) Portcullis house seem to be à la carte and vegetable portions are very small.

2. I think that the overall standard could be improved (maybe have a celebrity chef in and get some publicity?).

3. On a happy note the chips are perfect.

RT HON SIR MENZIES CAMPBELL

The coffee arrangements in the Debate in Portcullis House are inconvenient and dangerous. At busy times there is congestion between the machines and the tills where people are paying. The Committee should visit at a busy time and see for themselves.

NIA GRIFFITH

1. Please compliment the Debate restaurant for its good variety of food including vegetarian options and quick service.

2. One small point, please ask them to reconsider the layout of the take away hot drinks as this currently involves dancing around each other with hot water ie step to the left to pick up paper cup, step to the right to put in tea bag, step to the left to put in hot water, step to the right to add milk, step to the left to get cover to put on cup. This should flow in one straight sequence.

MEG HILLIER

1. Does the Refreshment Department provide the services you need? Yes.
2. Food in Portcullis House is healthy and fruit is generally ripe. It is a pleasure to eat in the Adjournment and in the café—excellent service and great food.
3. In the old building I have had variable service and the food is not so good. Some service is excellent but not all. Food in the Palace itself is generally stodgier and more like school dinners. Coffee on top throughout is often stewed. More water fountains might be useful.

MR ERIC ILLSLEY

1. Initially I believe that the inquiry should look at why the system was set up and who it is supposed to serve. Under the old sitting hours the Refreshment Service was designed to assist Members who remained in the Commons for late votes at odd hours. However hours have changed slightly and so have Members dining habits. However, I believe we should still not lose sight of the fact that *the only users of the service constrained by timings of votes are the Members*.

2. I would like to suggest therefore that the inquiry determine whether the facilities are here for the Members' benefit or for the army of researchers, staff, Commons staff and visitors. The question of pricing is relevant here as well. It is very annoying for a Member to sit in the chamber taking part in a debate for hours on end to go to the cafeterias late in the evening to find that the choices have all gone and that what is left is of poor quality. The idea that the subsidised prices mean we all benefit from low prices is of little consolation to a Member who can afford to pay more but can't because the system is designed for staff that are less well paid than Members.

3. Another complaint I have is the restaurants running out of food choices too early. The classic example of this is when I took my wife and children to dine in the Strangers' Dining Room to be told at five minute past eight in the evening that the restaurant had run out of steaks.

SUSAN KRAMER

I think the banqueting service is outstanding and the refreshments are good.

KALI MOUNTFORD

1. As a vegetarian with health issues I find it very difficult to find suitable variety in the food. I'm sure that meat eaters must also be pretty bored by the unchanged menu. There is a distinct lack of imagination and this is most difficult for vegetarians. As a result I only eat in the dining room once a week and even then I sometimes have to ask for different food because what is on offer is too oily or lacking in proteins.

2. The staff are friendly but are constrained by the choice they can offer. The canteen has made some more interesting food available but it should be possible to include a baked potato as a vegetable with say a hummus and vegetable tart rather than fried potatoes without having to pay for two main courses as is currently the case.

DR NICK PALMER

1. I'm reasonably happy with the services. A greater range of choice at different prices might be helpful—there are days when there's nothing in some of the canteens that I'd like to eat, though I can usually find something at one of the others. I've noticed the price rises, but it's still good value.

2. Personally I would support an expansion of self-service facilities, which are clearly overloaded, at the expense of the service restaurants.

RT HON JOHN REDWOOD

1. I would like to see a better range of hot dishes available at lunch time in the Members Tea Room. They rarely offer fish dishes, and seem to specialise in heavy stews/curries.

2. I think it would also be popular to offer cake more often at tea time.

ALISON SEABECK

1. I have over many years as a member of staff found that the cut off times for the availability of hot food during the recess are based on the assumption that no-one works in the House of Commons when MPs are not in the building. This is not the case. Indeed, now as an MP, I worked late in the House of Commons during the last recess.

2. I would ask that you do try and keep at least one venue open until 5.30 pm during the recess to meet staff needs.

MR BARRY SHEERMAN

1. On balance, the Refreshment Department works reasonably well but there are some disaster areas.
2. For all the investment the Terrace Cafeteria is an unpleasant environment to meet and eat. While the staff is good, the overall experience is a poor one and most Members avoid it unless it is absolutely necessary. What a contrast to the wonderful, crowded, but excellent Lords cafeteria just a short step away.
3. The Churchill Grill is also a disaster; renamed, of course without Members' consultation at the time. The staff has always been fantastic but the menu has never recovered from a drastic change some years ago when it ceased to be a first class grill restaurant. At present its offerings are vastly over priced and the portions ridiculously small for each an average appetite. It is much cheaper to eat in a good restaurant outside.
4. The Portcullis facilities are excellent. So much so that far too many tourists, journalists and Members of the Lords crowd out the people who work there. The one blot is the coffee bar where due to either equipment or staff training they seem incapable of providing coffee at any speed at all compare this with the rapidity of service just outside in Cafe Nero.
5. Finally, on food just a thank you for the underrated but truly excellent staff and restaurant at 1 Parliament Street. The food is good, choice excellent, and staff really excellent. Breakfasts are the best available. Pity we haven't yet sorted out the Members' facility which is rather dull and gloomy to eat in during the day.

MR ANDREW SLAUGHTER

1. I frequently buy coffee from the despatch box café, which is good, but it is a pity that this is the only location from which to buy decent coffee on the estate. Also it is frequently understaffed and queues form.
2. My limited experience of eating in the canteens is that the food is satisfactory and good value for money.
3. The food in the dining rooms (the Adjournment, Members, the Churchill Room) is far from good. I now invariably take guests to eat outside the estate because I do not believe the quality inside is satisfactory. I would have thought that the prestige of this venue would be sufficient to attract reputable chefs to operate franchises here.
4. I am still confused as to opening hours, rules on admissions and facilities for guests of differing types at the many refreshments outlets. I cannot believe it is impossible to simplify these. While it must be right that Members are able to have access to proper dining facilities, the emphasis appear too often to be on exclusivity for its own sake. This is particularly demoralising and confusing for staff.

DR PHYLLIS STARKEY

1. It is important both for the service provided and for the public reputation of Parliament that the public money subsidising the refreshment service is used as effectively and efficiently as possible. There can be no justification for the House of Commons and the House of Lords to run wholly separate services. Although there may be reasons for continuing to provide different services in each House, there must be some scope for greater provision of common services and the back-of-house parts of the operation should be run as a single operation to minimise waste.
2. In relation to my personal use of the services offered comments are as follows:
 - (a) Members Tea Room—an important facility because it is a meeting place for Members but it finds it very difficult to cope with peak times and the provision of “specials” and other dishes from the kitchens is unnecessarily slow. Could there be a rethink on staffing to try to respond to predictable peaks (eg after Prime Minister's Questions);
 - (b) Members/Strangers Dining Room—rarely used since 2005 Election although used frequently before (change largely because of personal circumstances). The menus here are very old fashioned and choices sometimes very limited. The buffet lunch in the Members is good value.
 - (c) The Adjournment, Portcullis House—high quality and modern menu. Service is very slow at times. The Debate, Cafeteria, Portcullis House—good range and obviously very popular because the queues are enormous. Suggests some other outlet should copy the style to provide an alternative and reduce the pressure. The Despatch Box—use this daily, only complaint is that staffing levels too low at certain times so that waiting times very long.
3. Altering the rules of access should be considered for facilities that are under-used (at times there is under-use). But there must remain some facilities like the Members Tea Room that are exclusive for Members to provide a meeting place and privacy. If other facilities are opened up then a priority service for Members should be considered at least when the House is sitting. Similar sort of consideration if joint facilities for MPs and Peers. I am not at all against joint use and I do think it is odd that Peers who have been MPs are given better access than other Peers BUT access to the Members Tea Room should not be opened out.

MR ANTHONY STEEN

1. *The Debate* is much more expensive than it should be. For the price of one banana you can get at least three at Tesco's. There is also insufficient green vegetables.
2. *The Adjournment* enjoys a high standard; on the whole the food is well priced, well presented and well served.
3. The *Despatch Box*: coffee tastes sour, bitter and unpleasant most of the time.
4. *Bellamy's*: This is the best of the outlets mentioned in terms of choice, quality and price. There is always a good selection of daily vegetables, although they are usually horribly overcooked. The hot puddings in Bellamy's are good, if not a little starchy. They are far better than what is on offer at the Debate and Terrace.
5. *Additional Comments*: In all outlets the levels of staffing seem to be somewhat on the high side, and I suspect are based on the demand at peak periods. Is there a better way of moving people around and perhaps bringing in part-time staff at peak times? People are increasingly favouring flexi hours and since staffing is the highest individual item on the agenda action in this area may prove particularly fruitful.
6. There is a prominence of spicy dishes. In the Terrace there was a splendid special day yesterday, but there is a disproportionate amount of spicy food on a daily basis in both Bellamy's and the Debate. I do not believe that Indian is preferred on such a scale to Chinese. Or why French/Italian and Spanish food continually supersedes a more traditional English meal.
7. Our cafeterias are considerably more expensive than many in other parts of Whitehall. Local Government offers its staff, if not more range, at least better prices.

MR ANDREW TURNER

1. While the Members' and Strangers' Dining Rooms and Adjournment are good and the Tea Room is essential, the Terrace and Portcullis cafeterias do not provide a decent cheap meal sufficiently late in the evenings for the many staff both of the House and of Members who may want one, including vegetarian options—there is seldom more than one vegetarian dish.
2. The food in the Terrace cafeteria is often not served hot enough at quieter times or has been left under the lights. One member of my staff comments that there is too much emphasis on "ethnic" meals and not enough choice of traditional English dishes (very simple items like cheese on toast would be welcome).
3. The coffee shop in Portcullis House is infuriatingly slow (seldom do I start a meeting there before 10 past the hour if my guests want coffee or tea) and the range is disappointingly limited, I wonder whether it would not more economical to close it and provide a slightly improved service at the cafeteria.
4. I seldom use Bellamy's cafeteria or the No 7 Millbank cafeteria or restaurant; the latter is so far away as to be of little use albeit of good quality.
5. Most outlets conform too rigidly to the conventional view of when people eat—for example, breakfast finishing around 10 am and then a gap until noon for lunch. Staff hours are such that they cannot meet "normal" eating times, and in particular they should be able to eat after 9 pm.
6. Retention of the Members' Dining Room is essential (in case anyone is thinking of savings there). Might it be possible the committee rooms in Portcullis House to be hireable (with light meals or buffets) to supplement the more traditional private Dining Rooms which as far as I can see are greatly in demand?
7. We need somewhere like Pizza Express to provide a service for all until close of business. The quality is reliable and they deliver freshly prepared food to a proven standard.

Memoranda submitted by Members' staff and House of Commons staff

Yasmin Ataullah, Asad Rehman, Lara Sami, Office of George Galloway MP

1. We write on behalf of many Muslim members of staff within the Palace of Westminster with a request for you to consider using halal meat in the Refreshment Department. There are a number of Muslims working within the parliamentary estate, both as House of Commons staff, and as MP's staff.
2. We would very much like to be able to choose from the entire menu, rather than always having to opt for the vegetarian meals on the menu. I am sure that the four Muslim Members of the House of Commons would appreciate this as well as the many Muslims working within the parliamentary estate.
3. I would be grateful if you would seriously consider catering for the needs of *all* parliamentary staff by introducing the use of halal meat.
4. I am aware that the Refreshment Department already has arrangements for the supply of halal meat when catering for functions sponsored by MPs. As such, I believe that the introduction of halal meat for our canteens would not be too troublesome.

Will Conway, Bar Attendant, Refreshment Department (and GMB Branch Secretary)

1. At present the access regulations for Annie's Bar seem outdated. Members understandably resent not being allowed to bring any guests into the bar; efforts to enforce the rule may be met with resentment and hostility. This is also undoing the good work done over time to increase use of the facilities, as some Members are not using the bar at all in protest.

2. While appreciating the historical reasons for the limited access, based largely on confidentiality, many have been overtaken by history. There has not been a small majority for some time now, obviating the old need for horse trading between the Whips' offices. Parliament has opened up to the public far more, so Members have more need to entertain guests informally, or to socialise with colleagues. This has added to pressure on areas such as the Strangers' bar.

3. The aim should be to make better use of the facility, while preserving the intimacy and rules on confidentiality that exist traditionally, this should be perfectly feasible with minor tweaking to the access rules. To this end, I would suggest that the rules are relaxed to allow escorted ex-members and personal secretaries (pass 9A only) access. This would mean that the clientele would be broadly familiar with each other so that they would not have to be as guarded as when surrounded by complete strangers in the Strangers' Bar.

4. In my union role, I am also aware of the pressures on the Department to reduce costs year on year. The cutbacks so far in place have led to an increase in temporary staff. This was coupled with reductions in the directly employed staff and major changes in working patterns. I would ask that the committee bears in mind the advantages of the directly employed workforce over agency staff:

- (a) The ability and willingness to react immediately to the exceptional demands of Parliament cannot be replaced by a transient workforce.
- (b) The security implications of poorly checked references giving wide access to the Estate, including sensitive areas.
- (c) The sheer commitment to good service of the permanently employed workforce, coupled with their experience and knowledge of the sensitivities of Parliament and Parliamentarians cannot be readily replaced.

George Crozier, Liberal Democrats Whips' Office

1. In the interests of improving services to those who work on the parliamentary estate I would like to request that you consider changing the current position on refreshments in meeting rooms, such as the Macmillan and Boothroyd rooms in Portcullis House. At present, I understand there is a single rate and set of rules for all users of the rooms. Among other things this requires the user to use the in-House caterer to supply alcoholic refreshment. This is at a rate of £12 per bottle of wine (for the cheapest) stretching upwards. This is a high mark-up for wine that presumably cost the house authorities no more than £3-£4 per bottle.

2. What this means is that a purely social event, such as a quiz for often poorly-paid MPs' staff and interns to get to know each other, is actually treated as a profit-making venture by the House authorities, effectively pricing such an event out of being able to supply any alcoholic refreshment. Surely it would make sense to simply charge cost price for refreshments at events of this kind, or to allow the relevant departments some discretion in this matter, or to allow organisers to provide refreshments purchased from outside, so that social events of this kind, which bring people who work on the parliamentary estate together, can take place.

Portia Dadley, Department of the Official Report

1. I am a vegetarian, and I regularly use the Debate in Portcullis House and the Terrace Cafeteria. However, the vegetarian options are often unsatisfactory—the portions are too small, and protein is not always included. Vegetarian meals rarely cost more than £2.00, but I would be happy to pay more for a more satisfying meal. There is also a limited range of vegetarian sandwiches.

2. On a more general note, hot meals are usually lukewarm.

Ingrid Davidson, Assistant to Lynne Jones MP

1. The lack of recycling facilities is very disappointing. Several outlets sell large glass bottles of water, yet there is no where obvious to return them for re-use/recycling.

2. Can the Committee consider making charges, say 15p for polystyrene takeaway boxes and 10p for plastic cutlery (marketed as an environmental levy) and use the proceeds to contribute towards the cost of recycling points?

Libby Dewdney-Herbert, Parliamentary Assistant to Tobias Ellwood MP

1. When, occasionally, I entertain somebody for lunch at the House I would appreciate the option of taking them to a dining room with waiter service. When, for example, I am entertaining a local dignitary from the constituency (eg the Mayor) or looking after somebody on Mr Ellwood's behalf, or an elderly or disabled person, I do not think it acceptable that that person should be expected to wait in a queue, particularly at the present time when all the cafeterias are working to capacity. As an example a few weeks

ago Mr Ellwood had two guests for lunch who had travelled all the way from Northern Ireland to meet him. He was delayed in a Committee and asked me to take them to the Strangers Restaurant and have a drink with them until he arrived. I did so but was told on arrival that I would not be allowed to sit with them at a table without him, indeed the guests would have to wait outside the restaurant until Mr Ellwood arrived. This caused me some embarrassment and did not appear very professional.

2. I know that it is possible to use the Adjournment restaurant during the recess, on Thursday evenings and Friday lunchtimes. Would it be possible to extend this facility or offer an alternative at those times when the restaurant is for the use of Members only?

Peter Harborne, Adviser, European Scrutiny Committee

A suggestion: earlier opening by the adjournment, with limited two and three course, "prix fixe" menus, from 17.30 to 19.00, to catch those working in the House who want a quick, reasonably priced meal in nice surroundings before going out for the evening.

Brian Harrison, Senior Administrator, Department of the Official Report

1. You may already have received some from staff of the Department of the Official Report (Hansard), but as their representative on the Refreshment Department Users Group, I offered to collate some comments and forward them to you.

2. Most comments and suggestions were of a trivial nature and would be best dealt with through the User Group or the Refreshment Department's online feedback or suggestion books. However, it was universally felt that there was a problem with the supply of service at night (after 6pm) and especially in the 7 Millbank building.

3. It was suggested that even if the provision of vending machines were increased with superior products to that supplied at present, it would help alleviate the problem for our staff who work well after House hours.

4. Also, if Portcullis Cafeteria could have its hours extended, this would enable staff to have a hot meal in the evening.

Mrs Christine Heald, Secretary to Mr Oliver Heald

1. Generally. I feel the services we receive are excellent.

2. I have a particular comment in relation to the Debate cafeteria in Portcullis House. The lunchtime Access Regulations have been widely ignored since the Debate was opened. Every day Pass-Holders entertain Visitors and Members take more than two visitors through between noon and 2 pm, contrary to Regulations. The serving staff do a wonderful job in keeping the long queues moving and the extra revenue must be welcome, but the table capacity is not sufficient to accommodate the numbers and it makes lunchtime a scrum. Furthermore, the large tables outside the Adjournment are supposed to be reserved for Members and Officers, but this has never been respected. When I raised these points once with a Manager, I was told that he had several times tried to enforce the Access Regulations and had been subjected to verbal abuse, which cannot be acceptable.

3. Clearly the Committee will need to decide whether to enforce the access restrictions (which would be heavy on staff time as it would need to be done regularly) or to scrap them altogether. If they are scrapped, more tables will be needed.

4. I think this raises a wider point, though, about whether Members and Pass Holders should expect to be able to entertain groups of Visitors to lunch within the House. A recent Mass Lobby of Parliament saw several Members lunching in the Debate with four or five constituents. Should Members be able to offer this facility when they are told that constituents are travelling to Westminster to see them? If the view is that they should, then the services provided will have to be expanded to reflect this. Otherwise, Members should respect the current restrictions on numbers and not lead groups of more than two visitors to expect lunch.

5. Similarly, should Passholders view the Debate as a staff canteen or as a café facility to which friends can be invited? Again, there is a revenue point to be considered, but I think it would be helpful if the Committee clarified the purpose of providing the facility of the Debate at lunchtime and set access limits accordingly. I suppose what really irks me that I am one of life's rule-keepers and I have to put up each day with other members of staff—and MPs—flouting the rules.

Christine Hemming, Researcher to John Hemming

1. The catering staff work very hard, are pleasant and accommodating.

2. The range of foods is British, which it should be, and of high quality.

3. The prices are appropriate for the location, the feeding of the less well-off researchers and keeping allowances down.

4. Terrace access is appropriate but in summer was allocated inconsistently.

Rowena Macdonald, Secretary, Committee Office, Clerks Department

1. I am a Grade C Secretary in the Clerk's Department and I have been working here since January 2001.
2. I feel that staff of all grades should be allowed to use the Pugin Room, the Strangers' Bar, the Strangers' Dining Room and the Terrace outdoor seating. Currently, I am only allowed to use these facilities if I am with an Officer of the House.
3. Today, a Thursday, I had three guests with me and we dined in the Terrace Cafeteria after 2 pm. It was a sunny day and the outdoor seating was empty as most Members had either gone back to their constituencies or were in the Commons chamber. I asked the guard if my guests and I would be allowed to sit outside to enjoy the view but we were not allowed. As there were plenty of free tables this seemed a great waste of resources and an example of petty rules overriding common sense.
4. Similarly, I was not able to take my guests to the Strangers' Dining Room or Pugin Room. This seems unfair and I feel sure these refreshment facilities are losing potential revenue from staff like me.
5. If the Refreshment Department wishes to improve its services, the most effective way to do this would be with extra revenue. More money could be made out of staff like me and my guests if the access restrictions to these venues were changed.
6. Having lunch with guests in the beautiful environment of the House of Commons is one of the perks of my job that makes up for my low salary. Relaxing the access restrictions would boost morale for staff. It would also prove to me and my guests that the House of Commons is a democratic institution. At the moment it does not feel like that.

Rosemary Mead, Senior Office Clerk, Clerks Department

1. Pricing and portions are erratic. Menus throughout, especially in the Terrace, have been the same for years. Salads in the Terrace cafe could be considerably more imaginative and healthy. Soups throughout the cafes are good and a fair price. Jamie Oliver should be invited to come here and revamp the menus with a view to more healthy, imaginative and cheaper food.
2. There should be fewer main dishes and types of potato (ie the same three every day) and the same ones should be available on the same day at each of the Commons cafeterias, so that if you were working in Bellamy's you could have fish pie, and you could in the Terrace cafe and Millbank too. There must be a lot of wastage by having so many different dishes and this costs money. Food in dishes such as shepherds pie, fish pies etc seems to weather better on the hotplate than some things which look very dry and to have fewer courses would ensure a fresher turnover.
3. On the whole the quality of the fish and meat is good and the fish pies and similar are very good and one couldn't do a better job oneself. The Terrace cafe cooked breakfasts have often run out and are frequently dried and bacon is like leather.

Ann Palmer, Secretary to David Wilshire

1. I hugely appreciate what is provided by the "coffee bar" in Portcullis House. My only comment is I would like slightly longer opening hours. I would like better access to the Adjournment other than after hours on a Thursday and on a Friday, the latter is a complete non starter. As everyone has the ability to pick up a phone and book, why can't it be "first come first booked". To restrict who can book at certain times results in empty tables.
2. The cold choice at the Terrace cafeteria is ghastly, so I never eat there. The sandwiches everywhere are tasteless—try a new supplier, such as Pret a Manger, their sandwiches cost more but taste of something. I don't mind paying the true price for something worth eating or drinking.

Keith Porteous Wood, Researcher for Lord Avebury and Dr Evan Harris

1. I commend the in-house made soups, especially in Portcullis House, as absolutely marvellous, and
2. Can I ask that soups be available throughout the day even between lunch and dinner for those who may have had to miss meals through no fault of their own.

*Chairman of the Public & Commercial Services Union (PCS),
House of Commons Branch No 060026*

I apologise for the late submission in giving evidence to the Administration Committee inquiry into the House of Commons Refreshment Department Services. The trade union side (TUS) recently gave written and oral evidence to the Committee. On reflection, the PCS believes that certain aspects of the TUS evidence, in particular the PCS input, warrants additional explanation. The PCS would be grateful if you could bring the enclosed comments to the attention of the Committee.

INTRODUCTION

The PCS is by far the largest union within the House of Commons. Its representation covers catering, support, administration and management throughout the House's Departments. The PCS is well-qualified to voice the concerns of staff across the House in general.

As far as House staff and catering users are concerned, there is a lack of information as to where a catering subsidy ends and financial viability starts, when one tries to access the pricing policy of the Refreshment Department (RD).

Some years ago, there was an understanding that the House made a block grant to cover the RD's staff salaries. This negated the Department having to cover costs in relation to staff wages through a pricing mechanism. All other RD running costs were to be met by income generated through sales of food, alcohol, banqueting and the gift shops. The PCS would welcome a response to this particular situation, through the Committee's eventual report.

PRICING POLICY

The current pricing policy is rather skewed in favour of poor nutrition when compared to the aim of a well-balanced diet of vegetables, fish etc.

If you visit the Terrace cafeteria, you will see a classic example of menu pricing:

For £2.90 you can have seven items that can form a cooked breakfast, ie fried bacon, fried sausages, fried hash browns, fried eggs etc. All high in fat and cholesterol! Should one prefer grapefruit, prunes or figs, these are classed as "compote" and priced (highly) accordingly. Porridge at 40p is the saviour!

When it comes to the lunchtime meal the RD take a different stance. The Government health advice of eating five portions of vegetables a day seems to have bypassed the RD management, with a policy of charging 40p a portion for vegetables. You would have to pay £2, even before you have chosen your main item! It is not an exaggeration to say that you would end up paying £5 plus for your lunch. This is far too expensive.

The RD has strong purchasing power, so items like carrots, sprouts, beans etc would be purchased at far less than £10 per 50kg, therefore the amount of profit on portions at 40p each is enormous. Broccoli and cabbage are also attracting huge mark ups. The RD menu available to staff could hardly be classed as "haute cuisine", although to be fair it is cooked to a good standard. There normally is a meal available each day for under £2, but this is reflected in the contents. In general, a reasonable lunchtime meal should cost no more than £2.75. Vegetables should be priced in the region of 15p to 20p a portion. A good variety of vegetables would not go amiss either.

At the end of the day, it is up to the individual to choose what they consume whether it is breakfast lunch or dinner—but there should be a degree of persuasive marketing in steering people to the healthy alternative—contrary to what is practiced now.

EATING FACILITIES—OVERCROWDING

The number of people working in the House together with visitors has steadily increased, to a point that in peak times (12.30–2.00 pm) overcrowding in the cafeterias has reached crisis point. Many staff just cannot stagger their lunch break around peak times, so they just have to endure endless queues, which, in real terms, shorten their lunch break somewhat.

A breakthrough in resolving the lunchtime accommodation crisis could be made by a joint approach with the House of Lords, in using one of their floors in No 1 Millbank. This building has recently been purchased by the House of Lords at a sum reputed to be £60,000,000; a huge sum for a large building. To many, it is hard to fathom why such a building was purchased.

In an ideal world, the House of Lords and House of Commons, through a joint venture, would create new catering facilities on the ground floor with room for 300 plus covers at any one time. Open to all staff from both Houses, this would indeed solve the problem in hand. At first glance, this may all seem fanciful, but the PCS believe it is something that merits serious consideration.

PRESS GALLERY CAFETERIA

This area is without a doubt under used, simply because of the restriction as to who can and cannot use it. It is an anachronism, well past its sell by date. It has been suggested that this area be opened up to all staff of the House, although it is a logical step in improving seating availability—In the wider context of catering outlets, there is, we believe, a better alternative for the facility.

The Press Gallery cafeteria should be fully opened up to all by it becoming a designated sandwich bar together with associated sundry items. The House has a demand for such a facility, for “made to order” as well as stocked supply sandwiches, rolls, cakes etc and perhaps soup sold in cartons. The Terrace cafeteria sandwich area would then be replaced by a better beverages/drinks bar, instead, as currently arranged, people milling in the corner, jostling for either a tea or coffee outlet.

The running costs of the House are readily met from the public purse, but for some reason, when it comes to meals and food in general, any purported subsidy is met with hysteria from certain parts of the media. Such comments are totally inaccurate and as such, compound the public belief of those working for the House being feather bedded, when in fact the opposite is true. As a group, the vast majority of RD staff are the lowest paid employees. There is no mention of this in the media!

The PCS and GMB unions are currently seeking to redress the anomaly of this particular group being disadvantaged in pay terms, compared to the rest of their colleagues across the House, by being placed on the common pay bands A–D. It could be said RD staff are themselves subsidising the Department through low wages.

We believe that all issues raised in this submission together with suggestions as to how to resolve them, will be for the benefit of all.

14 December 2005

Finnian Rook, Assistant to Adam Holloway

1. The Debate, Bellamy’s and The Terrace all serve healthy food. This is very much appreciated. If less healthy alternatives were provided, I would be tempted by them. I think the Administration Committee holds a responsibility to continue to promote healthy options and therefore influence many people’s eating habits.

2. The Debate serves a jacket potato (or pasta) option, which is generally the lowest priced hot-food item on the menu. Even if prices have to rise, I think it would be appropriate to keep one low-priced option available. Many people working at the Houses of Parliament are on low wages, or are volunteers, and it makes working in central London more viable if there continues to be at least one low-priced healthy hot food option.

3. All of the catering staff seem professional. I’m in no doubt that their friendly attitude and good quality service encourages members and staff to use their facilities.

4. I hope that the atmosphere and friendly approach of the staff would be taken into consideration as a factor, if reducing the number of staff at peak periods was considered by the Administration Committee.

Linda Rostron, Department of the Official Report

1. I work 4pm to midnight Monday to Thursdays and 2 pm to 7pm on Fridays for the Written Answers Unit of Hansard.

2. I found that once Members of Parliament left No 7 Millbank for other offices on the Parliamentary estate, the catering facilities available to members of staff in the evening decreased significantly. The Millbank Room restaurant, for example, was soon closed leaving vending machine sandwiches if lucky. It is not always practical or safe to walk on a dark evening to the main building in order to get a hot meal. I think it a mistake to split people up in this way as it leads to isolation and disunity. It is better to mix people up and treat all equally.

3. I am pleased to say that from May 2005 (approximately) Portcullis cafeteria (7 Millbank) has been opened in the evenings as an experiment. Long may this continue and may the choice of food available increase.

Doug Sauv , Researcher, Tony Lloyd’s Office

I’m generally very satisfied with the Refreshment Department, although I believe that “the Adjournment” should be made open to all pass holders (not just grey pass holders) on Thursdays and Fridays. I’ve noticed that it often appears empty before one o’clock on most days and would benefit from being open to a wider clientele.

Diana Thompson, Secretary to Andrew Robathan

I just wanted to express my concern about the number of visitors permitted to lunch in Portcullis House each day. There is absolutely no monitoring of this at present.

Memoranda submitted by others working on the Parliamentary Estate

Mashood Ahmed, House of Lords Computer Office

My only suggestion is for you to provide more Halal/Kosher food.

*Joe Ashton, Chairman, Elizabeth Peacock and Lord Graham of Edmonton, Joint Vice-Chairmen,
Association of Former Members of Parliament*

1. The Association notes that the terms of reference of this Inquiry include the possibility of reconsidering the rules on access to “encourage a more resource-efficient use of the facilities available”.
2. We believe that our members, totalling 333 and growing, represent a potential area of growth for the Refreshment Department. The existing situation is that at present former MPs who have served at least 10 years in Parliament, are eligible for a security pass which allows very limited access to refreshment facilities. Those without a pass have no rights of access. Around 150 MPs retired or were defeated at the general election, and we believe that there are in excess of 600 former MPs still alive and in receipt of a pension.
3. Our members fully understand that we should not be adding to the Department’s problems at peak times. However, we would ask that consideration be given to allowing all former MPs to book a table for themselves, and spouses if wished, at off-peak times such as Monday lunch-times, Thursday evenings, and Fridays, if space is available. Many of our members retired prior to the opening of Portcullis House, and would like guidance on the possibility of using the facilities there at off-peak times.
4. We feel it is perhaps relevant to point out that when the 700-plus Hereditary Peers left the House of Lords, they were granted a number of privileges including entitlement to a photographic pass enabling them to use the Peers’ Guest Dining Room once a month with up to three guests.
5. Our Association has now been in existence for five years and we know our members well. We would assure you that very few of us would want to use refreshment facilities on a regular basis, rather just occasionally, probably mostly on special family occasions.
6. In conclusion, we would add that the Refreshment Department has been extremely helpful in allowing the Association to hold our biennial dinners in Members’ Dining Room and the Churchill Room, which have been very successful occasions, much enjoyed by our members, and which we hope in turn have been beneficial in terms of income for the Refreshment Department.
7. In short, our members would welcome the opportunity to use refreshment facilities on a basis which would be of assistance to the Refreshment Department.

Caroline Cawston, All-Party Weight Watchers Group

1. The Group has held weekly weigh-ins for Members of both Houses each sitting Tuesday since the mid-nineties, and we have around 150 MPs and peers on our books, with a core of around 40 “regulars”. There is also a staff weigh-in which is held each Tuesday lunchtime in 1 Parliament Street.
2. There are two things which might interest the Committee. One is that although Weight Watchers sandwiches used to be sold in Bellamy’s, there was a problem with the supplier, and the initiative ended. We know that the Refreshment Department would like to stock some Weight Watchers products, because when we held the event in the Attlee Suite on 18 October they came to see us and took away some product packaging. A number of our regulars at the weigh-in have said that it would make life much easier for them if they could get Weight Watchers products within the precincts, and I imagine all the Refreshment Dept needs is a little encouragement on this one.
3. Our regulars have also said that it would help if perhaps some menus in some of the Palace’s food outlets could carry the Weight Watchers “points” values. We would be happy to help with such a project if it was felt to be of use.

June Hart, Inter-Parliamentary Union

1. As a vegetarian on a strict low fat diet I would very much appreciate a few more options, as I generally find myself having to have a plain salad sandwich in wholemeal bread every day.
2. I give below some examples which I would be very grateful if you could consider:—
 - (a) Protein options for sandwiches, other than cheese or egg, ie vegetarian sausage, quorn or tofu.
 - (b) Vegetarian hot dishes, without cheese, perhaps with vegetarian sausage, quorn or tofu.
 - (c) Roasted vegetables for toasted Paninis or sandwiches.
3. I realise this may be difficult with a tight budget but whatever you could do would be greatly appreciated.

Jonathan Woodhead, Aide to Baroness Warwick

1. Firstly, I would like to point out that I have a long experience of using the Refreshment facilities at the Houses of Parliament, firstly as an intern, then as a full time researcher for an MP and now as an aide to Baroness Warwick.

2. I feel that there are two major points to address, price structure and access.

3. Firstly, there appears to be very little basis for the price structure. You can maybe buy a two course meal and a drink in the Debate in Portcullis House for about £5, whereas in the Terrace Cafeteria it can be priced around £3. This could go with the fact that the quality of the food is often higher in the Debate rather than the Terrace, but this quality difference needs to be clarified.

4. The issue of access is also frustrating for some particularly over lunchtimes. I can understand the reasons for excluding contractors as there would be too many and are only there for a particular duration. However, yellow pass holders being excluded over lunch is often difficult as their lunch hour may not be before 12 or after 2. There needs to be an element of flexibility over this—say allowing them to buy sandwiches rather than full meals? As the issue of subsidy is under review it seems counter-productive to prevent guests over lunch in the Debate, surely by allowing guests in they are bringing in income that would otherwise not be spent, in turn reducing the need for a subsidy?

5. However on a more positive note allowing full pass holders access to The Adjournment restaurant on Friday's and recess is great—long may it continue.

Baroness Fookes, Chair of the House of Lords Refreshment Committee

INTRODUCTION—JOINT WORKING

1. I appreciated the informal meeting with Frank Doran to discuss catering arrangements in our respective Houses. At that meeting we both welcomed the increased joint procurement exercises being carried out by the two Houses—both in the field of catering and elsewhere. I particularly welcome this trend because it can help limit the staff time used for these exercises, which can be considerable, and because combining the purchasing power of the two Houses in this way is likely to lead to savings for the taxpayer. There are areas in which it makes sense for the two Houses to use separate suppliers, as is currently the case for meat, fish and wines. In general, however, I think this close co-operation in procurement should increase, and I expect it to do so.

2. I also welcome the greater collaboration between the Heads of Catering Services in the two Houses. Again, this is common sense.

SHARED USE OF FACILITIES—CURRENT AND FUTURE

3. The House of Lords three-year kitchen refurbishment project is drawing to a close, and the building works are expected to be completed at the end of March 2006. This has been a major project, involving the closure of the main kitchen and House of Lords staff restaurant. Although our Refreshment Department staff have shown considerable resilience in working out of temporary kitchens, including the Portacabins currently in use, and we have provided another Portacabin in Black Rod's Garden as a temporary staff canteen, there is currently a diminished service to House of Lords staff. This will also have affected House of Commons staff, some of whom were regular users of the House of Lords staff restaurant and bar, and security and contract staff, who were also heavy users of these facilities. I apologise for this disruption, which has been necessary in order to bring the Lords facilities up to modern health and safety standards.

4. When our new, larger, staff restaurant facility opens around Whitsun we expect it to be very popular, and it will have extended opening hours (the old staff restaurant was not open all day). The bar will also serve a range of coffees, unlike the previous bar. I hope this will reduce some of the current pressure on House of Commons facilities.

5. The House of Lords canteen for members and staff in Millbank House is also popular, and we ensure that this remains open during those recess periods, particularly during the summer, when the Lords staff restaurant is closed, so that a Lords staff facility is always available on working days. To an extent this facility has been a victim of its own success, and at lunch time in particular there is often queuing. We are therefore planning a larger catering facility as part of the development of the Island Site to meet predicted future demand.

6. Although I hope our planned expansion of catering facilities will be popular, many members of the Lords would like greater opportunities for members of the two Houses to be able to eat together, for example in the Churchill Room. I hope that the Committee might consider this.

7. The House Committee in the House of Lords considered a comparison of Refreshment Department prices in the two Houses in July 2005 and found that the prices were broadly in line though inevitably there are some differences.

December 2005
