



House of Commons
Administration Committee

Post–Election Services

First Report of Session 2005–06

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

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Contents

Report	<i>Page</i>
Summary	3
1 Introduction	5
2 Services for new and returning Members	7
Accommodation	7
Allocation of permanent offices	7
Temporary accommodation for Members awaiting an office	8
Temporary offices?	10
Information and Communications Technology	10
Reception facilities and services	11
3 Services for former Members	13
Clearing offices on the Parliamentary Estate	14
Concluding parliamentary business	16
Financial administration	17
Redundancy support and careers advice for Members' staff	19
Former Members' access in the longer term	19
4 Conclusion	22
 Conclusions and recommendations	 23
Annex: Transcript of informal discussions	26
Formal Minutes	49
List of written evidence	50

Summary

This Report examines how the House of Commons Service responded to the challenges posed by the change of membership that took place after the general election of May 2005, including the consequent accommodation moves and turnover of Members' staff. We concentrate on those areas where there is need for improvement, in particular

- i. practical provision for new Members, mainly accommodation and related facilities such as computers (see section 2); and
- ii. provision for former Members who stood at the general election and lost their seats (see section 3).

We recommend a target timescale (one month) within which **new Members** should be provided with permanent fully fitted office accommodation. We also make recommendations for more temporary office accommodation and the provision of wireless internet access.

It is the task of the House Administration to assist those **Members who lose their seats** at a general election to carry out the necessary business of ceasing to be a Member as sensitively, quickly and painlessly as possible. This did not always happen. Members who lose their seats have to clear their offices on the Parliamentary Estate, conclude parliamentary business including constituency casework, and deal not only with their own changed career circumstances, but also those of their staff. We make recommendations for how systems could be improved in each of these areas. We also recommend that consideration should be given to granting all former Members eligibility for a parliamentary pass in recognition of their service. Finally, we recommend that election-time guidance for Members and instructions for House staff should be made available well in advance of any future general election.

1 Introduction

1. When Parliament was dissolved on 11 April 2005, 86 Members had announced that they were standing down. On 5 May, 50 Members lost their seats, and 123 new Members were elected.¹ Following the election 178 existing Members who had served in the previous Parliament moved office, and Members (returned and new) employed 565 new members of staff. This change of membership, accommodation and personnel is a major logistical and administrative challenge for the House Service. This report examines how they responded to this challenge and recommends a number of changes, to be implemented well before the next election.

2. During our inquiry we invited written evidence from all former Members who left the House in 2005, and from all current Members. We particularly encouraged evidence from new Members. We received responses from 22 former Members, eight new Members and seven other Members. We also received written evidence from the House Administration, including an analysis of the results of a survey of the views of new Members on the services provided for them after the general election. Having analysed these submissions, we held discussions with a selection of new Members and former Members, and with officials from the House Administration. We are grateful to all those who have assisted us in our inquiry.

3. This report concentrates on those areas where there is need for improvement, but it would be wrong not also to reflect the appreciative comments that have been received from current and former Members from both sides of the House. The following are a selection of the comments we have received, from former Members who retired...

I have nothing but praise for the House of Commons officials.²

The staff and arrangements were ideal ... I genuinely cannot think of any other arrangements, which it would be reasonable to ask Parliament to make, for retiring MPs.³

... and from new Members:

All the staff were very, very helpful indeed and did an excellent job of helping and explaining each step of the way.⁴

Overall I was very impressed with the services offered immediately following the 2005 General election.⁵

1 There were 13 fewer seats in the 2005 Parliament, following a reduction in the number of Scottish constituencies.

2 Ev 9 (Ross Cranston)

3 Ev 15 (Sir Teddy Taylor)

4 Ev 1 (Adam Afriyie)

5 Ev 1 (Mr Robert Flello)

4. In addition, we should note that 84 per cent of the new Members who responded to the survey conducted by the House Administration stated that they were satisfied with the reception facilities and services provided for them.⁶

5. The more negative comments that we have received need to be seen in the context of these plaudits. The majority of the complaints received relate to two specific areas of service:

- i. practical provision for new Members, mainly accommodation and related facilities such as computers; and
- ii. provision for former Members who stood at the general election and lost their seats.

6. This report concentrates on these areas in particular.

2 Services for new and returning Members

7. This section of the Report deals in turn with the two main issues raised by new and returning Members: provision of accommodation and associated facilities on the Parliamentary Estate; and provision of the technology necessary to allow Members to carry out their parliamentary duties. We also consider the reception facilities and services provided for new Members.

Accommodation

8. Accommodation was among the main issues raised with us by new Members. The following are typical of the comments that we received:

Sort out the offices quickly. If the army can achieve it within 24 hours, then I'm sure Parliament can sort it out within 72.⁷

The lack of an office for several weeks was intolerable and meant that I had to spend weekends attending to post etc.⁸

The slow allocation of offices was immensely discourteous and disruptive.⁹

Allocation of permanent offices

9. Accommodation is allocated to individual Members by the relevant party whips. The House Administration is responsible for providing temporary accommodation for new Members and for administering the office moves.

10. Following a general election the allocation of some offices is likely to be held up by a shift in the balance of the parties in the House, which may require renegotiation of the accommodation available to each party. In addition, ministerial and shadow cabinet changes will affect the allocation. In this case, the majority of ministerial appointments had been made by the week of Monday 16 May.

11. Seventy per cent of those Members leaving the House in 2005 stood down at the election. Many of these will have been longer serving Members occupying some of the more sought after accommodation. Normally after an election this accommodation will be allocated to longer serving Members rather than to those new to the House. As the Serjeant at Arms has pointed out, "it is only after the needs of Ministers and longer serving

7 Ev 1 (Adam Afriyie)

8 Ev 1 (Mr Robert Goodwill)

9 Ev 2 (Nia Griffith)

Members are taken into account that the accommodation available for the Whips to allocate to new Members becomes clear”.¹⁰

12. In 2005, there was in addition an unusually large number of office moves among returning Members, 178 in total. Some new Members will have found themselves at the end of a chain of office moves, will have been held up by any delay at any link in this chain, and will as a result have been among the last to move into a permanent office.¹¹ The vast majority of new Members moved into their offices between four and seven weeks after the general election, a timescale not far behind the larger number of re-elected Members moving office.

13. We trust that lessons will be learned from the 2005 election to enable offices to be allocated to Members more quickly in the future. We recommend that the political parties and House of Commons Service should aim to provide all Members with permanent office accommodation within a month of a general election.

14. Due to finite staff resources, there was a limit to the number of office moves that the Administration could carry out on any one day, even once they had been informed of allocations. Other limiting factors included the need to clean and redecorate vacated offices, and the availability of computer and telephone engineers and equipment. The EU procurement exercise for Members’ computer equipment took longer than expected.¹² It is true that general elections are not always predictable; but this one was as predicted as they come and there was no excuse for this procurement to fall behind schedule. **Lessons need to be learnt to ensure that the provision of IT and telecommunications equipment and support dovetail as neatly as possible with that of office accommodation.**

15. We have considered whether the procurement of Members’ computer equipment should be decoupled from the general election cycle. But in practice this would mean either recovering second-hand equipment from former Members to pass on to new Members, or holding a significant quantity of excess stock ready for an unpredictable number of new Members at extra cost to the taxpayer.

Temporary accommodation for Members awaiting an office

16. Temporary accommodation for new Members was provided by the Serjeant at Arms Department. Five rooms were provided on the upper committee corridor, each with eight workstations, telephones and connection points for laptops, and with a single standalone desktop computer, printer and fax in each room. Additional network connectivity was provided for up to ten positions in the Chess Room, together with another printer. Sixteen desktop computers were available in the Members’ Library, and between ten and sixteen were available at any one time in the e-library. In total there were therefore at most around

10 Ev 23, paragraph 10

11 Ev 23, paragraph 11

12 Ev 24, paragraphs 16 and 17

80 places (and only 50 dedicated places) for 123 new Members and their staff.¹³ The Serjeant at Arms notes that to provide further temporary accommodation in Committee rooms would have “a significant impact on Members’ ability to hold large meetings in the weeks after the election” and that to increase the density of desk accommodation on the upper committee corridor would “require work to increase network connectivity in the area”.¹⁴ Neither of these problems need be insurmountable.

17. Although there was a current of feeling that hotdesking was inappropriate for Members’ needs,¹⁵ and the House Service acknowledges that “hot-desking arrangements, even if improved, will never meet fully new Members’ desire for privacy, peace and permanency”,¹⁶ the main complaint about temporary accommodation was quantity rather than quality, particularly given the length of time that Members had to wait for an office. The survey results provided by the Administration suggest that some new Members felt that insufficient printing capacity, faxes and telephones were provided in the temporary accommodation areas.

18. There also appears to be an unmet demand for spaces where new Members can hold confidential meetings with constituents and others. While meeting rooms are available, these are often reserved weeks in advance and there is nowhere to which new Members have priority access.

19. Each new Member is also offered a locker for the storage of personal documents, but on a different floor from the temporary office space provided. As one new Member told us,

*the sheer volume of stuff that you are carting around and the fact that you have nowhere to put anything leads to the danger of losing constituency correspondence and making a complete mess of things.*¹⁷

20. We recommend that the House Service should come back to us with recommended costed options for:

- i. **ensuring that places to work can be made available after an election for up to 150 new Members awaiting an office, together with sufficient fax and printing facilities, either within the space already provided for temporary accommodation, or by increasing the space available;**
- ii. **ensuring that for an initial period of weeks new Members have adequate priority access to spaces which are sufficiently private to be used for confidential meetings with constituents and others; and**

13 Ev 23, paragraph 9

14 Ev 23, paragraph 10

15 Ev 20, paragraph 10

16 Ev 21, paragraph 15

17 Annex, p 26 - Discussion (Nia Griffith)

iii. **lockable storage space for new Members close to their workstations.**

21. The demand for workstations could also be alleviated by providing wireless internet access in other parts of the House where Members can work, such as the Library. We comment further on this below.¹⁸

Temporary offices?

22. Several new Members made the suggestion that vacant offices should be allocated to new Members on a temporary basis:

*If on arrival a new Member moved into an office—even if you had all your stuff in a big wheelie bin—you would have somewhere to base yourself. Even if you were told that you could be chucked out on 24 hours’ notice, it would make no difference—at least you could get on with doing something.*¹⁹

*Why not, as a temporary measure, put new Members in the office occupied by their predecessor. Once all the allocations have been finalised then there could be a changeover process over a weekend.*²⁰

23. As we have already mentioned, few if any of those offices likely to be vacant at the start of a Parliament will eventually be allocated to new Members. Allowing new Members to use these offices temporarily would therefore create even longer and more complex chains of office moves. We also suspect that some new Members might resent (or even resist) being moved after a number of weeks from relatively spacious accommodation to the more prosaic rooms likely to be offered to them for the rest of the Parliament. In our view, **speeding up the allocation of offices and providing adequate temporary accommodation is a better solution to new Members’ accommodation needs than allocating them vacant offices on a temporary basis.**

Information and Communications Technology

*I did not really care that much that I did not have an office for two months, because if I have my laptop and a mobile phone, I have everything I need to contact the outside world.*²¹

24. For IT-literate new Members (an ever increasing proportion), their basic work needs include internet and telephone access. While the ability to forward calls made to a parliamentary telephone number to a mobile phone appears to have satisfied most voice telephony needs, the Parliamentary Data and Video Network is a wires-only network to which only computers matching a centrally specified standard can be connected. A

¹⁸ See paragraphs 24–26

¹⁹ Annex, p 26 - Discussion (Adam Afriyie)

²⁰ Ev 1 (Mr Robert Goodwill)

²¹ Annex, p 31 - Discussion (Grant Shapps)

centrally supplied laptop computer was provided to each new Member on arrival, but with both wireless and Bluetooth capabilities disabled. This significantly limited the extent to which a new Member without an office could work within the Parliamentary Estate, whether using their own equipment or centrally supplied equipment. As one new Member told us,

*I can work anywhere in the country—in coffee shops, in any building, most Conservative associations, if there is a coffee shop next door with a wireless LAN. The only place I was unable to work is here ... I used to spend afternoons sitting on the steps outside Portcullis House so that I could get a signal from what I think is Cafe Nero next door.*²²

25. The IT infrastructure and equipment currently provided on the Parliamentary Estate are simply not suited to a mobile Member without an office. For many new Members, adequate wireless Internet access would have made working without an office much more manageable.

26. It is disappointing that the House Service failed to anticipate new Members arriving with “an existing dependency on IT based on the use of their own equipment”. The Administration has undertaken in its evidence to us to “ensure that new Members also have access to temporary ADSL and, if viable, wireless access to the public internet”.²³ We appreciate the security and viability issues around wireless Internet access, but believe that it should be possible to overcome these difficulties. **We recommend that wireless Internet access should be provided in those areas likely to be of most use to Members: the atrium of Portcullis House, the Library and the new Members’ temporary accommodation areas, and that a way should be found of securely providing wireless functionality on centrally supplied laptop computers.**

27. The provision of immediate access for new Members to a parliamentary telephone number and voicemail account seems to have been widely welcomed.²⁴ But it has been suggested that voicemail boxes rapidly clogged up. **We recommend that the House Administration should assess demand for increased voicemail message capacity to see if it would be worth the additional expense.**

28. Many of the other concerns raised with us focus on the quality and quantity of IT provision more generally. These are matters for a subsequent inquiry.

Reception facilities and services

29. As already mentioned, a large majority of those new Members surveyed by the Administration were satisfied with the reception facilities and services provided for them.

²² Annex, p 29 - Discussion (Adam Afriyie)

²³ Ev 24, paragraph 20

²⁴ Annex, p 29 – Discussion (Adam Afriyie)

30. This House is a confusing and complicated place even for Members who have been here for many years. The fact that a number of new Members suffered from information overload during their first few weeks is therefore hardly surprising.²⁵ It is perhaps a sign of this overload and of Members' conflicting responsibilities that seminars on a very practical subject, employment law, organised by the Department of Finance and Administration, attracted the interest of fewer than 20 new Members.²⁶ **The House Administration should investigate ways of making the information of most use and interest to new Members easily available to be digested in Members' own time, on paper, on the Parliamentary Intranet, or, cost permitting, on DVD.**

31. There were welcome suggestions from those new Members we spoke to that in addition to the material already provided, new Members should be provided with:

- maps of the Parliamentary Estate and assistance to familiarise themselves with its layout;²⁷ and
- information on temporary and more long-term living accommodation in London.²⁸

32. New Members are overwhelmed with offers of assistance on arrival, not only from the House Service, but also from their party Whips. **We commend the House Administration and the party whips for their co-ordinated approach to the reception of new Members and trust that this success will be sustained and built upon.**

25 Ev 19, paragraph 9

26 Ev 26, paragraph 6

27 Ev 2 (Nia Griffith)

28 Ev 2 (Nia Griffith)

3 Services for former Members

33. Those who are no longer Members of Parliament after a general election fall into two very different categories:

- i. those who choose to stand down, and
- ii. those who stand for re-election and lose their seats.

34. Those in the first category have the opportunity to complete their parliamentary business before the dissolution of Parliament, and during the election campaign itself. Those in the second category will be devoting their energies to the election campaign during this period and have to deal with the practical consequences of their loss of office at a particularly difficult and exhausting time. The fact that they have to do this at some speed, so that new Members can be accommodated, is an added burden. **It is the task of the House Administration to assist those Members who lose their seats at a general election to carry out the necessary business of ceasing to be a Member as sensitively, quickly and painlessly as possible.**

35. A number of former Members who lost their seats in 2005 clearly feel aggrieved by the way in which they were treated following the election:

The Administration's approach to former members is, or certainly feels, highly insensitive. I fully understand that it has a pressing duty to new members and that the task of inducting, accommodating and making all the other necessary arrangements for them is extremely difficult. But that does not justify the way in which ex members are made to feel like non-persons almost from the moment their result is declared. It seems as though a task force which has been limbering up for weeks swings into action with a single mission – to dispose of the bodies as discreetly but as quickly as possible.²⁹

The treatment meted out is very similar to that facing employees of private companies who have been sacked for dishonesty. The latter are required to remove all personal effects, and to be accompanied while they clear their desks until they leave the premises never to return. Being a defeated MP is very similar, except that all vestige of courtesy or gratitude is entirely absent.³⁰

Upsetting and humiliating.³¹

I can think of no decent employer who would abandon ex-employees in the way the House turns it back on ex-members.³²

29 Ev 8 (Peter Bradley)

30 Ev 11 (Mr Tony McWalter)

31 Ev 12 (Linda Perham)

32 Ev 17 (Mr Simon Thomas)

36. It would be wrong not to note that some former Members have written to us appreciatively of the service they received:

*Losing an election will always be traumatic, but at each stage the phone calls and correspondence relating to my personal position were dealt with promptly and supportively.*³³

*My experience of the help and advice provided by the staff was very good.*³⁴

Those who have just lost their seats may also be more sensitive to treatment which in other circumstances they would probably shrug off. Most of the complaints received are about the rules which staff have to implement, and not the behaviour of the staff themselves. There is, however, a current of feeling among former Members which we cannot ignore, and, as the Serjeant at Arms has admitted,

My experience of the help and advice provided by the staff was very good

*Staff do appreciate that a Member who has lost their seat will feel particularly upset at this time and they do try to act as sympathetically as possible under the circumstances. Nevertheless, the evidence given to the Committee shows that this does not always happen and clearly we can plan to do better.*³⁵

The House Service needs to treat those who lose their seats at a general election with dignity, and to inculcate among staff a sensitivity to their situation.

37. Part of the problem, as the quotes above show, is that former Members who have lost their seats feel treated like “non-persons”. There is more that the Administration could do proactively to engage with them and assist them. **The House Service should consider nominating a senior member of staff to ensure that those who have lost their seats are given sensitive and proactive assistance and guidance during the week immediately following a general election.**

38. This section of the Report considers the various tasks that Members have to carry out in winding up their offices. These range from the physical clearance of belongings from the precincts of the House and the conclusion of casework to claiming allowances and making redundancy payments to staff. Finally, we look at an issue raised with us by a number of former Members: longer-term access to the Parliamentary Estate.

Clearing offices on the Parliamentary Estate

39. According to the published guidance, those Members standing down at the general election were asked to clear their offices of any papers and belongings no later than seven

33 Ev 10 (Valerie Davey)

34 Ev 16 (Gareth Thomas)

35 Ev 22, paragraph 4

days after the House was formally dissolved, to give time for refurbishment and redecoration before polling day. Those not returned to the House at the general election were asked to clear their offices of papers and belongings immediately after polling day, with the aim of completing the process no later than seven days after polling day. Help with packing belongings and transporting them to vehicles was offered by the Serjeant at Arms Department. According to the Serjeant, all defeated Members' access passes were re-enabled on the day after polling day, along with those of new and returning Members.³⁶

40. In practice, things seem not always to have gone so smoothly. Some defeated Members, not unreasonably, rested over the weekend following the election, and, arriving at Westminster early the following week, discovered that they had a very limited time in which to clear their offices.³⁷ Others, on arrival, found confusion among House staff as to the correct procedures to allow them to access their offices.³⁸ **Clear communications to security and other staff immediately before and immediately after polling day would help to ensure that all defeated Members are able to access and clear their offices as smoothly and swiftly as possible.**

41. According to the Serjeant, most defeated Members achieve the target set for them of completing the clearance of their Westminster office within one week of polling day. Some, however, have told us that this period was not long enough.³⁹ The Serjeant has told us that “in cases where there are difficulties, consideration is always given to extending the time”.⁴⁰

42. We intend in the coming months to conduct an inquiry into the use of all accommodation across the Commons part of the Parliamentary Estate. In the meantime, there is clearly a balance to be struck between defeated Members' need for enough time to clear their offices and the urgent requirement for the accommodation that is being vacated. Given the time that was required after the 2005 election to reallocate accommodation between the political parties, defeated Members probably could have been given slightly longer to clear their offices without inconveniencing serving Members. But this will not necessarily be the case in future. **We recommend that the House Service should investigate whether defeated Members could be allowed longer than a week after polling day in which to clear their offices without delaying the allocation of accommodation to serving Members.**

43. The Serjeant at Arms has told us that “as a measure of last resort”, Serjeant at Arms' staff can pack an office in a Member's absence and arrange for the contents to be transported, at the Member's expense, to wherever the Member requires.⁴¹ Our understanding is that the Winding Up Allowance can be used to reclaim this expense. In

36 Ev 22, paragraph 4

37 Ev 9 (Brian Cotter); Annex, p 36 -Discussion (Mr Simon Thomas)

38 Ev 12 (Mrs Linda Perham)

39 Ev 8 (Peter Bradley), Ev 9 (Brian Cotter), Ev 16 (Mr Simon Thomas)

40 Ev 22, paragraph 4

41 Ev 22, paragraph 3

2005–06 up to £ 34,694 could be claimed under this allowance. Out of the 136 former Members eligible for the allowance, only nine claimed 100 per cent of the total; just over fifty per cent of those former Members claimed more than 80 per cent of the total.⁴²

44. Currently, according to the published guidance, at least one telephone should remain available in a defeated Member's office for four working days after the general election; although at least one former Member found that the line made available to him would not take incoming calls.⁴³ The Administration has undertaken to investigate making a greater level of telephone services available to defeated Members while they remain on the parliamentary estate.⁴⁴ **We recommend that defeated Members should be given access to a telephone line for both outgoing and incoming calls for the whole of the time that they are permitted to clear their offices.**

Concluding parliamentary business

*Even those who voted do not realise that I lost and some still write to me or try to contact me. The House authorities should recognise that the democratic process is about managing that change.*⁴⁵

45. We have received compelling evidence from former Members about the extent to which they continue to be contacted by constituents after the election at which they have lost their seats. Yet, following an initial four-day period after polling day, former Members' e-mail accounts appear to have been disabled entirely, without even an automatic reply to ensure that someone sending an e-mail knew that it was not reaching their intended destination.⁴⁶ When requested, an automatic reply was set up in at least one case after some negotiation. The Serjeant at Arms has promised to investigate setting up an automatic response facility for former Members in future so that those contacting them by e-mail know that they are no longer there and providing alternative contact details.⁴⁷ **An e-mail automatic response service for former Members should be provided as a matter of course in future for a period of several months after a general election.**

46. Former Members' post is forwarded to them for three months after an election by Royal Mail. Several of the comments we have received have suggested that they would like to receive this service for longer.⁴⁸ **The Administration should investigate whether former Members might be offered the option of extending the mail forwarding service they currently receive.**

42 Information provided by the Department of Finance and Administration

43 Ev 9 (Peter Bradley)

44 Ev 22, paragraph 4

45 Annex, p 33 - Discussion (Mr Simon Thomas)

46 Ev 9 (Peter Bradley), Ev 10–11 (Mr Adrian Flook)

47 Ev 22, paragraph 4

48 Ev 10 (Mr Tam Dalyell), Ev 14 (Mr Peter Pike)

Financial administration

47. Those standing down or defeated at a general election need to carry out a considerable amount of complicated financial business at a difficult and stressful time. As well as dealing with their own personal circumstances and winding up their office, they need to deal with the redundancy of the staff they employ. Significant support is available to assist them from the Department of Finance and Administration (DFA). DFA held formal 'exit' interviews with the majority of defeated Members as well as with three-quarters of Members standing down. A team of DFA staff was dedicated to helping those Members standing down and not returned at the general election. They dealt with more than 4,000 telephone calls and sent 350 letters.

48. We have received a number of comments from former Members praising these staff for their assistance, often by name.⁴⁹ But, as DFA has admitted, the key guidance in this area, *Pay and allowances for Members who leave the House at a General Election*, was developed and approved too late for Members standing down who had made early contact, and in addition some incorrect advice was inadvertently given at 'exit' interviews. As one former Member told us:

*If the committee recommends nothing else it ought to recommend that the rules for next time are known at least by the middle of the Parliament, and don't emerge a couple of months before an election.*⁵⁰

We welcome the fact that for the first time comprehensive guidance on finances for Members standing down or defeated at a general election was produced in a single accessible document. It is important, however, that in future the guidance should be reviewed and signed off well in advance of the expected date of any general election. The timing of general election guidance is a matter to which we return below.⁵¹

49. The redundancy provisions for Members' staff were considered and approved by the Members' Estimate Committee before the general election. Members' staff automatically received their statutory redundancy entitlement. In addition, provision was made for matching payments, at the discretion of the employing Member, from the Winding Up Allowance, over and above staff's contractual statutory entitlement. Out of 345 staff receiving statutory redundancy, 87 per cent were given additional redundancy payments. The average amount of redundancy paid, before notice pay and final performance bonuses, was £2,241 without a discretionary payment, or £4,156 with a discretionary payment. Taken together with notice pay and final performance bonuses, it was possible for long serving staff to receive a termination payment of about £20,000; indeed payments were made of up to £29,408.⁵² This provided flexibility for Members and some compensation for

49 Ev 10 (Julia Drown, Mr Adrian Flook), Ev 12 (Mr Bill O'Brien), Ev 13 (Linda Perham), Ev 15 (Mr Chris Smith), Ev 16 (Gareth Thomas)

50 Ev 8 (Andrew Bennett)

51 Paragraph 61

52 Information provided by the Department of Finance and Administration

staff who lost their jobs. **It may be desirable to simplify the arrangements and guidance for the redundancy of former Members' staff. This is a matter on which we would welcome advice from the Advisory Panel on Members' Allowances.**

50. The Resettlement Grant was paid to 136 former Members after the general election. Three quarters of these former Members received the grant on or before 30 June, the target date.⁵³ Some of those who did not failed to apply for the grant in good time or had not met all of their outstanding liabilities to the House, suppliers and staff. The grant is an important way of helping former Members at a time when they might otherwise face cashflow problems.⁵⁴ Two former Members have written to us on this subject, one suggesting that guidance on payment of the grant needs clarification, the other on delays experienced in receiving the grant.

51. The Winding Up Allowance is available to former Members to meet costs incurred in closing their constituency office. Former Members are generally required to settle invoices themselves and then seek repayment of the cost from the House. This can sometimes be difficult where large one-off costs are incurred, for example to buy exit from office lease or photocopying supply contracts.⁵⁵ The House Administration has recognised this difficulty by paying certain larger invoices upfront when asked to do so in what it has described as “exceptional cases”, but on a rather ad hoc basis.⁵⁶ It would be better if the system were regularised, and **we invite the Advisory Panel on Members' Allowances to seek to identify those circumstances in which the House Administration might make payments above a certain value direct to suppliers where costs have been necessarily incurred by former Members, and those circumstances in which the Administration should continue to insist on former Members paying before seeking reimbursement from the House.**

52. One former Member brought to our attention the apparent lack of clear guidance on the interaction between allowances payable to former Members and other entitlements, such as Jobseeker's Allowance.⁵⁷ The DFA is aware of this ‘benefit trap’ and we welcome the steps being taken to liaise with the Department for Work and Pensions.⁵⁸ Pensions are a notoriously complex area, and guidance to Members on their entitlements does not seem always to have been clear or accurate.⁵⁹ We hope that the move towards a fully professional Pensions Unit will, as DFA suggests, limit the recurrence of such problems in future.⁶⁰

53 Ev 26, paragraph 11

54 Ev 16 (Gareth Thomas)

55 Ev 16 (Mr Simon Thomas)

56 Ev 26, paragraph 13

57 Ev 17 (Mr Simon Thomas)

58 Ev 27, paragraph 15

59 Ev 8 (Andrew Bennett), Ev 14 (Mr Peter Pike)

60 Ev 27, paragraph 16

Redundancy support and careers advice for Members' staff

53. Services such as careers advice are normally offered to employees being made redundant. There are currently no such services offered centrally to former Members' staff. Former Members have advocated to us that the House Administration should provide advice for former Members' staff on "preparation of CVs, job searching, etc."⁶¹

54. Although some former Members seem to believe that their staff are employed centrally by the House, this is not the case. Members' staff are employed by individual Members, who have a responsibility to ensure that they have the support and advice they need. They may however not be in the best position to provide this, especially immediately after an election. **The provision of central written guidance and a telephone advice point for Members' staff facing redundancy would be a welcome and sensible development.**

Former Members' access in the longer term

55. Currently, former Members who are not Peers are able to apply for a parliamentary pass if they have served for ten years or more. This followed the acceptance by the Speaker of a recommendation from the Administration Committee in January 2004, reducing the eligibility period from 15 years. Such a pass gives this select group of former Members access to the precincts (but not to the Terrace) and to the Terrace Cafeteria, Strangers' Bar and, on Monday lunchtimes only, the Members' Dining Room. There is no facility for former Members to bring guests into the precincts.

56. Any former Member who is a Peer has significantly greater access rights. These rights are reciprocal, but there are of course far fewer Members of this House who used to be Members of the Lords than the other way round. In December 1999, the House of Lords granted certain privileges including access rights to hereditary peers excluded from the House under the House of Lords Act. These hereditary peers are, unlike former Members, a known quantity whose number can only diminish over time.

57. Former Members of this House with fewer than 10 years' service are not currently entitled to a parliamentary pass and have no rights above and beyond those accorded to the general public.

58. We have received a number of requests from individual former Members, and from the Association of Former Members, that former Members' access rights to the Estate should be extended:

*To attend meetings as far as I know I have to enter Parliament as an ordinary member of the public. Some appreciation of past services would be helpful, and make it easier to attend meetings of All Party Parliamentary Groups.*⁶²

61 Ev 17 (Mr Simon Thomas)

62 Ev 9 (Brian Cotter)

*The new security system ... requires one on visiting Parliament to wear a large sticker saying 'VISITOR'. A doorman who recognised me said how sorry he was to be inspecting my mobile phone, just before he stuck the large sticker on my coat. While at dinner in Dining Room B one of my erstwhile colleagues ask me if I could remove it, as he felt troubled by the huge gulf that it established between him and me. After an evening like that, one does not have a strong wish to return, however kindly one's friends have been.*⁶³

*I would argue that if the principle for access for former Members has been accepted, then ALL former Members should qualify and the pass be designated "Former Member". In this event, the re-enablement of a former Member's pass would be automatic, and there would be no chance of the sorts of experiences I had during the days following my General Election defeat recurring.*⁶⁴

*My real reason for writing is to express my intense sadness that my eight years in Parliament are not recognised and I am excluded from any privilege of a Parliamentary Pass ... When the election was called I had no real time to say goodbye to many friends both staff and Members and my eight years of intense closeness with them all was immediately terminated.*⁶⁵

59. Currently there are 150 former Members with parliamentary passes out of approximately 350 former Members who might apply for such a pass under the current rules.⁶⁶ The estimated total number of all living former Members of this House is about 600,⁶⁷ less than the number of serving Members. We doubt that of these more than a very small number would visit Parliament frequently if granted the right to a pass. It seems highly unlikely that extending this right would pose a security risk. Nor, given the numbers involved, is demand on facilities likely to be a problem. There are, in our view, three pertinent concerns which need to be borne in mind:

- i. the principle that access should generally be restricted to those with a genuine need for it;
- ii. the concern that access should not be used for business purposes (for example, a former Member acting as a lobbyist) or for party politics; and
- iii. the view of the Joint Committee on Security that that the overall number of pass holders needs to be controlled.

63 Ev 11 (Mr Tony McWalter)

64 Ev 13 (Linda Perham)

65 Ev 15 (Syd Rapson)

66 Information provided by the House of Commons Library. All figures in this paragraph exclude former Members who are now Members of the Lords.

67 Information provided by the House of Commons Library

60. The current situation, in which most former Members have no greater access rights to the Parliamentary Estate than the general public, fails in our view to recognise their service appropriately. We recommend to Mr Speaker and to the House that consideration should be given to granting all former Members eligibility for a parliamentary pass, whether a long-term pass or an unescorted day pass, on the understanding that this access should not be used for business or political purposes. Further consideration also needs to be given to the range of access such a pass should allow.

4 Conclusion

61. Elections are unpredictable in their timing and their outcome both for the Administration and for the individual Member. In such circumstances, the Administration cannot be expected to get everything right for everyone all of the time. Planning is already carried out before an election to minimise the risk of things going wrong, but the planning could be more thorough and more timely. We hope that the issues we have raised in this Report will be looked at again after the next election to ensure that lessons have indeed been learned.

62. Current practice is to make election-time guidance available only shortly before the expected date of an election. This is unwise. If an election were to be called suddenly, both the Administration and Members would find themselves in a very difficult position. Guidance from the Department of Finance and Administration on pay and allowances for Members who leave the House at a general election is already available, and should continue to be available, regularly updated, as a living document. **All necessary guidance for Members who lose their seats or who intend to stand down, and the related working instructions for House staff, should be agreed and made available as soon as possible, by Easter 2007 at the very latest, and regularly updated.**

Conclusions and recommendations

Services for new and returning Members

1. We trust that lessons will be learned from the 2005 election to enable offices to be allocated to Members more quickly in the future. We recommend that the political parties and House of Commons Service should aim to provide all Members with permanent office accommodation within a month of a general election. (Paragraph 13)
2. Lessons need to be learnt to ensure that the provision of IT and telecommunications equipment and support dovetail as neatly as possible with that of office accommodation. (Paragraph 14)
3. We recommend that the House Service should come back to us with recommended costed options for:
 - i. ensuring that places to work can be made available after an election for up to 150 new Members awaiting an office, together with sufficient fax and printing facilities, either within the space already provided for temporary accommodation, or by increasing the space available;
 - ii. ensuring that for an initial period of weeks new Members have adequate priority access to spaces which are sufficiently private to be used for confidential meetings with constituents and others; and
 - iii. lockable storage space for new Members close to their workstations. (Paragraph 20.iii)
4. speeding up the allocation of offices and providing adequate temporary accommodation is a better solution to new Members' accommodation needs than allocating them vacant offices on a temporary basis. (Paragraph 23)
5. The IT infrastructure and equipment currently provided on the Parliamentary Estate are simply not suited to a mobile Member without an office. For many new Members, adequate wireless Internet access would have made working without an office much more manageable. (Paragraph 25)
6. We recommend that wireless Internet access should be provided in those areas likely to be of most use to Members: the atrium of Portcullis House, the Library and the new Members' temporary accommodation areas, and that a way should be found of securely providing wireless functionality on centrally supplied laptop computers. (Paragraph 26)
7. We recommend that the House Administration should assess demand for increased voicemail message capacity to see if it would be worth the additional expense. (Paragraph 27)
8. The House Administration should investigate ways of making the information of most use and interest to new Members easily available to be digested in Members'

own time, on paper, on the Parliamentary Intranet, or, cost permitting, on DVD. (Paragraph 30)

9. We commend the House Administration and the party whips for their co-ordinated approach to the reception of new Members and trust that this success will be sustained and built upon. (Paragraph 32)

Services for former Members

10. It is the task of the House Administration to assist those Members who lose their seats at a general election to carry out the necessary business of ceasing to be a Member as sensitively, quickly and painlessly as possible. (Paragraph 34)
11. The House Service needs to treat those who lose their seats at a general election with dignity, and to inculcate among staff a sensitivity to their situation (Paragraph 36)
12. The House Service should consider nominating a senior member of staff to ensure that those who have lost their seats are given sensitive and proactive assistance and guidance during the week immediately following a general election. (Paragraph 37)
13. Clear communications to security and other staff immediately before and immediately after polling day would help to ensure that all defeated Members are able to access and clear their offices as smoothly and swiftly as possible. (Paragraph 40)
14. We recommend that the House Service should investigate whether defeated Members could be allowed longer than a week after polling day in which to clear their offices without delaying the allocation of accommodation to serving Members. (Paragraph 42)
15. We recommend that defeated Members should be given access to a telephone line for both outgoing and incoming calls for the whole of the time that they are permitted to clear their offices. (Paragraph 44)
16. An e-mail automatic response service for former Members should be provided as a matter of course in future for a period of several months after a general election. (Paragraph 45)
17. The Administration should investigate whether former Members might be offered the option of extending the mail forwarding service they currently receive. (Paragraph 46)
18. We welcome the fact that for the first time comprehensive guidance on finances for Members standing down or defeated at a general election was produced in a single accessible document. It is important, however, that in future the guidance should be reviewed and signed off well in advance of the expected date of any general election. (Paragraph 48)
19. It may be desirable to simplify the arrangements and guidance for the redundancy of former Members' staff. This is a matter on which we would welcome advice from the Advisory Panel on Members' Allowances. (Paragraph 49)

20. we invite the Advisory Panel on Members' Allowances to seek to identify those circumstances in which the House Administration might make payments above a certain value direct to suppliers where costs have been necessarily incurred by former Members, and those circumstances in which the Administration should continue to insist on former Members paying before seeking reimbursement from the House. (Paragraph 51)
21. The provision of central written guidance and a telephone advice point for Members' staff facing redundancy would be a welcome and sensible development. (Paragraph 54)
22. The current situation, in which most former Members have no greater access rights to the Parliamentary Estate than the general public, fails in our view to recognise their service appropriately. We recommend to Mr Speaker and to the House that consideration should be given to granting all former Members eligibility for a parliamentary pass, whether a long-term pass or an unescorted day pass, on the understanding that this access should not be used for business or political purposes. Further consideration also needs to be given to the range of access such a pass should allow. (Paragraph 60)

Conclusion

23. Elections are unpredictable in their timing and their outcome both for the Administration and for the individual Member. In such circumstances, the Administration cannot be expected to get everything right for everyone all of the time. Planning is already carried out before an election to minimise the risk of things going wrong, but the planning could be more thorough and more timely. We hope that the issues we have raised in this Report will be looked at again after the next election to ensure that lessons have indeed been learned. (Paragraph 61)
24. All necessary guidance for Members who lose their seats or who intend to stand down, and the related working instructions for House staff, should be agreed and made available as soon as possible, by Easter 2007 at the very latest, and regularly updated. (Paragraph 62)

Annex: Transcript of informal discussions

Discussions held on Tuesday 8 November 2005 with Members of the Administration Committee

Discussion with new Members: Adam Afriyie, Nia Griffith, and Grant Shapps

Chairman: Welcome. Thank you for coming to the inquiry and for the written evidence that you have provided. This is the first inquiry of the new Administration Committee, so we are grateful for your involvement. Hansard writers will be taking notes and our proceedings will be recorded, so anything that you say will be taken down and may be used in evidence. I throw the session open to colleagues who wish to question the witnesses.

Mr. Ainsworth: From reading the evidence that some of our colleagues have presented to the Committee, I gained the impression that the new Members, rather than have the hot-desking arrangements that were made available, would have preferred to be moved into offices even though they would subsequently be thrown out of them. At a general election, some hon. Members expect to lose their seats and some stand down or retire, so their offices might become available immediately. Others, however, are surprised to find themselves returned, so if it were their office that you were to move into, it would take some time. Do the witnesses think that it would be better to be moved into an office only to be thrown out subsequently, or do they consider that the current hot-desking arrangements should be continued, but that improvements should be made?

Nia Griffith: Yes, I think it would be better. It would have to be made absolutely clear to new Members that such arrangements were only temporary and that they were likely to be moved. The sheer volume of stuff that you are carting around and the fact that you have nowhere to put anything leads to the danger of losing constituency correspondence and making a complete mess of things in the first few weeks of being here because you do not have a base. One or two MPs have very kindly let other Members camp in their offices, which was a helpful option. Having somewhere, rather than sharing desks and being at a different desk each day according to whoever was in the room, would be much better.

Adam Afriyie: From my perspective, I am absolutely clear. If on arrival a new Member moved into an office—even if you had all your stuff in a big wheelie bin—you would have somewhere to base yourself. Even if you were told that you could be chucked out on 24 hours' notice, it would make no difference—at least you could get on with doing something. If the Army can do it in 24 hours, I am sure that Parliament can do so in 48 hours.

Helen Jones: I wish to ask about induction procedures. We have received evidence about IT and so on, but before the witnesses came into the Room, several of us were chatting about when we arrived in Parliament. It would be interesting to know whether you were given enough information to be able to find your way around the House, to understand where everything was and to understand procedures, such as where to go to table questions, or whether you had to learn such things as you went along? Do you have any suggestions to make to the Committee about how the procedures might be improved?

Adam Afriyie: The quality of the information given out was fabulous—there was this much of it, though [3-foot pile indicated with hands]. The quality of the induction sessions involving parliamentary staff was spectacular. There was no issue with any of our respective Whips. The trouble is that, when you first arrive, you do not have much capacity to take in everything. For what it is worth, I suggest that a single three-hour induction session that covered everything briefly and generally in, say, 15-minute chunks, would enable us to assimilate what we needed to know. From my perspective, the most helpful item would have been a single sheet of A4 that had a list of 47 things that we should look at and in what order, and explained where to look. We could then proceed at our own pace. People have different demands on their time, so it would be of help if the information was there when you were ready to receive it at your own pace, particularly if you have been living on no sleep for three or four weeks beforehand.

Nia Griffith: Could I come in on that?

Chairman: Sorry, I should have said: if anyone wants to come in on the debate, they can just do so.

Nia Griffith: If I could take up the idea of learning as you go along, I think that a mentor is absolutely crucial, but the best way to have a mentor system is to have clear guidance for the mentor and the person they are mentoring on exactly what the process involves. There is plenty of guidance on that in lots of other

professions. There could be regular meeting times and a list of things that you would cover, so that together you could tick them off and say, “Right, yes, I have done that today, and that.” Then you would have that one-to-one tuition, which is what you need, but you would have it in a structured way, and you would have a clear list of what you had to complete.

I found the initial letter that we had with the four-figure phone number on it inadequate. It would have been nice to know what the seven numbers before that were, just for information. I think that slightly more consolidated training right at the beginning would also be helpful. It is difficult to take it in, but you can break up speaking sessions with sessions in which you are shown round. I found that there was very poor attendance at those sessions put on subsequently, on Tuesday mornings, when perhaps two or three of us would turn up because by that time the pressures of so many other things were coming in on you. There should be a clear couple of days, well structured, at the beginning, with not too much information but a mixture of more practical and more explicit information.

One of the sessions that I found particularly useful was the one where the Committee Chairs did something together with Committee Clerks. Again, I think that a mixture of elected Members and Clerks working together can probably provide the best sort of information and training.

Adam Afriyie: I have one other brief suggestion. Even if it were done in a tin-pot sort of a way, if there were DVD or video libraries of each of the sessions—even if it were done in a very inexpensive fashion, with blackboards behind the presenter—you could watch them in your own time, and at 2 o’clock in the morning, you could say, “Right, I’m going to learn about parliamentary procedures now,” and just have a very quick overview. That would mean that you could control your own destiny and the pace at which you needed to learn.

Derek Conway: My question is about settling in. Some Members come in and manage to inherit a secretary who knows the way around—often better than Members do—and their life is taken over. Others have never employed anybody before and the rights and responsibilities of employers are therefore alien to them. What was your experience of that? Did you find it easy getting someone who knew their way around? Did you inherit someone, or did you want to bring in someone from the outside? Was the whole process of engaging staff on the parliamentary estate as clear as it might have been?

Grant Shapps: First, I apologise—I did not realise the formal nature of this session, otherwise I would have been here a few minutes earlier.

One of the facets of working here and being a Member of Parliament is that the best people want to work for you, so immediately there is a pool of very talented people. Actually, I think that in the minds of most of us new Members starting here, the big panic is, “Will we will find people good enough who are left over once everyone else has found PAs, case workers and researchers?” Of course, nothing could be further from the truth: there are lots of people available and probably each of us to this day receives a lot of CVs from people who are highly qualified and whom we could probably take on at a moment’s notice if we were short of staff. A little more guidance in that area would be helpful.

My concerns do not revolve around employing people, however, because I happen to come from a business that I started and ran for 15 years so I am very comfortable with that sort of stuff. My concerns are all to do with the way the place itself operates—the lack of flexibility and the systems that would be just unbelievably ridiculous in any kind of business context. This is the first time that I have worked in anything approaching a public service environment, and the culture shock is just horrendous and extraordinarily frustrating. For me, it all leads back to things like not having an office quickly enough and not having IT equipment that is flexible enough to do the job that I need it to do. It is a problem that, for me, exists to this day.

Mr. Gerrard: How far do you think induction should be conducted purely by the House authorities, and how far should it be down to the parties?

Nia Griffith: There are two aspects to that. As I said before, a joint approach helps because there are different view points, say, between Members and Clerks. But there may be times when parties would prefer to train separately simply because people are more willing to say that they do not understand something or are uncomfortable about something to Members of their own party than they are in front of a cross-party group.

Adam Afriyie: I think it is important that you have private party sessions, because part of your job as a member of a parliamentary party is to know roughly what is required of you from your own party—not that I would be a full advocate of strong whipping systems. However, it is important to have a good mix of the two. I do not think that I have any complaint about the balance of the sessions. It worked out quite well: the parliamentary party fitted in where it could and worked around the general inductions.

Peter Luff: I should like to explore two quite separate issues about getting offices quickly. Adam made this point, as did Nia, and Grant, you mentioned it just now as well, although it was not in your written submission.

I want to be clear about what you think is a realistic expectation. You cannot have your permanent office quickly; that is impossible. We will hear evidence later from outgoing Members who were asked to vacate their offices too quickly; they did not have time to vacate their offices to make the space. There are other issues, which I am sure the accommodation Whip in the Room would acknowledge, about seeking to achieve the right balance of occupancy of Rooms in buildings so that you are surrounded by colleagues in the same party. It is actually a very complex process. So what are you looking for that is realistic and deliverable, given that you cannot have a permanent office within several weeks?

Adam Afriyie: I would be looking for what most of the other chitter-chatter was about: basically, getting access to an office. It really, really does not matter whether it is a permanent office or not. That makes no difference.

Peter Luff: There are no spare Rooms in the estate; I do not think that what you ask for is achievable either. You are talking about carving up a Committee Room or something.

Nia Griffith: Realistically, people know that they have lost the election on the Friday morning and I think you can give them a week to move out. People make funeral arrangements in a week. It is reasonable to allow them about a week to move out and to look to moving people in a week the following Monday.

Peter Luff: We shall have a debate in the Committee about this subsequently, but I do not think that you understand the practical constraints. For example, Front Benches change, Ministers become Back Benchers, Front-Bench spokesmen become Back Benchers and Back Benchers become part of the shadow Cabinet—it takes weeks for it to become apparent who needs what Room. That is the problem.

Nia Griffith: We accept that. We have just accepted the idea of a temporary office. You are saying, “How soon could you get into your temporary office?” If the office is only temporary, I would have thought that about a 10-day period would be realistic. We accept the fact that all those moves have to be made, and you could not have your permanent office for, say, six or seven weeks.

Mr. Ainsworth: There is expenditure in setting up a temporary office. That would be one consideration, although I think that the House authorities would be more concerned about that than the accommodation Whips. What the accommodation Whips would be concerned about is getting you out at the end of the period. If we moved you into some nice salubrious office that had just been vacated by someone who had been here for 20-odd years, and then attempted after about six weeks to move you into a little box, you would not want to go. You would fight like mad and put up all kinds of excuses as to why you should not go.

Grant Shapps: This is almost at the outrageous level. If people have lost, they have to get out. It is as simple as that. If this was any kind of private industry—

Mr. Ainsworth: I am not talking about the people who have lost; I am talking about you, after your six weeks, eight weeks or however long it is, when I decide that you cannot inherit John Major’s office, or whoever’s office, and that you must have the cubby hole at the end of Upper Committee Corridor North.

Grant Shapps: This is all synonymous with the wrong culture here. It is absolutely ridiculous that we should have to wait for six to eight weeks for offices. I think that about a fortnight is reasonable. When people have lost, they should move out; when they have been downgraded in their jobs, they should move. All this would never ever happen in a business. The only reason why it happens is because there are no financial implications for which anyone is accountable. It is as simple as that. It is completely the wrong culture. We should be thinking in days, but we are thinking in weeks.

Peter Luff: Grant, I invite you to think not just about culture, but about practicalities. There are some practical issues. Bob Ainsworth made the point that if we put you in a luxurious office in Portcullis House and you are destined for a cubby hole on Upper Committee Corridor North, you will not move. We will pursue this point in more detail, and I think that we will hear from later witnesses that they do not get enough time.

We will probably be more in agreement on the issue of information technology. I am impressed by your paper. I have a feeling that each of us as Members of Parliament do our jobs in very different ways. We all have our own approach, and our own needs and requirements. We are being straitjacketed by the information technology systems into doing our jobs in a certain way. Leaving aside the differences about timing and the other issues that we might explore, do you feel straitjacketed?

Grant Shapps: Absolutely. I wrote about that in my paper “Improving Westminster IT”, and I struggle with it to this day. I do not want to use the House of Commons PICT IT system, because I find it restrictive. I do not like being straitjacketed into its e-mail system, which until this week had a ridiculously small storage space. It

cuts off at election time, which means that someone else gets my e-mails and not me. It is needlessly made impossible to work around that. All the House needs to do is to unblock POP 3 port—port 110. It is very simple. Every other organisation in the country manages to do it, but for reasons beyond any of us with an IT mind it is blocked. That, together with inflexibility, is the problem. I needed two laptops, not four desktops, but to swap two desktops for one laptop took me 16 phone calls, most of which were never returned. Eventually, there was a meeting with the head of IT in my office, having first gone through the Serjeant at Arms. It was a ludicrous situation. There was no excuse for that. I have not even touched on the amount of time it took to get some PCs up and running in the first place.

I am being very restrained. I am not being nearly as scathing as I should be about this problem. It is outrageous.

Chairman: We are grateful for your restraint.

Nia Griffith: I want to follow on from that, not as an IT expert but as someone who needs to use the system. When we arrived, we all had the option to have a laptop, which was fine, but could we not have had standard computers straight away? We knew roughly how many new Members there were likely to be, and those who wanted something different or special could have waited a bit longer. I was among the first to put my name down for computers. I already had an office in the constituency, yet it still took weeks to have those computers set up. Surely we had a reasonable idea of how many people were coming. Choice is not always a good thing. We could have had a basic item immediately, unless we were prepared to wait for something different. What happened was that we all had to wait a long time, even if we had somewhere in the constituency where we could work. The issue was not whether we had an office; it was not being able to work from the constituency either, which was another handicap that we could have done without.

Adam Afriyie: I know from my 15 or 20 years in IT that it is easy to set up a computer in a few hours so that it can be used for basic purposes. The biggest constraint was that many of us came here already using our own notebooks and computers. It would have been fine had I been able to be connected to a wireless LAN in this building. I could have carried on at full speed using my own systems until the parliamentary systems were ready. I can work anywhere in the country—in coffee shops, in any building, most Conservative associations, if there is a coffee shop next door with a wireless LAN. The only place I was unable to work is here.

John Thurso: May I go back to the comments made about the provision of temporary offices? When I came to the House, what frustrated me more than anything else was not having a telephone that had my name on it. Will you comment on that? I am specifically thinking about practicality. A new office is about a space—it does not have to be four walls, it could be a cubicle—where you can leave things locked in a drawer that no one else can get into, and where there is a telephone that has your voicemail. Am I right in thinking that that was still as big a barrier this time round?

Adam Afriyie: Actually, I congratulate the parliamentary services, or whoever provides the telephones. It was great that we had an extension allocated before we arrived. Why? Because most of us carry mobile phones, and you can dial into them and get your voicemail forwarded. That is one of the first things I set up, so I was quite comfortable with the telephone extension we had allocated—but again, the voicemail box was too small.

Nia Griffith: May I just second that? The voicemail training was good and helpful, but I would have liked to have had a place where I could have received faxes and also, initially, before the fax machine was set up in the Committee Room, somewhere to send faxes from. Perhaps faxes could have been put in the Members' Post Office and, if they were non-confidential, they could have been put into your postal pile. It was difficult not having a fax machine on which you could receive things as well, particularly when your e-mail was not working either.

Chairman: Six colleagues want to come in. I will call Brian first and then Kevan.

Mr. Donohoe: I return to the question of what happens in the first few weeks, and the idea of using the Committee Rooms on the second floor of the Committee Corridor. Do you think that there is a case for there to be a portable or temporary work station with everything that you require on it, such as a telephone and PC, and perhaps have directories there so that it is all there contained for you? If they were to make some 150 of those available, would that be, in part, the answer to the problem?

Nia Griffith: It would be an improvement on the situation we had, where we were sharing and turning and turning about, particularly those who had taken on staff. That made the place crowded up there.

Mr. Donohoe: So is that something that we could be considering?

Nia Griffith: It is certainly something to be looked into.

Mr. Donohoe: You praised the quality of the information and the advice that you were given in the induction period. Would it be better if it were to be done by one agency within the House, so that there was a specialised

agency, rather than, as it was when I came in, a hotch-potch? Everything then was just done, and it might have worked and it might not have worked. Do you think that there is a case for the Education Unit, which I am sure you will now be aware of, taking on a role in that?

Grant Shapps: The answer is that it probably does not matter, so long as they answer and return phone calls. It was just at the point where PCD, and even Members services, were simply not returning the calls. I would call up and eventually get somebody, and they would say, “We’re not listening to the voicemails because we’re too busy.” The only people that the general election took completely by surprise were those in PCD.

Mr. Donohoe: You have to understand that you are talking about a fairly significant sea change, because this is not just restricted to the Members, but involves the staff as well. In addition, that can be impacted by all the change in the constituencies. Given that you have all now got your equipment—I am presuming that it is from PCD—what is the new equipment like? Is it working to your satisfaction or not?

Grant Shapps: Not for me.

Nia Griffith: Just having had yet another crisis in the constituency last week, and the constituency off e-mail again for the whole week, I have to say no, it is not satisfactory. It took until August to get it sorted out, although I had the office on 6 May. It has been a complete nightmare on the IT front.

On your original question, there is a case for some form of co-ordination. This publication—“Business of the House and its Committees: a short guide”—is very useful, and perhaps whoever put it together could be enlisted to look at the sort of training that we might put together in the first couple of days, when we want to give a brief coverage of as much as we possibly can.

Adam Afriyie: My observation would be that I continue to use my own equipment because the parliamentary equipment is just too restrictive. It is good equipment, but it is designed for the purposes for which whoever the authorities are want you to use it, rather than the way in which you would want to use it. But the equipment is good quality, and it is fine.

Having handled IT projects where we were rolling out networks of 500 or 1,000 users in 36 or 72 hours, I must say again that an election is a predictable event, and I do not believe that such things are that difficult to achieve. Perhaps, behind the scenes—I do not know how it works—those processes need to be looked at.

Mr. Jones: Can I just comment on the offices? As someone who camped in an office for nearly a year and refused to move, I can tell you that trying to get people out of an office once they are in is extremely difficult. I did get the office that I wanted in the end.

May I ask about money? When you get elected, one of the key things is that you shell out a lot of your own money very quickly. What was your experience of the advice that you were given about what you could claim back? Was it consistent? One complaint that I had was that you had different advice from different people in the Department of Finance and Administration. What was your experience of the advice you were given, and what turnaround was there in terms of getting paid for your outlay?

Grant Shapps: Not bad, in my case. The briefing from the Department of Finance and Administration was quite good, and you could usually get to the bottom of the facts. My only complaint would be similar to that about calling PCD. If you call Finance and Admin—on 1340, I think—you very rarely, if ever, get an answer. That is a service culture problem, that, I am afraid, goes across the entire Houses of Parliament.

Nia Griffith: By and large, they were pretty helpful—but I would like to bring up the issue of accommodation. During the time when you do not have an office, you also do not have a home in London. Simply having a list of letting agencies would save you time. We are all survivors; we are MPs—you know, we can get there. However, it would just be quicker if there were somewhere where you could pick up a list of phone numbers and at least begin to sort out somewhere to live when you do not have an office, or anywhere to put anything at all, and you are carrying a mountain of stuff around. That is something very simple that could be done.

Frank Dobson: My attitude to all communications is that I do not want to know how they work; I just want them to do what I want them to do. If I want to go to New York, I do not want to know the power-to-weight ratio of the engines or anything like that—I just want to pay, and the guy to drive it across. What is the minimum you think you require in terms of communications for the first few weeks of being a Member?

Adam Afriyie: My answer is similar to that I gave before: just a brisk, three-hour induction that jumped around each of the areas that you need to consider for 10 minutes, and then a single sheet of A4—

Frank Dobson: I am sorry—I meant IT for communicating with the outside.

Adam Afriyie: I see. Basically, access to a wireless LAN so you can use your own equipment while you do not have that IT equipment. Then a word processor and an e-mail system. That is it.

Grant Shapps: Same thing.

Frank Dobson: A telephone?

Grant Shapps: Yes, that would be useful.

Adam Afriyie: You can dial in with mobile phones. It would be handy to have a normal telephone handset, but I would not say that it is absolutely essential when you arrive. That is the least of your worries.

Grant Shapps: The LAN, in fact, does not even have to be wireless, just one that works that you can plug your laptop into. It is difficult for people to appreciate this if they are not trying to do it, but you cannot use your own e-mail system through the parliamentary network. You can surf the web, although they say that you cannot, but you cannot access your own e-mail. Because of that, to this day I use a 3G datacard in the House and completely circumvent the IT. It is a nightmare. It is very slow, and there happens to be a lift outside my office in Star Chamber where workmen are working. That cuts my 3G down to GPRS, which gives very slow access. I have all these problems, simply because I want to use my own e-mail account rather than the one that I have been assigned and that the House wants to control for me.

Adam Afriyie: I used to spend afternoons sitting on the steps outside Portcullis House so that I could get a signal from what I think is Caffè Nero next door.

Frank Dobson: Would any stuff be redundant at the end of the process of providing what you talk about?

Adam Afriyie: Nothing technical that I can think of immediately, no. All the equipment is pretty much the same; it is just the way it is configured, and whether you have access.

Pete Wishart: I clearly recall coming to Parliament for the first time four years ago and experiencing the same difficulties that you describe: turning up and there being no office, no phone and no place to put your stuff—although there was always a place to hang up your sword. They always make sure you have that in the House of Commons, and you can be thankful for it.

I have found listening to you very useful. I have been in the House for four years and you have come here from the business world, having experienced the technology available. You are able to say to us, “This is where it is deficient.” We have a lot to learn from new Members about the type of thing that we need to do.

My question to you is what would be the ideal set-up in which to do this job, given your experience in business, your applications and how you have used information technology in the past few years? I came here four years ago, but I am sure that it is radically different from what was available when Frank Dobson first entered. We all have a lot to learn, because we have not been out there, we have not been doing it, and we do not know what the most current technology available is. What would be ideal to enable you to do your work effectively and efficiently?

Adam Afriyie: I am just going to sound repetitive: the ideal would be a wireless LAN, so that you can get on with your own computer if you are already into computers, and somewhere private where you can work, where you either have a telephone, or just use your mobile phone. There would be somewhere you can put your stuff, and you know you are there and it is your area, and a basic computer, if somebody does not have their own computer.

Pete Wishart: I am not talking about what you need in your first few weeks or your first month, but as a Member of Parliament. What would you expect to have to enable you to do your job easily and most effectively? We are talking about highest expectations.

Adam Afriyie: My highest expectations—there is no rocket science here—are just access to the internet and a bit more freedom with the way you use your equipment. You have got great equipment; it is fine. It is just getting access to the internet, as the rest of the country has.

Grant Shapps: Adam is absolutely right about this point. For all my ribbing about the offices, I did not really care that much that I did not have an office for two months, because if I have my laptop and a mobile phone, I have everything I need to contact the outside world. The problem is that not only does this place make it harder than average to contact people outside, it actually blocks you from accessing your outside contacts using your own laptop, so it is working against you. The way it is working at the moment is counter-productive. What is required for a fairly IT-savvy new Member from the outside world to come in here and use the place is quite simply the ability to get on to the network. It does not even have to be wireless—just through the sockets. We come back to the same thing every time, but it is a fundamental problem. It puts a blockage in the way of progress, almost deliberately.

Pete Wishart: I was also very interested in your remarks, Nia, about assistance to find accommodation, because I was quite surprised that I did not see anything about that in any of the representations that we received when we asked new Members what they felt they required from the House when they came down here. I know that it is particularly difficult for Members like yourself from Wales, and people like us, from

Scotland, when there is absolutely nothing available at all. What would you like to have in the way of assistance to try to find accommodation down here?

Nia Griffith: It would have been quite nice if, when you had the letter from the returning officer, perhaps there was a sheet in there with some basic phone numbers and places that you could ring up—letting agencies or whatever—so that you could go around and find yourself somewhere, because you literally do not have anywhere to put anything, do you? You might be in a hotel room for a few days or something, but you do want to get out. You do it, but it would be nicer if you had a) some hotel phone numbers and so forth, b) some numbers for letting agencies, and c) possibly just a few paragraphs about where the normal areas that MPs find convenient are. If you do not even know London, as some of us from the far-flung corners of the globe do not, it would have been helpful to have had a few thoughts. Instead, I had a wonderful comment from a colleague, who said after I had found a place to rent, “Oh, that’s rather a long way, isn’t it?” I thought, “Why didn’t you say that before?” I had thought it was quite good, being only 20 minutes away on the tube.

Mr. Harper: Very briefly, on the office space issue, I just want to be clear, following the notes that we have from the survey of new Members. I perhaps understand a little about it, having talked to our accommodation Whip about the difficulty of putting people into either permanent or temporary offices. One of the suggestions was that, rather than hot-desking, which has issues around lack of privacy and lack of space to put things, we could use Committee rooms—or some other space—and just partition them, as in modern open-plan offices, into small cubicles where you at least had network access, a phone and some lockable space. Would that, for the first five or six weeks, do the business in giving you somewhere to operate from?

Adam Afriyie: Absolutely.

Grant Shapps: Yes.

Nia Griffith: Yes.

Mr. Harper: The second question is this. I do not know whether any of you did the squatting—for want of a better word—with existing Members. I managed to do that, but one of the difficulties I had was to do with IT. Even when I was in the office of an existing Member, it took me as long as I was using that office to get network access in it. Even though I had an office and a phone, I still could not make my laptop work, because all the network ports were disabled. That took me quite a long time to sort out, and by the time I got it working, I had an office. I just want to hear your point of view on whether, through the accommodation Whips, it would be worth trying to encourage willing colleagues who are already here—whether they be geographical neighbours, party colleagues, or Members with whom you have some connection—to volunteer to give up some space. Also, if you had access to a phone and a network, would that be a second best?

Adam Afriyie: I take your point, but I think I would be a bit reluctant to do that, because why should that be the responsibility of an existing Member who has an office? I just do not see it. The first concept—having little booths where everything is set up—would be fine.

Chairman: Thanks very much, lady and gentlemen; that has been extremely helpful. I have been thinking back to my first day here in the House of Commons. This was not on my first day, but I also remember complaining to Michael Foot—I was of that generation—that I did not have an office or a telephone or anything, and he said, “My boy, for my first 20 years in here, my office was the desk in the No Lobby, which I shared with 650 other Members.” It is clear that things have moved on a little bit. The evidence that you have given is extremely helpful. Your generation has to cope with what you have found, but we hope that the next generation will benefit. Thank you very much.

Discussion with former Members: Peter Bradley, Mr Adrian Flook, Linda Perham, Mr Peter Pike, and Mr Simon Thomas

Chairman: Welcome to you all. You are all old hands, so you are fairly familiar with the procedures here. You probably heard me say earlier that we have Hansard writers here and are being recorded; I say that that just in case someone is tempted to say something impolitic. Thank you very much for all the written evidence that you have submitted; it has been extremely helpful in our considerations. I throw this discussion open to the rest of the Committee. Who wants to kick off?

Frank Dobson: My own feeling, from observing what happened after previous elections and from looking at the evidence that you and others have submitted, is that the real problem is the mindset of House officialdom—which is that by and large, while you were Members you were a bit of a nuisance, and now you are a nuisance that can be dispensed with; looking after your interests is not a major consideration. It seems

that most of the rest of the problems flow from that, really. Some effort is put into helping, but not a lot. Is that too grotesque a generalisation?

Linda Perham: I think that is right, Frank. Peter made the point most strongly in his evidence, but that is the feeling, apart from in dealings with the Fees Office, who were very good, and who were very helpful for months afterwards with phone calls. From my point of view, the worst thing—someone will probably come on to this—is access to the building. I have come in just now, and I started off with a complete body search. It is as if I had turned into a terrorist in the last few months. It was certainly as though I had turned into a terrorist between the Thursday evening and the Monday morning, which is when I turned up. I think that is the worst aspect; it reinforces this mindset—you started off with that term—of “You’re not welcome here; you’re a bit of an embarrassment, really.” As you see in my evidence, I was even doing things like handing in keys, and people were saying, “Why are you giving me this key?” I would say, “I’m giving you the key because I’ve got to hand this stuff in.” It is that kind of attitude; I think we all felt that.

Peter Bradley: I do not know whether anyone recalls a series in the 1970s called “Branded”, with Chuck Connors, a David Davis look-alike with a broken nose. I do not remember the programme, except the introduction. It was about an American cavalry officer in the 19th century, who was unfairly accused of committing a misdemeanour. The opening titles showed his sword being taken from him and snapped over a fellow officer’s knee, and his epaulettes being torn from his uniform. He left the fort and walked off into the wilderness. That is how it feels. Mysteriously, you have committed a crime that you were not aware of committing, and you are to be punished for it—with dignity, but nevertheless punished. That is the feeling that people get, but whether it is justified is another matter. People feel particularly sensitive and hard done by when they lose elections, so it is important that those who deal with them do so with sensitivity and compassion.

Peter Pike: I found that if you were making telephone calls and got Mr. Finer, you got helpful answers. If you could not get him, no one got back to you, and if you wrote to him you did not always get a reply. In the end I gave up asking about my pension and other bits and pieces, because it became a waste of time—although certain people were extremely helpful.

The same applies to the post. I know that a number of important items were posted to me after the cut-off date of 5 August. If you go to the Post Office the people are extremely helpful, as they always were. Obviously, I appreciate that after the election the priority is for new Members, but the Post Office forwarded mail to us only as and when they could, but some of it was important to pass on to the new Member, because it involved urgent cases, which you were transferring to them.

What happens to that mail on 5 August? That is the cut-off date, but I know that some urgent items that have been sent to me at the House of Commons have neither come back to the people who sent them nor come to me. Nothing is forwarded. You are told, “That’s the end; you’ve finished.” I was talking to Linda about this outside, and we write to people, we e-mail them and we tell them—yet even Government Departments still write to me as a Member of Parliament. Some of that mail is sent to my party office, even though some of the Departments have been told that I am no longer the MP. People still lobby. It is incredible. After 5 August nothing is forwarded, so where does it go?

Frank Dobson: I succeeded Lena Jaeger, who went to the House of Lords. After the third time I had been elected, she passed on to me a letter which had been passed to her in the House of Lords. It was a bit of a giveaway because it started with the words, “I voted for you at the last election.” [Laughter.]

Simon Thomas: If you wanted to design a system to rub people’s noses in it, you could not come up with a better way than losing an election and being flung out of this place. It may be different if you planned to retire; that involves different issues. We have lost in the democratic process, and we have to respect that process, but it works both ways. Take Frank’s point—many people still think I am the MP. Even those who voted do not realise that I lost and some still write to me or try to contact me. The House authorities should recognise that the democratic process is about managing that change. We can all feel humiliated and get hot under the collar about the fact that we were frisked this morning. It was very pleasant, you could say, depending on how you look at it and who is doing the frisking. There is something wrong with the idea that the democratic process ends on one day, and there is no ongoing need to be managed correctly.

In the same way as you need to manage people coming into the House, you need to manage people leaving the House. Two things flow from the authorities’ current attitude: one is that there is extreme pressure on us to bring everything to an end quickly—to shred papers, to deal with the Data Protection Act and so on. But we are asked to do that without any support, while being treated as a nobody. The authorities want ex-Members to deal with staff, pay them the right redundancy money and give them the best pay off—and to do all that unpaid. In the meantime, we cannot claim benefit. We cannot claim jobseeker’s allowance because we are

regarded as currently being engaged in a job. We are still being asked to do a job that is part of the democratic process, but we are not treated with respect.

The second thing that flows on from that is failure within the system. I have had tremendous problems in getting rid of my computers. I was told that they would be collected, but the people probably cannot find a map that shows Aberystwyth. I was told to hang on to the computers and that they would be collected and cleaned. They have had to be left in an office over which I no longer have control. That is not the way in which to treat computers.

Mr. Jones: Can you clarify that?

Simon Thomas: I was told that the PCD computers—not the ones that I purchased with my money, which I have kept—would be collected by PCD and dealt with, but no one has collected them and no one has contacted me about them. In fact, my house was burgled and my laptop was taken. I do not know where that leaves me.

Adrian Flook: I echo that. It seems that everyone here is institutionally cut off from reality. Collectively, they forget that they are also constituents somewhere. If they wanted to write to the House of Commons, what would happen if they wrote to the wrong person? As 69 per cent. of people voted in Taunton, the 31 per cent. who did not take part in the process probably still think, “I’ll write to my MP,” then write to the bloke who had been in the paper for the previous four years. I was elected in 2001 and at the time, I was in the paper regularly—my picture was in it two or three times a week. A year after I was elected, some bloke came up to me and said, “We don’t see you much in the paper”, and then in the run-up to the election I’m sure some of them felt that I had been in it too much. As I also have a particularly strange surname and my successor is called Browne, which is not strange, people will probably remember my name. Although I do not know if I still receive letters because they are no longer forwarded, I was still getting letters as the MP until 5 August.

Mr. Donohoe: Passing on information to your successor has implications in terms of the Data Protection Act 1998, does it not?

Adrian Flook: Yes, I took over from someone who was from a different party. She did not give me anything and I did not want any. Likewise, I have not been asked for anything by Mr. Browne. I think that the Data Protection Act has scared everyone witless anyway, so one would not even dare ask.

Peter Pike: I asked people to sign if they wanted me to transfer the file. If they signed the paper, I transferred it. If they did not sign it, I warned them that I would be closing the file and that it would be shredded, then I gave them a final warning. I did it like that.

Mr. Donohoe: When I took over, my predecessor handed me three files. They are still with me, but that was as many cases as he thought were important enough to pass on. However, if I were knocked down by a bus tomorrow, my successor—if Labour—would get more than 1,200 files. That shows how the job has changed. It is hardly surprising that you are in the situation in which people still think that you are the Member of Parliament.

Let me return to what you said about the equipment still lying around your house, Simon. Could not a case be made for a seamless process? All information would have to be wiped, but could it not be argued that the equipment in a constituency should be transferred over for use by your successor—after it has been dealt with and its memory erased? Do you advocate that?

Simon Thomas: Yes, that makes sense. I have heard evidence about new Members having problems obtaining computer equipment, yet there was I with two perfectly decent computers in my office that I did not need any more. It would have only taken someone from the department to come up and clear them, and then for them to be transferred. That might be one way in which to deal with the problem. The other way would be to clear them and allow ex-Members to dispose of them to a local charity and make a use of such things. It seems that much of that has been lost in the system.

Peter Pike: We were not allowed to buy them. Since the election, I have bought a laptop, but I would quite happily have bought the laptop that I already had. We were not allowed to buy them. There was a problem to do with licences or something. It seems to be a bit of a nonsense that all that stuff is gathered in and is then scrapped because it is not being issued to the new Members.

Mr. Donohoe: Do you have any comment to make about your e-mail account being shut down on the date of the general election, or very close after it? If you were to relive your time as a Member, would you consider adopting the House of Commons e-mail system or, in view of your recent experience, do you think that you would probably set up your own e-mail account so that at the very least your right hand was not in effect cut off two days after the general election?

Peter Bradley: There is an issue to do with the dissolution period in general. I cannot understand why suddenly all access to your office or e-mail is withdrawn during an election. I can understand the principle that you are not supposed to have an advantage over your adversary, but the fact is that in many ways your adversary has the advantage because he or she does not have access to communications and information disrupted and his or her staff do not have to be hurled out of their office.

I do not understand why, when you come in and clear your office, you find that for some reason you can make outgoing calls but you cannot receive incoming calls, and that your e-mail account has been entirely disabled so that people who for genuine reasons want to contact you cannot do so, and do not even get a message. I do not think that the people who contacted me at that time got any kind of message back until I argued for that at some length. I prevailed on the basis that I was the only one who had asked for it, so it was not setting a precedent. People were sending me e-mails but they were not receiving any message in return saying, "He's not here any more," or, "Here's the new address," or, "We will forward it to him." As Peter says, the mail stops coming in August. I was a diligent MP and I did all my own casework, so the idea that people were trying to contact me and were unable to do so, and that for all they knew I was just ignoring them, was quite offensive.

Mr. Donohoe: Perhaps I did not ask the question as I wanted to. If you had the experience again of being on the losing side after a general election, would you consider—if not initially, then at some point such as six months before a general election—setting up an alternative e-mail account that you would be able to continue with? Do you think that Members should get advice about that long before a general election takes place? If not, that might take me back to my original question, which was about restrictive practices that have caused great concerns and grief and make the system almost impossible to operate. Is it sensible to have the system that we have for e-mail accounts and for them arbitrarily to be denied to people almost immediately following a general election?

Adrian Flook: Notwithstanding the fact that our representations to you and yours, in turn, to the House will have failed, I would not use the flooka@parliament.uk address again when—or if—I am re-elected to the House. I would use my own address. It demonstrates my name better in its title—it does not reverse it—and I could use it with greater flexibility after Dissolution if, heaven forbid, I stood again and lost and I was immediately completely cut off.

Simon Thomas: I have a slightly different view. I think there is an advantage in the @parliament.uk address. People become familiar with the fact that that is the address of an MP and of people who work in the House. However, I do not see why it is not possible on Microsoft Outlook to enable the POP 3 account so that it allows people to have more than one e-mail address. You can then just switch identities. That is what I do now, but I could not do it when I was an MP. It would be so simple to do that, so that people could have more than one e-mail address. The problem is that there is a caution around campaigning from the House.

Peter Pike: I would have thought that, even if you did not start using your own e-mail address before the end of a Parliament, it would at least be possible for a message to be sent saying that they can be posted to—for example—peterl.pike@btinternet.com, so that people know where to contact you. That would be better than them just being bounced back with a message that they cannot be received. That would be easy because you would have publicised that address for so long. There would be some merits in involving the @parliament.uk address, but just to get e-mails bounced is a bit stupid.

Mr. Donohoe: Were the resources that were given to you adequate?

Adrian Flook: Afterwards?

Mr. Donohoe: Yes.

Adrian Flook: Financially?

Mr. Donohoe: Yes.

Adrian Flook: Hugely so.

Simon Thomas: May I make one point on the financial resources? It is not the adequacy that raises any problems, but the way that you have to do things. You have to shell out first and then claim it back. For a few hundred pounds that is no problem but, for example, I had a photocopier lease that I had to buy my way out of, which cost £6,000. So I had to spend £6,000, which was not my money but my family's money; it was my wife's money and my money. In that sense, you are penalising people who have just lost their job. I do not know why it is not possible, when you have got all the paperwork and the legal documents, simply to go to the Fees Office and say, "Please pay this".

Peter Pike: And you have to claim the resettlement grant, which is stupid. The guidance notes said that you could not claim it until you had settled all your other claims on the House, but suddenly in July I got a phone

call saying, "You haven't claimed it." I said, "Well, you can't claim it yet," and was told "Well not many people have." I said, "Well, if you look at the guidance, it says we can't claim it until the end." He said, "Well, if you sign it now, we will pay it you at the end of the month." That would have overcome a lot of the difficulties of paying for things and claiming them afterwards. I would assume that it would be very unusual for a Member not to claim their resettlement grant because it is quite a large sum. I do not know why we have to go through the farce of having to fill a form in and claim it.

Linda Perham: Simon talked about claiming. I was told by the Fees Office categorically that if you had large bills of several thousand pounds, you could send them in and it would pay them.

Adrian Flook: Pay it against an invoice.

Linda Perham: You did not have to pay up in advance.

Simon Thomas: There is an inconsistency.

Mr. Jones: It is interesting reading people's evidence; there is a clear difference between people who lost their seats and people who retired.

Linda, I was reading your submission. Another Member told me that he was told on Saturday morning that he had to be down here by Sunday to clear his office out. There is a clear implication that you are treated like lepers. Would it be simpler if the parliamentary pass could be extended for a couple of weeks to allow people to do things. Your description shows that you were made to feel as though you were a problem and that you should go away.

Linda Perham: Yes, that is right. Having on the Friday morning after the election made my appointment with the Fees Office for the Monday—I live in London so I can get here for 9 o'clock in the morning—I phoned up and said, "What do I do". You have all read this in the evidence. I was told, "No problem, you turn up and they will know what to do," but they did not know what to do. There was all the ridiculous business about being accompanied to your office when you are standing by the lift.

Our friend sitting on the end here, the business man, said that if we have lost, we get out. I wanted to get out. I did not want to be around here. I just wanted to go. I wanted to clear out. Help us do that. Do not just say, "Well, shall we let you go upstairs by yourself? All right then. Oh, it might be an idea if we re-enable your pass." Why was that not thought of to begin with? Everyone could go round and get their pass re-enabled and they could go back to start on their office. I do not think anybody really wants to hang around. We want to clear out. Nobody wants to be here for two or three weeks. It just draws out the agony when you see other people going round who have got every right to be there and you are going around wishing that it was not the nightmare it was. Give us the help to get in, get sorted out and get on with our lives.

Simon Thomas: It might be helpful to both new Members and retiring Members if there was simply a process by which offices were cleared—if there were staff on hand to help load boxes and to arrange things easily with a removal firm or a van.

My situation was that I lost. My first response was to spend the weekend with the family—I was not going to do anything else. I came down here on the Tuesday with my car to try to move what I could. The fact is that most of my stuff is still in my colleague's office because there were so many Committee papers and research papers that I had been using here. My staff though were in the constituency, on the whole, so I did not have much in the way of help here to clear an office. It was very much a question of just packing it into bags and hoping that there would be another opportunity to do that. You could have some sort of central control throughout that fortnight, going into the offices, packing things up and moving them out. Then they would be available for new Members much more quickly.

Mr. Jones: May I ask Peter a question about stationery? You had the opposite problem; you ordered in excess of £1,000-worth of stationery and you could not get rid of it. They did not want it back.

Peter Pike: They would not credit it back. In the old days, when they did not publish how many envelopes you had had, it did not matter. If you have plastic mailers, they are quite expensive—about £5 a piece, the large ones—

Janet Anderson: Are they?

Peter Pike: Yes; they pay to cover a certain amount of postage, you see. So if you have a stock of those and other envelopes, £1,000 might sound a lot, but it is not when you work it out. I asked if I could have it taken back—the bulk items, not the odd bits; it does not matter about them. I meant the unopened boxes. They said no, they could not take them back. Some were in my constituency office and some in London, so the next people benefited from that. These days, now that we have published expenses and you are shown where you are in the league tables, it does have an impact.

It might sound petty, but I have to say this: mine was a planned retirement—I regret having taken it—but on the Thursday my office was speaking to the Serjeant at Arms’ office, and they said that I had to be accompanied all the time. After about four phone calls backwards and forwards, I spoke to the Serjeant at Arms office and was told that I would have to be accompanied. I said, “I’ve been a Member for 22 years, and if you’re going to have someone sitting with me in the office, I am not prepared to come down.” I said, “I want you to arrange for it all to be boxed up and sent to Burnley, and I’ll sort it out in Burnley.” About an hour later I got a phone call to say that I could come down unaccompanied—but I got a note when I came down, saying “You mustn’t use the cafeteria.” I did use it. It was only for staff of the House when the House was suspended. Members or ex-Members, even Members seeking re-election, were not allowed to use it. If I had wanted to collect my post, which I did not, I could not open it in the building; I had to go and open it in the street. Well, I did think it was quite petty. As I say, at that stage my post was all being forwarded to Burnley, so it was not an issue.

Mr. Jones: Who was this from?

Peter Pike: This was all from the Serjeant at Arms Department, and there were bits of paper that were—well, I am not saying who actually originated them, but I did think it was a bit petty. Like Linda says, we do not suddenly become terrorists overnight because we are no longer Members, nor do our staff. It needs a little bit more sensitive thought.

Peter Bradley: On the issue about access and being a visitor, we have to accept we are not Members any more. You have to make a distinction between the hurt that you feel when you lose your seat and what is reasonable and justified. Much as I would rather not be wearing a visitor’s badge, I understand the reasons for it. However, I think the House needs to come to some kind of settled view on how to treat its former Members. It may decide that, yes, it would be a courtesy to allow them to have access and a card like Peter’s, but this false distinction between whether you have been here four, five, six, seven or eight years is, I think, precisely that: false. Either we get it or we do not get it. As I say, I think we have to be slightly less sensitive on that issue. After all, if you leave somebody’s employment, you do not necessarily enjoy rights of access and privileges. It is a difficult issue; it is going to be difficult for people. I just think there needs to be consistency.

Pete Wishart: Listening to what you say, it is quite clear that there is a clear distinction between those who were retiring and those who lost their seats at the election. Peter, although you have had difficulties and issues, it seems that your experience has been a lot more seamless than those of Simon and Adrian, who unfortunately lost their seat at the last election. I would like to ask the people who lost their seat whether there is anything that could have been done to prepare for their experience since. I am thinking of something such as a list of what to expect if you lose in an election, so that there is something we can all access to see what difficulties there will be. Taking this evidence today will possibly help to shape something like that—something that we could all be given in the run-up to the next general election to give us some sort of guideline on what to expect.

Adrian Flook: I am only just 42 and my first inclination was to get another job, forget this place, draw a line in the sand and move on. In fact, it has been quite difficult to draw a line in the sand. I will not exchange my house in the constituency until this coming Thursday, and even that is tentative at the moment. I had members of staff who were unemployed—one has found a job, but the other is not so keen on finding one anyway because she is more than 60. However, you are living a lot of other people’s problems. All you want to do is say, “Right, I accept that I have lost. Thank you very much; now I have to move on,” but you are forced to dwell on it—from former constituents thinking that you are their MP, to filling out forms and playing with bureaucracy. All I wanted to do was go back to the private sector and work fewer hours for more money, which I have achieved.

Simon Thomas: I have not quite achieved that, but I have a year to go; I am a year younger. Adrian has made a good point. You cannot just walk away. This place expects you to do so, but it holds you accountable for many things, such as the employment and redundancy situation of your staff and the whole winding-down of the office. You have to get yourself out of legal contracts with rent and photocopiers and everything else that has been mentioned. In addition, there is an ongoing moral commitment to constituents, even if it is just letting them down gently for the purposes of a seamless transition to the help that they may get from the new MP. If you take that seriously—and conscientious former MPs do—that means that you are out of the job market for two or three months anyway, before you can even consider what you might be doing.

I am fortunate enough to have a new post now. However, when I was interviewed for it, I thought, “Good God, I haven’t had a job interview for eight years. This is very different. What has changed out there?” Any other major employer would give assistance to people who have been made redundant, which is basically what had happened. There would be assistance on preparing CVs, on interview techniques and all the rest of

it. None of that is available. I understand that it is for staff, although it was not clear to me how my staff could avail themselves of those training opportunities in a place such as Aberystwyth. I am pleased that they got jobs.

Pete Wishart: That is what I was edging towards in my question. Is there anything that we could do to help to deal with some of those issues? Is there something that the House could prepare for or give to Members who lose their seats?

Simon Thomas: There are two things that the House could do. I had problems with the interaction between being an MP and the benefits system. I wanted to make a point of claiming the jobseeker's allowance—I fought hard to keep the jobseeker's allowance office open in my constituency, so I thought that I should go and use it. It is bit like a post office—you should go and use it. I also wanted to preserve my national insurance status. That is still unresolved. An ex-MP's relationship with national insurance still has not been decided. I did not want to claim the jobseeker's allowance; I was getting enough money in my pay-off, but that was not the point. The point was a principled one about the relationship with the national insurance system, and that is still unresolved. Surely it must be possible, as I mentioned in my evidence, for the House and the various powers-that-be to have a discussion and prepare a note for Members to tell them about their situation when they leave office?

The second thing that could be done would be to set up an ongoing employer-type relationship. If you are made redundant by a serious and responsible employer, it is not a question of just closing the door on you; there is an ongoing relationship. It is different for an MP because you cannot be given any notice. I would argue that the notice has to happen after you have lost and that for a month or two some sort of support system should be available that helps you through the process, helps you get a new job if necessary—even if it is giving help with preparing CVs or whatever. Not everyone in this House has been active in the job market as recently as Adrian or I. That makes it more difficult for people to get back into the job market.

Chairman: There are five members left who want to ask questions and we are already behind schedule. I ask colleagues and witnesses to be more brief.

Mr. Harper: To pick up on this “closing down” thing, it strikes me that there is a bit of a discrepancy. On the one hand, there are arrangements in place with the winding-up allowance and the expectation that you have to get out of things and you have to finish things off, and you are given taxpayers' money to do all that. But on the other hand, as Linda said, you cannot get access to the estate.

It strikes me that we need to do one of two things. Either people are not expected to do anything and they can just walk away—that is one option—or we could pay them to wind things down properly. Going along with that second option are the other things that help that process—either access to the estate or perhaps having a short-term team of people who facilitate some of the moves. As you said, you could have people helping with shifting office equipment or with office paperwork, or somebody to assist with closing out contracts and making all that happen very quickly. As Adrian said, you really want to have all that stuff resolved and then move on to whatever else you are going to do, not to be stuck in limbo, desperately trying to clear things up in a not very efficient fashion. I wondered whether anyone would like to comment on that.

Simon Thomas: We agree.

Chairman: Does anybody want to respond to that?

Simon Thomas: I just responded. My preferred option would be to have assistance, because I think you cannot walk away. There is the democratic process that we talked about earlier. It is important that some respect is held for that. People expect you to deal with their problems still, and to wind down that process, so the proper course is to have a winding-down period, but there needs to be more recognition that you are still doing a job.

Mr. Harper: You support that?

Simon Thomas: Yes.

Mr. Gerrard: Simon, you mentioned the situation that your staff were in. Do you feel that in particular, people who lost rather than retired—although this might well apply to both—have sufficient help in dealing with the whole business? You have staff who are being made redundant, and with some people who lose, that would come absolutely out of the blue. Did you get sufficient assistance to be able to deal with them fairly and efficiently, as you should?

Adrian Flook: Yes. To be honest, I did not treat all my staff equally, because two of them were part-time and actually had not done as much as they ought to have done, and two had done more than they ought to have done. The process is quite arcane and bizarre, the bonusing that you can apply, and you can backdate it and almost postdate it. It is incredibly complicated. I like to think that I looked after the two people who worked

the hardest the best, and they were brilliant. The lady who I ended up speaking to most of the time—Hannah Lamb—was just superb, and very helpful.

Mr. Gerrard: Peter obviously did not feel the same.

Peter Pike: I do not think so, no. There is a difficulty for a Member who knows they are retiring. You cannot tell staff exactly when you are going to finish, because you do not know when the election is going to come, and you get told to give them a loose notice telling them that at some stage they are going to become redundant, which is a bit of an odd thing. Also, a number of things that we were told at the pre-meeting that we could have—I went to one—did not actually happen. We were not told what we could give in bonuses and redundancy until well after the election, so you were not able to tell staff what you would give them. I wanted to treat them as favourably as possible, remembering that, with a Member who was retiring, they could choose to leave you at any time, when you would find it very difficult to recruit staff who knew that they might have only a few months to go, because you were going whenever the election might suddenly be called. None of my staff were being taken on by my successor, because she did not want anybody in London and the others, for different reasons, did not continue. You want to get staff to stay on with you till the end, and I tried to treat them as favourably as possible. To expect them to type out their own redundancy notice and things is difficult. I could do it myself now, but I had become dependent on staff doing things. I can now e-mail and type things myself, but for years I had not bothered. To tell them to type out something saying “This is your ex gratia payment,” “This is your statutory redundancy,” or “This is what you are getting as a bonus,” is a bit much, so they did not get the information.

After the election you cannot do it on official paper, and the benefits office will not accept a letter signed from your home address. Then you find out that there is somebody dealing with it at the Fees Office—or the Department of Finance and Administration, or whatever we call it nowadays. They were very helpful, but it would have been much better if, right from day one, we had been told, “This is who is dealing with staff. This is who they can contact.” I was talking to a member of my staff last night, and one of them spoke to me in South Africa, when I was on holiday, and I said, “Get in touch with them. They’ll sort it out.” Once she did that, they sorted it out perfectly well. We should already have known that, and the person should have been identified. It is not only a difficult time for the MP who is finishing; it is an extremely difficult time—not of their choosing—for the staff, whether the Member has been defeated or is retiring.

Adrian Flook: It was at least a week and a half before the actual amount was declared, was it not? I found that bizarre.

Peter Pike: Yes. When they gave the briefing, they said that all these things were under discussion by the Commission, or whatever it was, which was going to make a decision. But they all knew that an election was coming up. The papers kept telling us that it was going to be on 5 May, so all these things should have been known. When you want to treat staff as reasonably as possible—I would hope that we are all good employers—it is a bit difficult.

John Thurso: May I just return to the question of access? It seems to me that there are two separate sides, or two related issues. One is common courtesy and treating former colleagues in a courteous manner. The other is efficiency, and getting the work done. On the former issue, I note, having had the privilege of being ejected from a different House, that everybody who was ejected from there was given a pass immediately, irrespective of how long they had been there. Is there any reason why, in your view, former Members should not have a former Members’ pass and be allowed to come in? On the issue of efficiency, it seems from everything that you have been saying that this area needs to be completely revisited, and a completely new protocol written to reflect the reality of a modern Member of Parliament leaving office, as opposed to a model designed for a 1945 Member of Parliament leaving office.

Linda Perham: That is absolutely right. It is what I said in my evidence. If it were accepted that former Members had a pass, there would be no question of being challenged when you turned up. Perhaps your pass would be temporarily re-enabled so that you could clear your office, but then you would be given a pass like Peter Pike’s. Then you would not be subject to what Peter Bradley said before. It all depends on when the election is called. Why should someone be allowed access because they have been here for 15 years, or 10 years? Efficiency may involve a dedicated team being geared up to deal with former Members—certainly Members who have not got staff in London and have Simon’s problems of packing up their office virtually alone. A dedicated team would help—like the section that deals with you on the winding-up allowance in the Fees Office. I really think that the Serjeant at Arms Department should have something like that. Perhaps the Committee could think about that when it is considering its recommendations.

Peter Bradley: In contrast with some others, I had no problem whatever with coming in and being here. Perhaps that is because I just waltzed in and people assumed that I was still a Member. I did not ask any permissions, so they were not denied me.

John Thurso: You did not try to vote, by any chance?

Peter Bradley: I heard what current Members said—that former Members should just clear off. However, it is interesting how long a former Member's office lies empty before somebody occupies it. I am sure that most ex-Members do not want to spend too much time clearing their offices. They want a bit of time to gather their energies after their defeat, and then they will do the business. But I think that I had about 50 sacks of paper, having hoarded paper over eight to 10 years. In the end I threw everything away, but I still had to go through it as I did so. It did take time and it was physically quite tiring. It was daft to be under that sort of pressure to clear my office just for it to stand empty. Either people need to speed up the allocation process, or they should be a bit more relaxed about Members clearing their space.

Simon Thomas: It is interesting that formers Members are allowed to retain an honorary membership of the Inter-Parliamentary Union, but are persona non grata in this place.

Frank Dobson: Although at first blush there appears to be a conflict between ex-Members getting out of their offices and new Members coming in, it is not a case of hot seats. There is quite a period during which it would be possible to give Members who have left more time to sort out things. However, as the staff are paid from the public payroll, do you, in your experience, think that it would be better if the House had a better redundancy scheme and it was left to the House officialdom to make all the arrangements, so that you did not have to make them?

Simon Thomas: That is my point. I tried to say that in my evidence. When I first came to the House I employed staff directly from the office allowance, or whatever it was called. Now staff are employed directly by the House—so why am I in the middle of a shop in Aberystwyth buying my daughter trainers and trying to negotiate a redundancy package for one of my members of staff? I must say that the person who I was talking to was very good, and that I have received a lot of help and assistance from the Fees Office. Nevertheless, the situation that we are in strikes me as completely archaic. If people are employed by the House, they should be dealt with by the House. They should be given the proper redundancy package and support to enable them to get new jobs, because they are not employed directly by Members any more. The situation has changed. I was tempted to do what Adrian did, but we should not really be doing that, should we? It should be for the House to decide.

Adrian Flook: I must stress that mine got the required minimum; it is just that I did not bonus them up. Equally, I bonused up two at the expense of the other two.

Chairman: May I raise an issue about passes? When I read some of the evidence, I was more than a little shocked. I lost my seat in 1992, and my recollection of that period was that I could come to Westminster without hindrance. In fact, for the five years until I came back in 1997, I came and went as I pleased on my 1992 pass. I was never questioned.

Mr. Donohoe: Things have changed.

Chairman: I did not know any better. I did not come very often. To be honest, I did not want to come in. I felt that when I came back, I wanted it to be in my previous status. There is an issue about passes and access for former Members. Peter, your story is particularly difficult to accept because you well qualify, even under the old rules, for a pass as a former Member. One issue concerns the pressure on the estate and its facilities. The cafeteria facilities, in particular, are under enormous pressure. That is one of the stated reasons for not extending the right for passes. Not everyone here lives in London and must have to travel quite a bit to get here. If you had a pass, how regularly would you expect to use it?

Linda Perham: It is just a matter of being able to come to meetings and not having to go through what I did today. It is about the right of access. As I have said, we are the least likely people to have turned by the Taliban. About 14,000 passes are issued, many of which go to temporary workers. MPs give their passes to lobbying organisations and to people who work in the constituency and come down once or twice a year. Former Members may not all want to take it up or to come back here. I doubt whether all that many people would want to come back. Perhaps an exercise can be carried out to see how many ex-Members would come back, if passes were made available. Perhaps letters could be written to them asking whether they would return in such circumstances. Joe Ashton said that some people, even those who had been in the House as long as Peter, did not know that they could take up what is now the 10-year rule. Perhaps that is why they are not told much about it—because if they were, more people might want a pass. But I cannot imagine that it would involve huge numbers of us, or that we would be a risk.

Adrian Flook: My job might bring me here occasionally, but I would not necessarily come that often, even if I had a pass. There has been a great hoo-hah in the last four years about the fact that we were not using the facilities enough, so they were not doing as well as they could have done. If extra people went to Strangers Dining Room, it might help the catering budget.

In looking after a client's interests, I have had to go to the Royal Courts of Justice in the Strand in the past week. Once I am through the efficient security search, no one checks who I am or where I am going. You can wander into any courtroom you want, as long as you go to the public areas. You have to go past the barristers, but no one quibbles at all. Here we are *persona non grata*, but there no one even has to wear a visitor's pass. It is bizarre.

Chairman: You may regret saying that. From the shakes of the head in the Gallery, that may be about to change.

Peter Bradley: Personally, I would not use a pass very often. I still live in my former constituency, and even if I were in London I would have the same reservations about coming here, unless I had a good reason, as you had during your time out of office. The problem is the attitude of the House towards former Members. If you represent a marginal seat, you know that sooner or later you will lose it, but nothing quite prepares you for the loss of identity that accompanies that. It is a unique job, so losing it is a unique experience. We suddenly go from being everything to all people—including some of the things you do not particularly want to be to your constituents—to being nothing. Colleagues of ours who are not present today have probably suffered a great deal more than we have, especially those who did not anticipate losing and who had every right to believe that they would still be here. It must have been a blow to them.

I would appreciate a pass, not for any practical benefits but merely as a recognition that, although I no longer serve, I have given service and should have a little respect. I may hardly ever use the pass, but if I had cause to come here I would not feel quite so "branded".

Peter Pike: I have come here a few times since I got a pass. I have friends on both sides of the House, and it is an advantage not to have to queue up to enter. There is nowhere to hang a coat, so I disappear into the Family Room and pretend that I do not notice the sign. I hang it up there and hope that no one throws me out, so do not inform the authorities. A pass has some advantages. You can use the cafeteria and you can go into the Members Lobby. It is strange that you can go into the Members Lobby and other places. Officially, you cannot go into Portcullis House, but no one challenges anyone who goes there.

Simon Thomas: I do not mind the security arrangements; they are essential these days. However, it would be good, once you are in the building, not to have to rely on your ex-colleagues to accompany you everywhere. That simple courtesy could be extended to ex-Members.

Mr. Jones: The issue that Frank raised about pressure on the facilities is nonsense, because the House authorities do not know who uses the facilities, as we found out on our tour of the catering facilities. The idea that the small number of ex-Members would be a burden is laughable.

At the end of the month, some members of the Serjeant at Arms Department are going to Washington to look at security. Perhaps they could investigate how ex-Congressmen are dealt with, because I understand that there is an ex-Congressmen's club and society that looks after them quite well. I wonder whether they could bring back some information on that.

Chairman: Thanks to everyone for coming along today. I know that some of you have had to travel some distance, and we appreciate that, as this is an important inquiry for us. It is new territory. This is a brand new Committee, and this is our first such inquiry. Your evidence has been excellent, and has helped us to focus on a serious issue. Thank you very much.

Discussion with officials from the House Administration: James Robertson (Assistant Serjeant at Arms), Matthew Taylor (Director of Parliamentary Communications), and Terry Bird (Director of Operations, Department of Finance and Administration)

Chairman: Sorry to have kept you waiting, gentlemen. We obviously underestimated the time that we would need to question witnesses, but I think you will agree that what we heard was quite important and useful. I hope that none of you is inconvenienced, and that we are not preventing you from being somewhere else.

Frank Dobson: I have a factual question: how quickly was the first room vacated by a defeated Member allocated to a new one?

James Robertson: I cannot answer that question. I do not know.

Frank Dobson: But someone will know, presumably?

James Robertson: We could go back and look through the record, and should be able to work it out.

Frank Dobson: It would be interesting to know how quickly the first 10 or 20 were allocated.

James Robertson: If I may say so, that would be untypical of what we aim to achieve. On this occasion, because of the arrangement that we tried to execute for the Whips, there was a significant delay in getting the first Members into their rooms. Normally, we would expect to move all Members within a month of the election, but that did not happen on this occasion.

Frank Dobson: Does that mean that the very short deadline for retiring or defeated Members contributes nothing to the reallocation of rooms?

James Robertson: I would have to go and look at the data, and I should have been interested in what the Whips would have said if they were here.

Chairman: I think you heard the evidence, Mr. Robertson, from both groups who were here. Obviously it took a long time to find all the new Members new rooms, yet retiring and other ex-Members were pushed out of the door as quickly as possible.

James Robertson: There is a need, in some cases, to redecorate the rooms and bring them up to standard—not in every case.

Mr. Harper: I have a factual question for Mr. Bird, to make sure that the record is accurate on the employment point that Simon made. I understand that what he said is not correct: the House is not the employer of staff—we are. I think the change to which he referred is the fact that they all have standard terms and conditions, but we are very much the employers and therefore have to deal with relevant issues. Presumably we can consider whether that should continue, and make recommendations, but that is the situation at the moment.

Terry Bird: That is absolutely right: Members are the employers of their staff. Our Department is on the horns of a dilemma. It is a difficult time for everyone, but the Member is the employer. We provide advice to the Member, not to the Member's staff, much as we might like to do so. We try to be as helpful as we can. We are here to provide you, the employer, with personnel advice if you need it.

Mr. Jones: What instructions are given to members of staff in the Serjeant at Arms Department? We have heard different stories from people. Mr. Pike was, frankly, treated shoddily, if he was told he had to be escorted around this place.

James Robertson: I cannot understand that.

Mr. Jones: I also know of an ex-Member who, like Simon, wanted to spend the weekend with his family. He rang on the Friday morning and was told that he had to be in here over the weekend to clear his stuff out, and would not be allowed in the following week. From the evidence that we have, and from ex-Members to whom I have spoken, there is clearly an inconsistency in what is being said to people. Is there a procedure laid down whereby the Serjeant at Arms Department and people who deal with officers are told this is how people should be treated? The way in which some Members were treated has been appalling.

James Robertson: The guidance is laid down in the Dissolution arrangements under the rules for defeated Members. The aim is to get them out of their offices within a week.

Mr. Jones: Is that written down?

James Robertson: Yes.

Mr. Jones: Can we have a copy of that?

James Robertson: Yes.

Mr. Jones: How is that communicated to staff? Clearly people are giving different messages?

James Robertson: It certainly sounds as though they are.

Mr. Jones: Can I pick up on the point made by Frank Dobson about the turnaround of rooms? I cannot wait to get on with our accommodation inquiry, because there are rooms all over this building standing empty. In my corridor there are some, not with ex-Members' names on, but with the names of Members who I know have moved out. How many empty offices are there in this building?

James Robertson: Again, I shall have to look at the record.

Mr. Jones: I suspect that there are a lot. I was on Upper Committee Corridor South before the election, and the two offices across from me stood empty all year. This idea that there is a real pressure on offices—is it a bit of kidology?

James Robertson: I do not believe so, no. The recommendation in the last accommodation study is that there should be 5 per cent. of what is called “swing space”—free accommodation, so that people can be moved around and we can try to achieve some of the things we were discussing as regards flexibility. At the moment almost all offices are allocated. Whether the Members choose to occupy them, I do not know.

Mr. Jones: There are also offices that have the names of members of staff on them. I go past some that are rarely used.

James Robertson: Without specific examples, I cannot answer that.

John Thurso: May I ask about this question of the pass, which seems a relatively straightforward issue, but is obviously salt in the wound? At the other end of the building, when I and all the other hereditaries were ejected, it did not matter whether you had taken your seat a month before or 50 years before, everybody got a pass that gets you into the building. I believe that it is very rarely used, and that most people when they leave somewhere tend to say, “That’s it.” Occasionally, when they do come back, it is quite nice to be treated with that little bit of extra respect. Is not that something we could do for all former Members? It is highly unlikely to be grossly abused, and as Linda Perham was saying, they have been through all the security and all the rest of it for five years. Is not that a simple thing that we could do to ease that little bit of pain, which is not going to cost us much?

James Robertson: It is certainly something that has been looked at by previous Administration Committees—bringing down the cut-off time at which the ex-Member’s pass is issued. In the past they have decided that the current level is correct.

John Thurso: Was that because there was some evidence?

James Robertson: It tends to be done at the same time as there is an up-swelling among Members and Members’ staff, who are the main users of some of the facilities. Things become crowded. Clearly there is pressure on some areas at some times of the day.

John Thurso: All the evidence from the other place is that it is a courtesy given but rarely used. From what I heard there, nobody was in any rush to come back, but on the odd occasion when people do, to be able to come in with a bit of recognition meant a great deal to them. The argument that it puts pressure on the facilities does not actually stand up to the evidence that I have seen. Obviously the previous Committee took that view, but would the Serjeant at Arms Department support that view, or would the Serjeant be quite relaxed if this Committee recommended that everybody got a pass once they had been a Member?

James Robertson: If this Committee recommended it, the Serjeant would obviously abide by the decision of the Committee.

John Thurso: That would be wonderful. Thank you.

Pete Wishart: The two key issues for new Members are clearly accommodation and the availability of technology. My experience of accommodation as the accommodation Whip for most of the minority parties was constantly having to deal with Bob Ainsworth; it is a pity Bob is not here just now. To implement solutions to deal with early accommodation issues, we need to get the Whips out of the arrangement and make sure it is managed properly from within the House. Leaving it all to practical Bob to fix, allocate and manage led to a bottleneck in the allocation of accommodation. Is there not a better way to do it than going through the Whips?

James Robertson: I think that we would be extremely reluctant to get the Whips out of the equation. Accommodation Whip is one of the most thankless tasks that anyone can take on. Because of the varying needs of Members and the pressures that they come under, it requires the Whips’ understanding of what is going on to try to manage that process.

Pete Wishart: In order to try to get rooms for my new Members, I constantly had to deal with Bob, Judy and other members of the Serjeant’s office to get things resolved. There did not seem to be a proper interface to achieve and secure that. I found it quite chaotic. Bob was trying to assist as best he could, and Judy was trying to assist as best she could, in her own particular way—but there must be a better way to do it than what we went through in the allocation of offices.

James Robertson: I have to say that I am not sure of one.

Pete Wishart: Okay. We will leave that point.

As for PCD, and what new Members were clearly saying about their basic requirements when they come here, are we closer to meeting those requirements regarding things like wi-fi connections, LAN lines and so on? Will that be possible?

Matthew Taylor: You may recall that we covered some of this ground at a previous meeting. We welcome the report presented from the new Members, and we believe that we can address most of the points in that

paper. On the specific points that have arisen in today's meeting, the key one was flexibility. I would like to say one or two things about that if I may. First, we are following the Senior Salaries Review Body resolution, which is agreed on the Floor of the House, and if you look at the resolution, it is quite specific about the types of equipment that Members can receive. It is probably over-specific, but it is extremely specific and it is difficult for us to move away from that.

With regard to flexibility of access—we heard a lot about wireless access today—we have initiatives in hand which are looking at 3G wireless access, and public and direct access to the internet and parliamentary network. Once we have delivered those, which are budgeted for in this financial year, we might have gone quite some way to address the problems that have been identified.

Mr. Harper: To pick up the point concerning the specificity of Members' equipment, could the Committee have a copy of the SSRB paper so that we can have a look at it?

Matthew Taylor: Yes, it is a published document.

Janet Anderson: Mr. Robertson, you referred earlier to Dissolution arrangements. We heard earlier in our evidence that new Members get handed a letter by the returning officer when they are elected. Clearly, there is nothing similar or comparable for defeated Members, and maybe that is something that we should consider. We know when a general election is coming. We do not know the date, because that is up to the Prime Minister, but we roughly know when it is going to happen, and all of us as politicians put certain procedures in place to get ready for it. It would be interesting to us to know what you do, as part of the House Administration, when you know that there is an election coming up. I wonder whether there is a manual or some guidance that you have that you could make available to us.

James Robertson: There is no specific manual or guidance. We start planning the reception for the new Members something like a year and a half before we believe an election will take place. It is done by the Departments of the House. We talk in that process to the Whips to see whether we can begin to address the issue, which was brought up here, about a co-ordinated approach between the parties and officials to see whether we can get a short, sharp, relevant induction. Then, as a result of that, we put on, in our case, the induction process that you saw at the last election, which was, if you like, the general induction in the one room, with the one-stop shop for other departmental stuff in the other rooms in Portcullis house. We have reviewed that since the election, and the evidence that we have had from the report, which forms part of the evidence, is that we think we probably provided information overload. We heard about some of that earlier on. There was too much, too soon. We should be concentrating—again, as the witnesses said—on providing something that allows them to get in, get up and get working very quickly. That means the simple post, pay and PC—that sort of thing—to get them in and working, and then perhaps subsequently provide further information.

Janet Anderson: But accommodation is obviously a very pressing issue when new Members come in.

James Robertson: Yes.

Janet Anderson: I am sure you have taken on board the evidence that we have heard—

James Robertson: Yes, indeed.

Janet Anderson:—that they would like more information about that.

James Robertson: Yes. What we have done in the past is to provide, as you said, hot-desking. We took the top floor of the Committee Corridor out this year.

Janet Anderson: Actually I was thinking about somewhere to live—somewhere to dwell and sleep at night.

James Robertson: Oh, sorry. We put the Travel Office in as part of the Department of Finance and Administration, and I think that one of the things that, very late in the process, we thought about was somewhere for hotel accommodation. We did provide, I think, two or three hotel addresses and telephone numbers as part of the package, but clearly that was not enough, and it would have been very much better if we had provided something as part of a sort of joining sheet, which had that sort of information on.

Janet Anderson: Thank you very much.

Frank Dobson: On the IT, am I right in thinking that your first answer was saying basically that you can now provide universally what the three new Members giving evidence said they would want?

Matthew Taylor: In terms of the wireless access, we certainly have live projects—they are happening now—which are looking at providing wireless access in some of the communal areas—for example, Portcullis atrium. They are looking at direct access to the parliamentary network, but also direct access to the internet for those who want to use it. We are currently considering what other locations in both Houses might be suitable for that sort of access. Because of the structure of the building, flooding the place with wireless access

would not be possible—some walls are just too thick, some places are just too inaccessible—but we are looking at communal areas. Perhaps the Committee Corridor, perhaps the atrium, but they have still to be decided.

Frank Dobson: You were also saying that the SSRB recommendations, as endorsed by the House, constrain the flexibility of what is provided. There is nothing to stop us saying we want more flexibility than the SSRB talked about in its last report, and that we are not prepared to wait three eons until it makes its next recommendation. It would be possible for you to say, “This is what would need to be done to provide the flexibility,” and it would be up to us to decide whether to provide it.

Matthew Taylor: On that particular point I was responding to the point that Mr. Shapps raised about—“I don’t want all PCs. I want to have perhaps more laptops”—and I was interpreting the resolution in that respect. I have taken advice on that, and we would need to take this to the Members Estimate Committee for its ratification, if we did indeed want to make a change. But we would take it to this Committee first and the Advisory Panel on Members’ Allowances before it went to the MEC to seek that change.

Frank Dobson: Could I then go on to the computer equipment possessed by the departing Members? Some of them would like to buy it, and I am told that they cannot buy it because of problems over the licence agreement. Does anybody ever ask the people at the other end of the licence agreement whether they would be prepared to accept that?

Matthew Taylor: Yes, we have. The problem is the position that Microsoft has taken over the licences that we have as an enterprise and corporation. It is not allowing us to resell them or take advantage of the price discounts that we have achieved as an organisation for the benefit of an individual. We have discussed this in the former Information Committee and in the Panel in the past, and the conclusion that was reached was to wipe the hardware of all the useful software. This would render the equipment fairly useless, given that it would be more than four years old and would need software to be purchased and reinstalled on it.

The decision taken had been to retrieve the equipment, dispose of it within the House—members of staff could use it if it had a usable life—or resell it if it had a commercial value. If it did not have a commercial value, we would destroy it in an environmentally friendly and safe way, while ensuring that we had cleaned all the sensitive data that might exist on the machine.

Frank Dobson: How far up the great chain of command at Microsoft have we gone in trying to get the company to be flexible?

Matthew Taylor: That is a fair question. We have been operating at a certain level, and because of the interest expressed by the Advisory Panel when we met a couple of weeks ago, we are escalating the issue at Microsoft and asking, “Are you absolutely sure that this is your final position?” We are pursuing that.

Frank Dobson: I have a question for Mr. Bird. Would there be any problem for the Fees Office—as I still think of you—in taking responsibility for the redundant aspects of Members’ staff?

Terry Bird: The key problem is that we are not the employer. Members of Parliament are, and therefore it is their responsibility to go through the processes that should happen before redundancy takes place—consultation and so on. It is the responsibility of Members of Parliament to enact those redundancy procedures.

However, we do a lot of backroom work. As one or two of the former Members indicated, we provide a number of services. We would provide the calculation of the redundancy payments at request, even though you could go elsewhere to find that information. We were also very happy to provide—although perhaps we did not notify this widely enough—template letters that former Members could use in the process of making their staff redundant. They were not required to use them, but we were happy to provide drafts that they could use.

The other thing that we did was to provide, through a third-party provider, courses for members of staff on such things as CV writing. That third-party provider phoned round all former Members to say that those courses were on, and ask whether any of their staff would like to attend. I do not think that we got a great take-up, and maybe we need to look at that. We did a lot of backroom work, but could not take on the responsibility.

Frank Dobson: I do not expect you to answer this now, because it is a matter of interpretation of the law, but will it be possible for Members to include in their contracts of employment a stipulation that, in the event of their losing their seat or retiring, the House of Commons would be responsible for the redundancy arrangements? Could you find that out for us?

Terry Bird: I can certainly look into that.

Mr. Gerrard: I want to come back to one or two of the issues around the IT. We heard Simon Thomas; there still seem to be people who have retired whose equipment has not been collected. Is Simon Thomas's an isolated experience or a wider problem?

Matthew Taylor: No, it is not an isolated situation; quite a number of ex-Members out there still have their equipment.

Mr. Gerrard: Why has that happened?

Matthew Taylor: We would expect to have retrieved it before now, but it has been a low priority in the project, the first priority being new Members. Also, we had an issue at the start of that delivery project, which then created an increased work load. You have heard some of the comments about calls not being returned. It generated a work load that was difficult to cope with. That was considered a lower priority. In the guidance to Members that we issued about the retrieval of equipment from ex-Members there was not a set date by which we said we would retrieve it. Clearly, we would have expected to have made more progress by now.

Mr. Gerrard: Is it PCD who are doing the retrieval?

Matthew Taylor: We instruct a third party to do it, and monitor and manage its work.

Mr. Gerrard: I am not clear where the problem has arisen, because if you are instructing a third party, I do not see how some of the problems about getting the new Members supplied would interfere with a third party collecting from ex-Members.

Matthew Taylor: I can understand why it appears that way. It will in fact be a member of our own staff who would be contacting the ex-Members and making the arrangements, and the third party who goes out with the van to collect it. Having the resources to have handled that to date has not been possible.

Mr. Harper: Why would it not be possible just to have a list, given that former Members are not, in most cases, likely to be particularly difficult about this and that most of them wanted to give us information? Why would it not be possible to have the contact as part of the third party contract? You could give the third party the name and contact details and just say, "Go get the stuff in a sensible and courteous manner." These people want you to come to collect it, so that they can have it off their hands. Most of them are having to store it or look after it. They do not want it; they want you to come to collect it.

Matthew Taylor: That is a perfectly reasonable point and we will want to take it on board. Where Members have contacted us and said that it is causing a problem, we have ensured that we have retrieved it. So we have dealt with the situation for those Members who have been in touch saying, "Please get this off my hands".

Janet Anderson: Are you confident that it will ever be retrieved?

Matthew Taylor: If it is where our records say it is, we will be able to retrieve it.

Janet Anderson: But you have no kind of cut-off point for that. You do not know what the time scale will be. You will do it some time, perhaps never.

Matthew Taylor: It is not a coincidence that the meeting is happening today and a member of staff is working on this at present. But there is somebody who now has making contact with all the ex-Members as a dedicated task.

Mr. Gerrard: The question of flexibility is something that we ought to look at. It is not just the SSRB report. There was a resolution of the House, which is based on that SSRB report. If we pass something through the House that does not have flexibility in it, we would have, in a sense, created the problem. We should have a look at what the terms of that resolution were and what we might need to do to change it. I understand the point that was being made about different Members wanting to work in different ways. Perhaps when we are looking at this report we could think about how we could progress. You might need to come back to us on that.

The other point that I wanted to raise was about the wireless access, and once that starts to happen, which I recall being mentioned at the previous meeting. What restrictions would you have on that? You heard some of the people who were giving us evidence saying, "Well, I just want to bring in my own gear that I have been using, and be able to connect through wireless access into the parliamentary system."

Matthew Taylor: In terms of the ability to access the POP 3 types of accounts that you heard about earlier, when I was talking about the wireless connection I mentioned two types: direct connection to the parliamentary network and direct connection to the internet. That is the key distinction. If you are directly connecting to the parliamentary network, the technical advice that we have received says that we should not allow POP 3 access.

Mr. Gerrard: For security reasons.

Matthew Taylor: For security reasons.

So, we would not currently consider doing that. If you had direct access to the internet, which I believe the two gentleman on the panel were requesting, that would allow them to access their POP 3 accounts and to do the sort of internet work that they were seeking to do. We are in the middle of a project and we are exploring the possibilities of that, but it is worth flagging up again the fact that we are looking at public or communal areas within the building and not necessarily people's individual offices for that service.

Mr. Jones: I have two points about the computer equipment that clearly has not been collected yet. Is it worth collecting some of this equipment? Will you provide us with some information—not today—about what percentage is reuseable and what is disposed of because it is not worth collecting? Computers go out of date quickly.

As for unused envelopes, the Serjeant at Arms Department and the Speaker get vexed about the cost of envelopes. Is there a system—clearly not in Mr. Pike's case—for returning envelopes if you have not used them?

James Robertson: There is no specific instruction that tells a retiring Member that if they want to return envelopes they should do it this way. Members who have a large number of envelopes tend to contact the Office Keeper, who tells them to put them in a box and return them via parcel post.

Mr. Jones: That clearly failed in Mr. Pike's case.

James Robertson: We failed in Mr. Pike's case, but we had at least one long meeting with him before he returned the envelopes and other bits and pieces.

Janet Anderson: When Members return envelopes that have previously been billed to them, is the value of the envelopes they have returned taken off their expense returns?

James Robertson: No.

Janet Anderson: Why not?

James Robertson: Nobody has thought of it. I guess that it is bringing public money back into—

Mr. Jones: It is important, because a few weeks ago our expenses were published in the newspapers. They also published figures for all those ex-Members in our region who retired at the last election. If they returned £2,000-worth of stationery, that should come off the bill.

James Robertson: Fair point.

Frank Dobson: I seek clarification from Mr. Bird. My question about legality was on the assumption that the House of Commons has a redundancy scheme that is more generous than the statutory one.

Terry Bird: It has a redundancy scheme, and in general it is more generous than the statutory one.

Frank Dobson: Applying it to Members' staff?

Terry Bird: There would be all sorts of difficulties, because if the employer was changing from a Member of Parliament to the House, there would be issues about length of service, and redundancy and length of service are connected too. I take your point, but I am not sure that the solution you have offered is a neat way of achieving what you want.

Frank Dobson: It might not be for the Fees Office, but it might be for the Members.

Chairman: I have a final question. I used a couple of examples from my own experience, and I was not exaggerating when I said that I was able to come and go for five years. That applied particularly when I was asked to come and empty my office, which was difficult and painful. I was certainly not escorted, and I did not have any trouble getting into the office and getting staff from the Serjeant at Arms Department to help with boxes.

The other example I gave was from the time when I first came into the House. Between 1987 and now there has been a sea change in the services provided for Members, including the induction process, on which you are to be congratulated. It is important to point out that although we have concentrated on some of the negatives, there were many positives in the evidence that we received. However, I still have a nagging problem about former Members and how they were treated, but there has been massive culture change.

I understand the security issues, and what I did is probably impossible to countenance nowadays. Not all that the Committee has heard has been presented in evidence, because we have all had conversations with defeated Members. Some strong words have been spoken today, and previously written, about the way in which people were treated. There has been a culture change. Is there an explanation for that, beyond the security one, which most of us on this side of the fence would argue is invalid, because everyone has been security checked. Everyone whom we saw today, with the exception of Peter Pike, had been a Member for eight years.

James Robertson: I cannot offer an explanation. As far as I am aware, and certainly in all the dealings with my staff, the intention has been for defeated Members—former Members—to come in and to be facilitated in

clearing their offices. We give them as long as possible to do that, and if a Member has a significant problem, as some do, we will do whatever we can to help. However, in general, because of the pressures that we perceive on turning the accommodation around, we aim for about a week.

Chairman: That is not what we have heard.

James Robertson: It is certainly not what seems to be happening.

Chairman: Thank you gentlemen. This has been extremely useful. I apologise again for the Committee overrunning. If anyone wants to write in to us about issues that were raised in evidence today, we would be happy to receive such letters. We must start to prepare our report in the next couple of weeks, but if anyone wants to elaborate on any points, they should feel free to write to the Clerk.

Formal Minutes

Tuesday 13 December 2005

Members present:

Mr Frank Doran, in the Chair

Mr Bob Ainsworth
Janet Anderson
Frank Dobson
Mr Brian H Donohoe
Mr Eric Forth
Mr Mark Harper

Helen Jones
Mr Kevan Jones
David Lepper
Peter Luff
John Thurso

* * *

The Committee deliberated.

Draft Report (Post-election 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 62 read and agreed to.

Summary agreed to.

Annex agreed to.

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

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

Several Papers were ordered to be appended to the Report.

* * *

[Adjourned till Tuesday 17th January at half-past Two o'clock.]

List of written evidence

Memoranda submitted by new Members

Adam Afriyie, Mr Robert Flello, Mr Robert Goodwill, Nia Griffith	Ev 1
John Hemming, Alison Seabeck	Ev 2
Grant Shapps	Ev 3
Mr Andrew Slaughter	Ev 5

Memoranda submitted by re-elected Members

Mr Peter Bottomley, Mrs Claire Curtis-Thomas, Paul Flynn	Ev 5
Peter Luff, Dr Nick Palmer, Mr Nick Raynsford, Caroline Spelman	Ev 6

Memoranda submitted by former Members

Joe Ashton (Association of Former MPs)	Ev 6
Mr Harry Barnes	Ev 7
Andrew Bennett, Peter Bradley	Ev 8
Brian Cotter, Ross Cranston, Mr Tam Dalyell	Ev 9
Valerie Davey, Julia Drown, Mr Adrian Flook	Ev 10
Mrs Helen Liddell, Mr Tony McWalter	Ev 11
Mr Bill O'Brien, Linda Perham	Ev 12
Mr Peter Pike	Ev 13
Syd Rapson, Mr Chris Smith, Rev Martin Smyth, Sir Teddy Taylor	Ev 15
Gareth Thomas, Mr Simon Thomas	Ev 16
Brian White	Ev 17

Memoranda submitted by the House of Commons Administration

Board of Management	Ev 18
Serjeant at Arms	Ev 22
Department of Finance and Administration	Ev 25

Written evidence

Memoranda submitted by new Members

ADAM AFRIYIE

1. At the key moment when one needs to work at full speed, it is the key moment at which it is impossible to do so. This is because of the absence of wireless internet access in the Parliament building. The wireless LAN need not be connected to the Parliamentary network so there should not be any security issues.

2. It would have saved a lot of time and stress and made MPs a lot more efficient if they were able to work with their own equipment within Parliament whilst awaiting their equipment.

3. The induction programmes were far too early and far too in-depth. I recommend a simple sheet of A4 suggesting what new MPs should do, in what order, and where to go to do it.

4. I also recommend a simple DVD that new MPs can watch for each step of the process—even if it's very badly produced and involves a bad actor pointing at paper forms. MPs could then do things at their own pace and refer back when necessary.

5. *Sort out the offices quickly.* If the army can achieve it within 24 hours, then I'm sure Parliament can sort it out within 72, even if MPs know that they may have to move again several weeks later on demand.

6. On a positive note all the staff were very, very helpful indeed and did an excellent job of helping and explaining each step of the way.

MR ROBERT FLELLO

1. Overall I was very impressed with the services offered immediately following the 2005 General Election. In particular:

- (a) The ability to meet with all departments in a “one-stop shop” week was excellent;
- (b) I received very good accommodation and more quickly than I had anticipated;
- (c) Provision of computer equipment, etc was fast and efficient;
- (d) The various seminars on procedure were helpful and timely;
- (e) Staff were helpful, courteous and almost always able to resolve an issue within 24 hours.

2. My only two criticisms are as follows:

- (f) Due I suspect to the volume of claims given that retiring members were also requiring payments, I found the Dept of Fees and Admin to be slow at meeting claims and on two occasions the claim forms never arrived with them causing lengthy delays in settlement; and
- (g) The current system of reimbursement of ACA causes me difficulties bearing in mind that with high rents and other initial outlays it can be up to almost six weeks after incurring expenditure of the order of £1,600 or more before reimbursement.

3. My suggestions for the last two items would be:

- (f) Institute some form of (electronic) acknowledgement system so that Members know claims have been received and are being processed and the likely date of settlement; and
- (g) Provide an advance of ACA quarterly in advance from day one with a requirement to submit claims to enable future advances to be authorised.

MR ROBERT GOODWILL

1. I have only one suggestion regarding the allocation of offices after the election. The lack of an office for several weeks was intolerable and meant that I had to spend weekends attending to post etc. The heaviest postbag we received was for new members in the first week or two.

2. Why not, as a temporary measure, put new Members in the office occupied by their predecessor. Once all the allocations have been finalised then there could be a changeover process over a weekend.

3. I am sure this would help new Members to become established more quickly. This may present some problems, for example if the Prime Minister or Party Leader does not stand and Members should be made to understand that they should not get comfortable in their temporary offices.

NIA GRIFFITH

Report on the main issues facing new Members.

1. When the electoral returning officer handed the winning candidate a letter, in the letter was a four figure extension number telling you to address enquiries to this number. What use was a four figure number if you were phoning from the constituency? And you just did not happen to know the number for the HoC? Or even if you were phoning from inside the Palace of Westminster as you had to use your mobile, having no access to a phone?

2. The slow allocation of offices was immensely discourteous and disruptive. Health and Safety implications because of severe back pain following carrying so much stuff around. Whips must be told this was unacceptable.

3. IT—provision of laptop excellent. Would be good idea to have available for purchase memory sticks. I found mine very useful as I used computers which were not networked all over the place such as in Members' library so that my researcher could use laptop in the daytime. I could then transfer things using my stick onto the laptop.

4. Arrival and installation of other computers very slow and problematic. I had constituency office premises ready from 6 May and ordered my computers soon after arrival here but they did not arrive and were not installed for ages and gave rise to all sorts of problems. Must be possible to estimate rough requirements of computer stock in advance of election and have them ready so that they arrive sooner. Only means of communication was via mobile. Provision of IT eqpt here linked to allocation of office problems.

5. Voicemail training good.

6. Provision of top corridor rooms good.

7. Locker useful. Members' cloakroom really useful.

8. FAX machine. It took a while to realise that actually we could fax out using the printer in the cttee room but we had no number for incoming faxes. Ideally should provide a fax, maybe linked to Members' mail room which could be used for outgoing faxes and for incoming faxes which could be placed with Members mail.

9. Used library quite a lot. Lighting appalling. Health & Safety issue.

10. Induction Training. Personally I would have liked to have seen an intensive two-day course to cover all the main aspects of the job. This could be partly all-party and partly party-specific. The trouble with sessions spread out over several weeks was that they tended to get forgotten or crowded out by other things and I attended several with pathetically low attendance. Ideally training sessions should be run jointly by House staff and Members. I would be prepared to help put together something for the next intake.

11. HoC booklets good.

12. A tour around the buildings, inside and out. Unlike some people who had worked here, I had rarely been to London, and never inside the Palace of Westminster. Part of the induction should have included a tour of all the main areas inside the Palace of Westminster that would be useful and also a walk up Whitehall. Margaret Beckett kindly provided a map to get to her residence but she was the exception.

13. Accommodation—some useful guidance could have been provided. One helpful MP told me after I had taken a six-month lease out that my flat was too far away. Pity he did not say so before.

14. I was missed out of the first edition of the new Members' booklet. Don't miss anyone out next time!

15. Mentors. Experience varied. Should provide mentor and new MP with a checklist of the issues to cover. Should give guidelines on effective mentoring eg meet at specific regular times.

16. Generally, a long way to go to reach the standards required for Investors in People.

JOHN HEMMING

1. *Provision made for new Members while they were waiting to be allocated offices: I was OK with it.*

2. *Provision of furniture, IT equipment and telephones to new Members and to existing Members moving office: Typical "protect your back" mentality in PCD which prevents them offering a service.*

3. People are very friendly and helpful generally. PCD are, however, unreasonably inflexible.

ALISON SEABECK

1. I have seen in my time at Westminster as a staff member a number of administration changes and post election office scrums!

2. I have to say that the welcome new Members received was terrific in terms of the attention which was paid to meeting, greeting and funnelling us off to sessions with the various House authorities and departments.

3. I know that meeting the needs of new Members is far from an exact science because of the "unknowns" which follow any election—like number of new MPs, change in party balance etc but I would have thought that the allocation of computer equipment, telephones and furniture, could have been better prepared. There was also a shortage of hot desks initially which caused problems and other computers like those in the PCH Library were often over subscribed making it very difficult for those of us who appointed staff immediately to find machines which they could access.

4. The Office Keeping staff in 1 Parliament Street were superb.

5. Although one of the last MPs to be allocated an office I do accept that without the full co-operation of departing MPs and indeed existing MPs who are required to move these arrangements will inevitably take time. I don't suppose you can physically empty the rooms of MPs who lose seats but who are unwilling to return to Westminster?

GRANT SHAPPS

IMPROVING WESTMINSTER IT: INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY AT THE HOUSE OF COMMONS

1. You have asked for my thoughts (and those of my colleagues) about how IT could be brought up-to-date and improved. As a result I have spent time this summer consulting with my new intake colleagues in order to reach a consensus about possible improvements. Outlined below are the specific points where we believe matters could be improved, as well as some overarching comments which I trust are intended to be helpful from the "users" point of view.

THE CULTURE OF IT PROVISION AT WESTMINSTER

2. In undertaking this project we had hoped to identify areas where new technology could dramatically enhance MPs' workflow. In reality we have found that, with one or two exceptions as outlined below, the real problem is one of business culture and approach within the IT Directorate. The fact that most of the solutions do not lie in new technology may be good news in as much as fixing these issues won't take a lot of cash. On the other hand it will require a sizeable management-led effort to resolve, which may in some ways prove harder.

PROVISION OF WIRELESS

3. For most of us entering Parliament from the outside world of business, it was surprising to discover that there is currently no wireless (WiFi) coverage available on the Estate. Indeed, the Dell laptops provided by PCD actually go as far as to completely disable WiFi functionality. Whilst we understand the very real security concerns involved, other data-sensitive organisations do seem to have overcome this and our research has identified that the US Congress has provided wireless access in their presumably equally sensitive environment.

Recommendation

4. PCD have previously commented that the Palace (in particular) is a difficult place to "make wireless" and asserted that it would only be fair to provide WiFi access if everyone can benefit. Whilst we accept that providing strong wireless coverage across the Estate might prove difficult, we are not satisfied that this is a good reason for not providing any coverage at all, at least where practical. For example, it would be helpful to many colleagues to have WiFi access available in the PCH Despatch Box coffee bar area. Laptops could then be used out of the office environment. Incidentally, there are no power supplies available around these coffee tables, indicating that the use of technology in this area was probably not considered when PCH was originally designed. A modern company would doubtless take advantage of this type of relaxed coffee break area to provide wireless access and encourage their workers to get away from their desks.

PROVISION OF IT EQUIPMENT AFTER ELECTIONS

5. The fact that a General Election might result in new MPs being elected seems to have taken PCD by complete surprise. This unacceptable delay in providing computers to new Members is well documented and we won't labour the point here. We know that there were some issues with Dell and that the wrong systems were built, but we fail to understand why three months after the election, some new Members were still waiting for their IT equipment to be delivered.

Recommendation

6. We believe that work should be carried out to identify the precise nature of the delays and that steps be put in place to ensure that future intakes are never expected to deal with the massive amounts of correspondence that a new MP attracts, with just one laptop computer. Furthermore a specific timeline should be established to ensure that Members receive a laptop immediately (as happened), followed by computer and printer provision within a named and relatively short timeframe.

USE OF IT AT THE HOUSES OF PARLIAMENT

7. There is a general consensus within the 2005 intake that the use of technology could be expanded into new areas.

SIGNING EDMs ONLINE

8. Whilst it is possible to table Written and Oral Questions via the Intranet system, it is not yet possible to sign EDMs. This provides an inconsistent application of IT and may well suppress the uptake of the use of IT in this area by Members as a visit to the Tabling Office is still physically required.

Recommendation

9. Members should be able to add their name to EDMs online.

RESTAURANT AND FACILITY BOOKINGS

10. There's a general scarcity of places to take guests to eat within the Palace itself. The two principal dining rooms—Strangers and Churchill—are frequently booked up unless a reservation has been made in advance. However it's impossible to make any reservations out of the irregular hours during which these two restaurants are staffed.

Recommendation

11. Members should be able to book restaurants via the Intranet. An obvious solution would be to allow online booking of Estate restaurants by Members via the Intranet at any time.

EMAIL SPACE LIMITATION

12. A concern expressed by many members and staff is the 50mb maximum allowable for email storage. In these days of scanned document attachments, this capacity constraint tends to be very limiting.

Recommendation

13. There's a clear case for increasing server space available for stored email. We believe that a 100mb limit would be more appropriate bearing in mind the amount of constituency casework which now arrives via email.

QUALITY OF MOBILE SIGNAL IN PARTS OF THE ESTATE

14. Members naturally rely on mobile phones, PDAs and Blackberrys, but mobile phone coverage is very poor in parts of the Estate. In particular the Orange signal is weak in many parts of PCH.

Recommendation

15. Carry out a comprehensive review of coverage on T-Mobile, Orange, Vodafone, O2 and 3 and then alert mobile phone networks to signal problems in affected parts of Estate.

RIGIDITY VERSUS FLEXIBILITY

16. An overly rigid application of the rules governing Members computing means that simple requests are usually not granted. When colleagues with limited office space asked to switch two desktop computers out of their allocation in return for one laptop, it appeared to send PCD into meltdown. In most cases these requests were simply not acknowledged. In my own case it took six separate requests and wasn't resolved until the request was escalated to the highest level within PCD and Finance and Administration.

Recommendation

17. Whilst we understand the advantages of a "one size fits all" approach from the suppliers point of view, common sense needs to be applied and it would be helpful if time critical requests were granted without needing to take the issue to the highest level of management.

SERVICE QUALITY FROM PCD AND MEMBERS COMPUTING

18. The quality of service from PCD and Members Computing was lamentable. On numerous occasions colleagues would call and leave messages, without these calls ever being returned or the items requested ever being acknowledged or actioned. To make matters worse, a call to Members Computing would rarely be returned. On one occasion a colleague was told that there simply wasn't time to respond to voicemails left by Members. This was definitely the reality as we found it.

Recommendation

19. Measures need to be urgently put in place in order to predict times of unusually high activity (critically after a General Election) and sufficient human resources must be made available to respond to all communication from Members.

SHIFTING TO A SERVICE ORIENTATED APPROACH

20. Whilst seeking views to draw up this document, by far the most frequently heard comment was in regard to the lack of service culture within PCD. Put bluntly, if PCD were a business (without a monopoly) it would go bust. Recognition should be given for the fact that the system appears to be stable (with the exception of some concerns over external VPN access), it doesn't appear to crash from a user's point of view and is always available. However, the "extreme caution" approach seems to have led to a less innovative service, deeply lacking in customer focus. PCD has indicated that they are researching some advanced ideas, like providing wireless access to PDAs (Personal Digital Assistance), but in reality we couldn't find any demand for such services, particularly whilst basic access to a wireless network for laptop computers remains elusive.

Recommendation

21. PCD need to base their future approach on what Members actually require and a customer service culture is urgently required.

MR ANDREW SLAUGHTER

1. I do feel very strongly that the induction process could have been handled very much better and more efficiently: having to wait weeks for an office, office equipment and supplies created great difficulties, not least the impression of incompetence or lack of care it gave to constituents.

2. As to the reception process, I felt that more formal, comprehensive and timetabled briefing sessions would have provided a better grounding in procedures and practices.

3. None of the above is a comment on the attitude or abilities of individual staff, whom I found courteous and helpful.

Memoranda submitted by re-elected Members

MR PETER BOTTOMLEY

1. My comment is that as a re-elected MP, I was delighted at the smooth planned move of my office from one building to another. Minor details were dealt with quickly and quietly. I am grateful to everyone involved.

2. I did offer to have a new MP as an office sharer while they were sorted out—and I would be happy to do that in future.

MRS CLAIRE CURTIS-THOMAS

1. Are staff aware that they are there to help MPs, not humiliate them?

2. The service for MPs is scandalous and centuries out of date.

PAUL FLYNN

1. As your Committee is examining accommodation perhaps they would consider criteria for ensuring the most efficient use of office space. While the committee may not find it practical to allocate offices, they could perhaps establish guidelines that would encourage a more transparent system. One splendid corner office remained empty for 10 months from July 2004. It has now been allocated to an ex-Government Minister following a ministerial re-shuffle. There is strong impression that the allocation of offices is used as an instrument of a patronage in a sometimes capricious manner. Decisions often fail to achieve an equitable and efficient use of space.

2. I have asked the Whips responsible what the criteria are for allocating offices. Are seniority, workload, disability, age, staff numbers factors taken into account? I have had no substantive reply and a brief discussion revealed no criteria on which Members can measure whether or not they are being treated fairly.

PETER LUFF

1. I am writing in response to the recent survey asking the views of Members on the services provided after the General Election.

2. I am extremely unhappy with the provision of new computer equipment by PCD.

3. First, MPs should be able to buy whatever make or model of computers and printers we want, and not be restricted to an authorised shopping list. Why should we be forced to choose only from the tiny range approved by PCD? The range is already out-of-date, having been specified many months ago—memory and processing speeds will have moved on considerably by the time I am allocated my machines.

4. Second, we should also be able to buy our equipment from where we want. I would have much preferred to support a local business in my constituency, which sells a fine range of IT equipment. The current arrangements meant that I had no choice in the matter.

5. Third, the time scale of the roll-out of new equipment is appalling. I have a new member of staff who started working for me at the end of June. He has a mild disability (Repetitive Strain Injury) which requires him to use voice-activated software. However, the only spare computer in my office wasn't capable of supporting the software. I wanted to get a more powerful computer from my entitlement, but was told by PCD that he would have to wait because the new MPs were being provided with their equipment first. I have not even been allowed to buy a machine from the catalogue, leaving me in non-compliance with the Disability Discrimination Act.

6. In a recent letter PCD stated that the roll-out will take place from November 2005 to June 2006. This is quite incredible. Luckily, PCD arranged for my researcher's computer to be fitted with a memory upgrade, which will probably do in the meantime—but this is far from ideal.

7. The problem is that PCD tries to squeeze MPs into a corporate model. This doesn't work. We are 646 small businesses, all with different needs and working habits. We need the flexibility to accommodate those differences.

8. Each of us should be given the freedom to buy our equipment from a set budget to suit our own needs. If this system was in place, I could have bought all of my new computers and printers in a single day—not a year. The solution is to free MPs from the restrictions of the network, which is wholly unconnected to the communications needs of MPs, and so give everyone the freedom to define and meet their own requirements.

DR NICK PALMER

Many thanks for the interesting enquiry. As a third-term Member I didn't experience any problems, and basically just resumed where I left off with no particular difficulty, but this may well be untypical of new Members' experiences.

MR NICK RAYNSFORD

1. My office was relocated from two separate offices to adjoining offices in Portcullis House immediately after the May 2005 election. To date, despite repeated requests to the PCD, I have not received my full allowance of computers. Indeed for many weeks the office managed on only two PCs shared between four people.

2. I appreciate that priority has to be given to new members after the General Election, however it took many phone calls before we were able to secure a reconditioned PC, three months after it was requested. One member of my staff was forced to work from home during this time, which was not ideal.

MRS CAROLINE SPELMAN

Very unhappy with IT support.

Memoranda submitted by former Members

JOE ASHTON (Association of Former MPs)

1. Not all Committee members will be aware of the existence of the Association of Former MPs which has been formally set up, with a written constitution, approved by the House of Commons Commission, and which has been granted office accommodation at 2 Abbey Gardens together with a modest grant.

2. There are presently 333 paid up members of the Association, 58 of whom left Parliament at the 2005 election. About half of our members are defeated ex-MPs, and the other half retired. The Speaker is Patron of the Association, the aims of which are as follows:

- (a) To provide former Members of Parliament with opportunities to meet socially and continue long-standing friendships.

- (b) To work for the acceptance of the Association as a repository of political knowledge and parliamentary experience.
- (c) To undertake educational, cultural, social and consultative tasks, drawing on the skill and experience of members to further the cause of parliamentary democracy.
- (d) To represent the interests of former MPs.
- (e) To provide a forum within which former MPs can offer advice to other former Members and to the widows, spouses and partners of former Members.
- (f) To foster good relations between former MPs and the current Members of the Commons and the Lords and the authorities of both Houses.
- (g) To enhance the status of politicians generally and demonstrate that British politics is an honourable profession in which former MPs are proud to have served.
- (h) To establish and maintain good relations with similar associations worldwide, offering and receiving help, advice and hospitality, and seeking to unite former politicians in advancing the cause of parliamentary democracy.

3. The Association has an elected, fully representative and balanced Executive Committee. There are seven elected members and six co-opted members to ensure regional, political, gender, etc, balance. Two serving MPs are also members of the committee.

4. The Association appreciates the strict remit of the present inquiry, and acknowledges that there is a clear distinction between the problems of MPs who retire, and prepare for it accordingly, and those who are defeated, who face the trauma of a sudden exit, often highly publicised, and immediate unemployment at what is often a very difficult age.

5. We are including a copy of our magazine “Order Order” which contains an article on the problem, which members of the Committee might like to read.

6. We would submit that the inquiry should include consideration of the availability of clear advice to retired/defeated members, as to their status within the House of Commons as ex-Members.

7. The Committee will know that former Members who have served 10 years are eligible for a security pass. Following representations from the Association during the last Parliament, it was agreed that the qualifying years be reduced from 15 to 10. It seems to be the case that the existence of such a pass is not effectively made known to retiring/defeated MPs. The possession of a pass allows limited access to refreshment facilities on the estate and again this is not made clear.

8. The Association hopes that the Committee will consider, as a future study, looking into the whole question of access to the estate for former MPs. Those without a security pass have no rights at all, although we understand that the Refreshment Department might welcome the use of catering facilities by former MPs at off-peak times.

9. It is felt by many of our members that there is an in-built objection, by officials, to the presence of former MPs in the House. This is not the case in countries such as the USA, Australia, New Zealand, where former parliamentarians are all welcome visitors to their parliaments.

10. With regard to security passes, a further cause for complaint is that they are entitled “Special Guest” rather than “Former Member”.

11. In conclusion, therefore, the Association would ask members of the Administration Committee to consider the following:

- Clear guidance on rights of access to the parliamentary estate and its facilities for former MPs.
- The guidance to include reference to the existence and activities of the Association of Former MPs.
- Consideration of a future committee inquiry on access regulations.

MR HARRY BARNES

1. My staff and myself received full and ready assistance from the Administration in the Commons when vacating our offices and finalising our arrangements in the Commons in the run-up to the dissolution of Parliament on 11 April. Subsequent arrangements also worked well except in the following case.

2. PCD have not yet collected the Commons computer, printer, attachments and lap-top from what was an office in my home, although I gave them notice and reminders of this problem some time ago. I have been back in touch with them today.

3. The ease with which all the other arrangements worked was no doubt assisted by the fact that I announced my intention not to stand again for Parliament way back in December 2002. It was also clear well before the formal decision was made on the dissolution of Parliament that the General Election would be held on 5 May. Both the Administration and myself could, therefore, undertake forward planning for my departure.

4. My own experiences might not, therefore be reflected in circumstances where there is a snap General Election or where a sitting MP is defeated at the polls.

ANDREW BENNETT

1. I hope your remit will cover, the period before, as well as after an election. I very much appreciated the help and support I received in winding up my office and in planning my retirement from most of the Fees Office Staff. However the procedures were very unsatisfactory. I will deal with four issues.

2. First, I needed to know what help and resources would be available when I was deciding whether to retire, ie during the first half of the 2001–05 Parliament. When I asked the Fees Office in February 2002, what would be available, I was told they didn't know for certain, but it would be at least as generous as in 2001, and we then discussed specifics about my staff and redundancy payments. All this information turned out to be inaccurate. If the Committee recommends nothing else it ought to recommend that the rules for next time are known at least by the middle of the Parliament, and don't emerge a couple of months before an election.

3. Second, I was keen to be able to offer my staff redundancy payments and or bonuses which would make it very attractive for them to remain in my employment until the election and look for new jobs thereafter. This is an issue for MPs who choose to retire; in that staff naturally are tempted to look for new jobs rather than wait to the end, particularly in a five-year parliament. It can also be a problem for MPs in marginal seats, particularly if opinion polls suggest over a two or three-year period they are likely to lose their seats. (I was very aware of this in 1977–79). It would seem fair for the rules to allow very significant redundancy payments to reward staff who remain with an MP up to the election.

4. Third, my computer equipment in the House of Commons, provided by the House was easily dealt with. I just abandoned it, but the equipment in my constituency was much more of a problem. Logically I should have been able to buy it at a price reflecting it was over four years old. This I was told I couldn't do because of the licences for the software on the computer. It was claimed all computers had to be returned and have the programs removed. Obviously this is much more expensive to the House. Two things would be sensible, to get the licences altered so ex-MPs still had the right to use the programs on old machines; or merely to allow ex-MPs to buy the machines with a program licence, or providing a note assuring the House of Commons that all programs had been wiped. The actual position in this area is very unsatisfactory.

5. Finally the management of the Members Pension Fund. It is very annoying when one has done one's sums for retiring, to be told managers have made errors in your contributions, and require you to make up the shortfall. If the Members Pension Fund is to be continued to be "out sourced" those providing the service ought to be responsible for making good any mistakes they made.

PETER BRADLEY

1. I am very glad that the Committee is enquiring into the provision of services to Members and former Members and grateful for the opportunity to submit evidence to it.

2. I note that the Committee is not reviewing the level of pay and allowances made to former Members. I do however wish to record that, in my view, the financial arrangements made for ex-Members are generous. My concern about the House Administration's services is not so much what they provide as how.

3. As an MP, I gained the distinct impression that those at senior level who run the House regard the majority of its members as a necessary nuisance and an impediment to its efficient administration.

4. My experience as an ex-Member confirms that view.

5. Even for hard-bitten politicians, losing office is not a happy experience. MPs who lose their seats lose much more than their job. They also, virtually overnight and very publicly, lose the status to which they have become accustomed in their local community, access to a significant part of their social circle at Westminster and, perhaps not surprisingly given the nature of an MP's lifestyle, their own sense of identity. It is a testing time. I have heard a number of former colleagues liken the experience to a bereavement.

6. Those who administer the House ought to have a special insight into the circumstances in which ex-MPs find themselves. After all, they see MPs coming and going at very regular intervals.

7. Yet the Administration's approach to former Members is, or certainly feels, highly insensitive. I fully understand that it has a pressing duty to new Members and that the task of inducting, accommodating and making all the other necessary arrangements for them is extremely difficult.

8. But that does not justify the way in which ex-Members are made to feel like non-persons almost from the moment their result is declared. It seems as though a task force which has been limbering up for weeks swings into action with a single mission—to dispose of the bodies as discreetly but as quickly as possible.

9. I set out below a few of the post-election arrangements which, in my view, were both inconsiderate and unnecessary:

- The period of time given to ex-MPs to clear their offices is inadequate; those who lose their seats are as exhausted as newly elected Members after often gruelling election campaigns but without the adrenalin of victory to keep them going; they should not be required to clear their desks (often of many years' accumulated paperwork) as if they had been dismissed from their posts for gross misconduct.

- There is no reason why the House should move quite so quickly to cut off former Members' means of communication with the outside world; although they are allowed four days in which to vacate their offices, they will find that even during that limited period, their telephone line cannot take incoming calls and their Parliamentary email address has been disabled.

Indeed, while technically it would have been easy to arrange, those who tried to contact former Members by email, perhaps with condolences or even offers of employment, were not even informed that their messages were not reaching their destination. I managed to agree an arrangement through which those trying to reach me were provided by automatic response with an alternative address, but not without a great deal of effort and negotiation.

- For reasons which no-one in the Finance Department was able to explain to me, ex-Members are not allowed to forward invoices for allowable expenditures for settlement by the Fees Office. In practical terms that means that ex-Members, unlike sitting Members, are obliged to lay out considerable sums from their own resources. In my case I had to advance several thousand pounds for the rent and uniform business rate due on my constituency office and then await reimbursement.

Fortunately, that did not present immediate financial difficulties to me, though it may well have to others. But it did make me feel that, having lost my seat, I had somehow become untrustworthy.

10. I should also like to identify two other deficiencies which I hope the Committee will consider. I have mentioned how challenging the experience of losing a seat can be for an ex-Member. Yet, as a former employer, the House of Commons offers no practical support. I would strongly recommend that at future elections it provides for those who want it access to:

- counselling to help ex-Members through the difficulties associated with defeat which could typically include a sense of failure, loss of self esteem, fear about the future;
- advice, guidance and support for ex-Members seeking to re-enter the job market perhaps for the first time in many years.

11. I hope that the above is helpful. Although I have been forthright about my views about the House Administration, I would wish to place on record my appreciation of all the help and frequent kindnesses I received both as a Member and since from a large number of those who work in the House.

12. The problems to which I have referred are cultural and perhaps institutional but, in my view, can be resolved by a greater understanding of and sensitivity to the needs of ex-Members and by relatively modest changes to current arrangements.

BRIAN COTTER

1. I know this is not part of your remit but as an ex-MP I was treated reasonably with "severance payment" and help to give staff a reasonable deal.

2. However I was not happy with the following—

3. I was expected to clear out my office in the House of Commons within seven days, indeed less: I went to HoC on Tuesday after election day with notice to be out two days later on Thursday.

4. There seemed to be no concession for my pass to last a bit longer to enable me to deal with other matters, say for 21–28 days!

5. Then having been in Parliament eight years there seems to be no form of pass to make it easier to revisit for meetings or to have any form of continuation. I am a member of the Association of Former Members. To attend meetings as far as I know I have to enter Parliament as an ordinary member of the public. Some appreciation of past services would be helpful, and make it easier to attend meetings of All Party Parliamentary Groups with which I would like to carry on my interests, to attend their meetings from time to time.

6. Could not a pass be available for four years' service or one Parliament or two Parliaments based upon the actual length of the Parliaments nowadays, usually four years or thereabouts?

ROSS CRANSTON

1. I can say little, primarily because I have nothing but praise for the House of Commons officials.

2. Since I had decided to stand down before the election, I did have time to make enquiries and on that basis adequate arrangements for my staff and myself. Therefore I was in a different position to those defeated in the election.

3. Perhaps the only point I would make is that the written information was detailed, as it should be, and therefore took time to digest. But, as I say, the officials were always at the other end of the telephone to advise. My only point may be whether the written information could be presented in a slightly different way, eg with accompanying flowcharts.

MR TAM DALYELL

1. *Were you given enough time to vacate your office?:* Yes.

2. *Did you and your staff receive appropriate help and advice from the staff of the House?:* Yes.

3. *Please let us know which aspects of the services you particularly appreciated. If you are unhappy in any way with the services you received, please tell us how they could have been improved:* Every kindness, particularly Library.

4. My one quibble is that I think it is ridiculous that the Royal Mail do not send on letters—of which there are very few—to former Members after three months.

VALERIE DAVEY

1. I welcome the opportunity to place on record both my thanks to the staff of the General Election Team and my concern about the apparent lack of a thought through strategy to support my staff facing redundancy.

2. Losing an election will always be traumatic, but at each stage the phone calls and correspondence relating to my personal position were dealt with promptly and supportively by finance/administration staff. I offered them my thanks at the time and do so again now.

3. Individual members of staff also sought to help my staff but did not have, it seemed, a clear remit and/or detailed knowledge to be able to offer this level of support needed.

4. In retrospect it is easy to say that more advice was needed before the election, whilst acknowledging even now how difficult it was to concentrate on anything but the election! Just one practical example was the necessity for the outgoing MP's signature to secure the payment of staff at the end of May. If that remains a necessity, then all MP's facing future elections must know.

5. When it came to the detailed process of working out the redundancy entitlements, one member of my staff in Bristol went through the fine print and, after what she described as an uphill struggle, agreed a settlement for herself, two other full-time and one part-time colleagues.

6. There were other less important, but none the less irritating inconsistencies in information received relating to data protection and the collection of IT equipment.

JULIA DROWN

1. I have found the fees office general election team to be very helpful in dealing with all my queries on settling up all outstanding bills and thank them for that. I think in cases like mine where I knew I was stepping down as an MP we could have sorted more out before eg, I could have filled out most of the forms for my staff beforehand and just left the leaving dates to fill in when the election was confirmed which would have been helpful.

2. I have had problems with my computer which I bought via the PDVN but on my own office budget so that I was entitled to keep it. I had problems with viruses so needed to know what software was on the machine so that I could re-build it with legal licences etc. Unlike their normal service which I generally thought was very good, the helpline was not able to help, didn't get back to me etc etc even though they said they would. After many attempts to get an answer, I then went to the customer services manager who then was helpful and did find out that I could still get some help under the warranty and I was very grateful for that help. This did reveal though many unresolved policy issues which the PDVN hadn't thought of and which they are still deciding on. There should be ways for managers to make decisions in the interim before the slow policy procedure resolves issues.

3. I look forward to the policies all being resolved as I understand we will all be written to to say what we can do on equipment we have been left with—entitlement to use software on the machines etc.

MR ADRIAN FLOOK

1. First and foremost, I must praise the staff, and especially Hannah Lamb, for their courteousness and efforts on my and my former office's behalf. It cannot be easy dealing with the winding down of offices especially where members of staff are to be made redundant and I know that my two employees much appreciated the way this whole process was handled.

2. If there was one criticism it is that access to my e-mail address as well as access to the server was removed too swiftly for us to be able to alert all those who needed to know. We are sure that some "former" constituents who had always preferred to use e-mail did not get their message through to me once my parliamentary e-mail address (flooka@parliament.uk) had been switched off. Compare this with the situation that had existed since the Dissolution whereby anyone who had e-mailed me could still use my parliamentary e-mail address which was then automatically forwarded to another e-mail address. There was no reason why this could not have been continued for the same length of time that I kept my office going and had access to the winding up allowance.

3. Someone at PDVN told me that as a former Member, I was not allowed access to the server and inferred that I might abuse such a privilege. Notwithstanding that I was not asking for that, nor that this was an insult to me and my staff, all that was requested was that my mail was automatically forwarded on to an address which would then reach my (still publicly funded) office. To switch off access to my main

address within a week of the election caused serious disruption to members of the public in the Taunton constituency; it was more than annoying and somewhat ironic when you consider there is considerable public money that can be used to carry out a managed winding down.

4. It was as if PDVN was not working to the same ends as the Department of Finance and Administration; yet when we tried to rectify this obvious wrong we immediately recognised that “resistance was futile”. They did not seem to have any real idea why as a former MP I might still need to deal with “former” constituents or even want to manage an organised download of stored e-mail addresses. They were impervious to the arguments of common sense and even the protestations of the Office of the Opposition Chief Whip could not get them to understand the inconsistency of their inaction.

5. It was all very frustrating!

6. I hope my submission is useful and that positive action can be taken to rectify this oversight in the course of the next Parliament so that the same problem does not impact on former honourable Members who might find themselves in the same situation.

MRS HELEN LIDDELL

1. In reply to your enquiry, I found the staff helpful and their advice timely. As I knew well in advance I was leaving I had plenty of time to vacate my office, but more physical help moving stuff would have been useful. Some of the rules about allowances were overly prescriptive—and the staff helped as far as they could to fit circumstances to the rules, especially as I was leaving the country shortly after the election, I also received a lot of bills after the cut off date. The travel allowance between constituency and London was also overly restrictive given that not everything could be fitted into a tight timescale.

2. Other than that, I was very appreciative of the help.

MR TONY McWALTER

1. The basic issue facing a defeated Member, particularly if the election has been close or the defeat has been a surprise, is that one is left suddenly without any period of preparation to deal with a situation which is as dreadful as success was a delight. The treatment meted out is very similar to that facing employees of private companies who have been sacked for dishonesty. The latter are required to remove all personal effects, and to be accompanied while they clear their desks until they leave the premises never to return. Being a defeated MP is very similar, except that all vestige of courtesy or gratitude is entirely absent. While my constituency party was kind enough to organise a farewell party for me, the situation in Parliament was very different. Having said that, many erstwhile colleagues were very kind; but Parliament itself is not.

2. Probably the worst aspect of defeat is that if you have been a conscientious MP you are suddenly faced with knowing that a lot of vulnerable people will be left in the lurch. While the theory is that one's successor will take over one's caseload, in practice many of these cases have been built up into a personal relationship; and psychologically it is very difficult for people who have had some reliance on a particular person to transfer their attentions immediately to another, different person. This is particularly true of mental health cases, and I cannot believe it is sound policy to remove what might have been a bastion of support for people in this kind of way. I have to say as well: I miss the people I once could help, and to move from being someone who could make a difference to people's lives to being a full-time job seeker is a transition few would wish to make.

3. A thoroughly objectionable aspect of the way you are treated by Parliament is the IT system. A friend who wrote to me expressing her regret was greeted by an automatic response which just said “DEFEATED”. The computers which one operated through the Parliamentary system cannot cope once they are bereft of the network, and in any case access to vital files and address books is withdrawn summarily. The effect is that one not only loses one's job, and one's sense that one is a helping person who is able to do something to make the difficulties of life a little easier for some of our most vulnerable citizens, but one loses also one's network of contacts and friends. You have mentioned that you want no evidence on winding up, but there needs to be an IT policy which allows a defeated MP scope to rebuild his network of contacts. And a decent IT policy might help a former MP to keep abreast of opportunities to continue in some way some of the work he or she has been doing in Parliament. When a conscientious and knowledgeable MP is defeated, there seems to be no mechanism (other than the House of Lords) by which any expertise he or she might have can continue to be made available in any form to the public. That does seem a waste.

4. The third element of the way one is treated is the new security system which requires one on visiting Parliament to wear a large sticker saying “VISITOR”. A doorman who recognised me said how sorry he was to be inspecting my mobile phone, just before he stuck the large sticker on my coat. While at dinner in Dining Room B one of my erstwhile colleagues ask me if I could remove it, as he felt troubled by the huge gulf that it established between him and me. After an evening like that, one does not have a strong wish to return, however kindly one's friends have been.

5. I do understand that successful MPs do not want to be troubled by the presence of ghosts from previous Parliaments; but there ought to be a way to treat defeated MPs with some element of respect. One MP had organised a post-election dinner for her staff on the Monday after the election, and following her unexpected defeat she was ejected, having been told by the kitchen staff that she could not take up her booking. In other countries, once someone has been an MP one is treated with a certain respect thereafter.

I think Parliament should be willing sometimes to withdraw that assumption, but as it stands at the moment the fate of the defeated MP is for him or her to be treated as if they have disgraced themselves in some way. This attitude also makes it extremely difficult to continue doing any of the work one was engaged in prior to failing in an election, however far removed from the constituency it was and however worthwhile it is in itself.

6. I note that there are now moves to secure some rights for those who have served 10 years in Parliament. These are welcome, but they are still much more geared to those who have been ensconced in Parliament in safe seats than for those whose time in Parliament was always going to be a white-knuckle ride. They also serve who represent marginal seats.

7. I served eight years as an MP. Having never had any declarable interest outside Parliament, because I regarded being an MP as something more than a full time job, I have been unemployed since my defeat. There are not many people who would claim that I lack qualifications, but being an ex-MP is not seen as a qualification by most employers or head-hunters. It has in fact served to cancel out my previous qualifications, to leave me with the prospects of a salary far beneath that which I would have had if I had never been an MP. That has made this period of the life of my family and myself very hard. But the disregard and the operational contempt visited on those who have served it by Parliament has certainly exacerbated the difficulties of adjusting to a life where one has to think afresh about one's *raison d'être*. Parliament could and should change the way it treats those who have served as Members for however short or long a time. Reforming the way ex-MPs access the Palace, thinking again about whether there is some way of showing respect for those who have played a role, and reforming the IT system, would all be places to begin.

MR BILL O'BRIEN

1. My personal experience involving those members of the staff who offered help and advice before the election was to full satisfaction.

2. I had plenty of time to vacate my office and the help in clearing away the surplus material was most adequate and supportive.

3. The advice given on my staff conditions of redundancies, the winding up allowances and pensions was clear and my questions were answered to my full satisfaction.

4. I have no reason to be critical of the advice and service I received.

LINDA PERHAM

ACCESS TO THE PARLIAMENTARY ESTATE

1. On Friday 6 May, ie the day after the General Election, I telephoned the Serjeant at Arms Office to enquire about access to clear my office starting on the following Monday. I was told to go to St Stephens's Entrance and "They would know what to do". When I said that I needed access to Portcullis House because that was where my office was, I was told to go to that entrance, and again: "They would know what to do".

2. My staff arrived before me, and when they presented themselves at Portcullis House, they were sent round to Derby Gate to get their passes re-enabled. It would have been helpful if that information had been conveyed to them beforehand so that they could have gone directly to Derby Gate.

3. However, when I arrived at Portcullis House, while my possessions were for the first time in eight years being put through the security check, I started to explain who I was.

4. The person at the desk did not know what to do, and began telephoning someone. Meanwhile, my pass was taken from me, and, despite my vainly telling the security person that it was disabled, he tried to use it to operate the swing-door entrance gate. It of course did not work.

5. Then three doorkeepers who were standing inside the entrance doors noticed me, and I was allowed through. A discussion then ensued about whether I would be permitted to go up to my office unaccompanied. I told them that my staff were already in the office, which could be reached by ascending the lift only yards from where we were standing. I also pointed out that the sooner I got into my office, the sooner I could clear it. Finally, I was allowed to walk to the lift and go up on my own.

6. When I entered the office, the telephone was ringing, and one of the doorkeepers I had just spoken to told me they had thought about it, and perhaps the best thing for me to do so that I could get around the building in the next few days would be to get my pass re-enabled at Derby Gate. This was the information my staff were given as soon as they arrived!

7. I found this experience upsetting and humiliating, and it was made even worse when I went to the Derby Gate Pass Office on the Wednesday of that week (11 May), having cleared my office, to return my pass and that of my husband. I approached the desk, holding out the passes; the young woman behind the desk looked up, said: "Oh hello, Ms Perham, Congratulations!" I said, with some bitterness, as you might imagine: "It's not congratulations, I lost", handed over the passes and left.

8. Furthermore, during the three very unhappy days I spent clearing out my office, I encountered a number of House staff who made assumptions about my status. Even when I was handing over keys and other items, it seemed to puzzle some staff about why I was doing this. I did not expect that staff would

instantly be furnished with lists of who had and had not been re-elected, but a few basic questions to establish whether I was a former Member, and some sensitivity would have helped at what was a very difficult and traumatic time.

9. My recommendations following my experiences of gaining access to the Parliamentary Estate after a General Election would be:

1. Include in the Dissolution arrangements information an instruction for former (not ex-Members, please!) Members and their staff wishing to gain access to the Parliamentary Estate following a General Election to report in the first instance to a Pass Office to get their passes re-enabled for the period allowed, at present, I believe four days.
 2. On the wider point of access for former Members, I know the Administration Committee has reduced the length of time for entitlement to a "Special Guest" pass from 15 years to 10. I would argue that if the principle for access for former Members has been accepted, then ALL former Members should qualify and the pass be designated "Former Member". In this event, the re-enablement of a former Member's pass would be automatic, and there would be no chance of the sorts of experiences I had during the days following my General Election defeat recurring.
 3. Train House staff to deal sensitively with former Members and not make assumptions.
10. And now the good news . . .

ADMINISTRATIVE ASSISTANCE WITH CLEARING THE OFFICE

11. My staff, and Mrs Miller, in particular, who was in the office for three days, found anything they asked for—boxes, bags, any assistance at all for expediting removal of items was immediately provided. Mrs Miller says she couldn't have asked for better help and that staff were "brilliant".

FORWARDING OF POST/MESSAGES

12. This seemed to work well. My post has been forwarded to the local Party office and thence to my home address.

13. However, as far as emails were concerned, it would have been helpful, if a former Member wished it, for correspondents to be directed to a new email address. A number of people have complained they were unable to contact me and have only managed to do so via the national, regional or local Party offices. Of course, one could assume that former Members would NOT wish to be contacted by former constituents, lobbyists etc, but this problem could be overcome by setting up a read-only forwarding message or re-directing emails to a neutral email address, eg that of a local Party office.

SERVICES FROM THE FEES OFFICE

14. I made an appointment with the Fees Office to discuss Winding Up/IEP/Staffing allowances etc for Monday 9 May. I met Andy Martin and Russell Finer, who covered the details very efficiently and sensitively.

15. I subsequently dealt with Russell Finer and Andy Gibson over the next few months concerning a number of transactions and queries. They were both unfailingly helpful—nothing was too much trouble. I should like to commend both these officers for the way they handled my financial affairs and those of my staff.

IN CONCLUSION

16. As the above demonstrates, I found the services available to me after the General Election generally good, except for the access issues I have described. Having subsequently visited the Palace on a number of occasions since May, I would reiterate my strong feeling that all former Members regardless of length of service deserve the dignity of being able to enter the Parliamentary Estate with a pass.

MR PETER PIKE

CLEARING LONDON OFFICE

1. I would say at the outset that the personal help and support given by the attendant/manager could not have been better. It would have helped if boxes—or their availability—had been made earlier. The time in itself proved to be sufficient but original advice that we would need to be accompanied at all times was neither practicable or acceptable. This was amended on the phone on the final sitting day. Whilst it was said we could not use the refreshment facilities it was not enforced. My mail was at the stage I was clearing my office being forwarded to Burnley but it seemed somewhat petty to say if we collected it we should not open it on the Parliamentary Estate.

STATIONERY

2. I personally found I had far larger stock than I knew when I pulled it all together from my two offices with the postage value probably in excess of £1,000. I asked if this could be returned and as our expenses are now published if the bulk/box items credited to me. This was not possible so those inheriting my offices gained at my expense.

STAFF

3. Not all staff seem to have been advised of help, courses or assistance available to them to help get new employment. It would have helped if all staff had been given details of an individual in Finance and Administration who would give them assistance. After dissolution you cannot sign on House of Commons paper and in the end Benefit Offices would only accept some details from the Finance and Administration Department. It is a difficult time for Members who are retiring and also a difficult time for their staff. It is also a bit much to expect them to type out their redundancy notice and ultimately notifying them in writing what exactly they were going to receive. In addition ex-Members in most cases would initially be involved in the election campaign and many staff were also probably working in their spare time as volunteers.

4. This is at a time when staff are having to deal with files to be closed and papers to be shredded. Files of cases ongoing to be transferred where agreed and appropriate to the new Member. Some files—All Party Groups for example—to be pulled together and transferred to other Members after the election.

POST

5. The staff at all the Post Office Counters always have been and still are very helpful. That said the arrangements for forwarding the mail after the election was very poor. It was not dealt with daily as the first priority was understandably to deal with Members including the new ones. That said, some of the mail was urgent items including many items that needed to be passed on to new Members as and when cases were transferred. Clearly cases that would be ongoing for some time if the constituent was agreeable needed transferring. After 5 August mail has no longer been forwarded. What has happened to it—has it been returned, destroyed or returned to the sender? At that stage most of the mail may well have been unwanted items but this was not the case with all items. I know that some items sent to me at that address and which were of importance, after the date above, have not been received. It is surprising how difficult it is to get people to amend their mail record systems and delete you where applicable or send to your home address. Even some government departments are writing to me as the MP even when in some cases I have returned mailings/briefings etc. British Waterways even congratulated me on my election and told me I have a canal in my constituency.

PENSIONS

6. This may well not be in your remit but it is time Members all had a rule book. I asked for some figures earlier in the year. There were errors and when I queried them the reply was still not correct. Since retiring several queries have been answered in great detail but I have not really had a simple understandable explanation of how the figures have been arrived at.

ALLOWANCES

7. The guidance on claiming the resettlement payment was unclear. It gave the impression that it could not be claimed until all other items had been resolved. Some members of the staff at Finance and Administration were very helpful. That said, some items I raised by letter—some more than once—have never been answered. I have now given up bothering. The final ACA was not paid out for example as indicated at pre-retirement meetings. Also asked some questions relating to 2004–05 tax year have not been clarified so I did not meet the 30 September deadline—I will now have to do as I normally do and go for the 31 January deadline but this year I had wanted to get rid of it.

HANSARD

8. Members who have been having the bound editions do not get the outstanding ones—obviously they are always a few months late. This may affect only a handful of ex-Members and may seem petty but I felt I would mention it.

SUMMARY

9. Overall, things have been adequate and people in the main have been helpful but I make a few suggestions which I hope may be of some help.

SYD RAPSON

1. I retired voluntarily in May 2005 and was able to plan well ahead of time for leaving not only my employment but Parliament. My financial situation was very simple and straightforward so I did not create any surprises or difficulties for the staff when I left office.

2. All my dealings with staff of the House were very good.

3. One problem I had was the length of time it took for the “loaned” equipment ie computers, laptop, printer etc that I had in the constituency office to be collected. Had I not constantly reminded the department responsible about this situation I am sure it would still be in my possession and “lost” to the system. Perhaps someone could carry out an audit and check how much loaned equipment was recovered. I would suggest that as this equipment is usually of no practical use to the House due to its age that it would be more economic to allow these ex-Members to purchase the equipment at a reduced price and therefore alleviate the need for the expense of collection and cleaning of these items.

4. My real reason for writing is to express my intense sadness that my eight years in Parliament are not recognised and I am excluded from any privilege of a Parliamentary Pass. I know that previously the term of service was 15 years and this has been reduced to 10 years but that does not help. I believe that it should be reduced to two terms. Ordinary MPs have no control as to when the Prime Minister chooses to curtail the Parliamentary Term. Had Tony Blair decided to have two full terms of five years I would qualify for a pass, he chose to call both terms early and that affected many of us having the right to return to Parliament as former Members. When the election was called I had no real time to say goodbye to many friends both staff and Members and my eight years of intense closeness with them all was immediately terminated. Why base the qualification on a set number of years? why not on two terms? that would enable many of us that were elected and re-elected to have some benefit for the terms of office we served.

5. Finally the intensity of my sadness is felt even though I chose to retire. I had 29 years of public service as a Councillor prior to my two terms in Parliament and I was also 63 years old. How much worse it must be for Members of younger years who lose their seats unexpectedly.

6. Please consider a change of qualification for a pass to two terms instead of a stated amount of years, and instead of calling it a “special guest pass” to call it a “former Member of Parliament pass”.

MR CHRIS SMITH

1. Thank you for your invitation to former MPs to make submissions about the handling of affairs by the House Administration, following a General Election. My general comment is that I received excellent service. This was partly because I knew well in advance that I was standing down, and we also knew well ahead the likely date of the Election, so it was possible to make good plans beforehand. If the same would be true if a “snap” election were called unexpectedly, I’m not sure. And for those Members who lost their seats rather than voluntarily vacating them, I suspect the experience will have been rather more difficult.

2. I particularly found the staff who dealt with the Winding-up Allowances helpful and able to give good advice. The various headings of funding you have to try and juggle with when you step down are complex, and it was extremely helpful to be dealt with by staff who clearly knew what they were doing, and were anxious to provide us all with a highly professional service. I have nothing but praise for the patience, courtesy and expertise they demonstrated.

REV MARTIN SMYTH

In response to your request, I found the support very good. There was a slight blip over link with my AVCs but no problem with the amount. Since I knew I was leaving I had time to clear the office but did not reckon with the amount I had accumulated. I had appropriate help and advice from all staff who were very courteous. The prompt delivery of sacks and boxes made life easy and their help in transporting boxes for removal from the Palace was appreciated.

SIR TEDDY TAYLOR

1. Obviously there is a difference between those who decide to retire and are therefore able to make a great deal of provision and those who are unexpectedly defeated at elections. As one of the former, I have to say that the staff and arrangements were ideal, particularly the individuals who approached us to assist with moving items out of the office.

2. I have to say that most of the problems that former MPs face are not to do with administration but more with coping with a new lifestyle. I genuinely cannot think of any other arrangements, which it would be reasonable to ask Parliament to make, for retiring MPs.

3. The only real problem I have had since retirement is putting on weight but I am not sure if this is something on which you could offer advice!

GARETH THOMAS

1. I was defeated in the election (ie I was not a retiring Member). I found the “Fees Office” staff to be very helpful and Mr Andy Martin from the Fees Office came to see me in the House a couple of days after the election. He gave me a comprehensive and helpful account of the procedures for claiming the winding up allowance. My experience of the help and advice provided by the staff was very good. I can confirm I was given sufficient time to vacate my office.

2. One criticism I have was that the resettlement grant was not paid sufficiently speedily. After an election I suppose many Members find themselves “stretched” financially. As I recall, although I was informed that I could get the resettlement allowance by the end of May—this did not happen. I had to phone the Fees Office up for an advance payment which they agreed to—of I think half the sum. I received the balance at the end of the following month.

3. It seems to me that receiving the resettlement allowance promptly is crucial to ensuring that defeated Members don’t have too bad a time of it.

4. I can say my former members of staff received redundancy payments, bonuses etc in a very efficient and speedy manner—in that sense I suppose the service was more effective for them than Members. My understanding is that the Fees Office had to ensure that all Members had settled their affairs (signed the requisite forms, paid the Refreshment Dept etc) before a cheque “run” could be authorised.

5. I can confirm that the resettlement allowance is very important for people like myself. I recommenced practice at the Bar in early July—and I was lucky to be able to do this at the age of 50/51. Cash flow has been critical and the resettlement grant was crucial for me. Long may it continue!

MR SIMON THOMAS

1. I was the Plaid Cymru the Party of Wales MP for Ceredigion between February 2000 and the General Election in 2005.

2. Though the post of MP is unique, in this submission I seek to compare my experience post-election with similar experiences in the real job market and knowledge of redundancy situations faced by others, such as my constituents.

LONDON OFFICE

3. The time allocated to vacate Westminster is completely inadequate, particularly for Members living at considerable distances from London. Many of my own files remain in colleagues’ offices.

4. Help should be given to ex-Members to:

- Remove material.
- Destroy correspondence in London.

5. Consideration should be given to allowing ex-Members limited security access to their old offices post-election so that they can be cleared out. Members of smaller parties may not have colleagues who can sign them in to the building and accompany them all day in order that this work can be carried out. Alternatively, the House should simply arrange for offices to be packed up and shipped back to the constituency.

DATA PROTECTION

6. The advice received was confusing. I took the decision that the safest course of action was to destroy all correspondence. This created some dismay among constituents.

7. The advice relating to material stored on computers was that the PCD would remove computers and clean them. To date, I have received no contact whatsoever from PCD and parliamentary computers remain in the constituency. They are stored only on the sufferance of colleagues and I have no control over them.

LEGAL CONTRACTS

8. Members enter into binding legal agreements to serve their constituents, for example in renting offices or leasing office equipment such as photocopiers. I was able to use the winding-up allowance to buy my exit from such contracts. However, consideration should be given to providing legal advice to ex-Members and ensuring they and their staff face no penalties for having contracted liabilities to serve constituents.

STAFF

9. The advice received on making staff redundant and payments was reasonably clear. There should, however, be advice available to staff regarding preparation of CVs, job searching, etc. Any other employer would provide such information for staff being made redundant.

10. Indeed, it appears archaic that now staff are employed directly by the House and not by Members, that ex-Members are required to decide upon redundancy payments and other employment matters.

MEMBERS

11. I can think of no decent employer who would abandon ex-employees in the way the House turns it back on ex-Members.

12. Ex-Members should be given:

- Pensions advice.
- Advice on any entitlement to benefits.
- Help with job seeking, CVs, interview techniques etc.

13. Even a Member serving just one term will have been out of the job market for several years and in any comparable profession facing redundancy would receive support and advice in changing careers.

14. Another small, but appropriate, consideration would be for retiring and defeated Members to receive a letter from the Speaker on behalf of the House thanking them for their work.

OTHER MATTERS

15. Though payments to ex-Members are outside the scope of this inquiry, I would like to bring to the Committee's attention the lack of clarity regarding the interaction of payments with other entitlements. From my own experience, it appears that there is no-one in DWP who knows how the resettlement grant should be treated with regard to entitlement to JSA and payments of NI. This would be simple to sort out and agree so that in the future ex-Members could approach the DWP with confidence.

16. It is particularly galling that the weeks—it could be up to three months—that an ex-Member must spend prioritising the redundancy of his or her staff are not taken into account by the DWP and in effect, according to the current interpretation of regulations, ex-Members are considered to have been in employment during that time even though they are neither paid nor entitled to the resettlement grant.

BRIAN WHITE

I made provision for removing most of my personal stuff from my House of Commons office prior to the election so there was no problem in just telling the staff to bin everything in the office which I would have used had I been re-elected but was of no use when I wasn't. That side of it went very smoothly and I returned keys, passes, season tickets etc with no problems.

The main problem area was the lack of communication about how to shut down the computer system and leaving PDVN. We were told that we would have a month and then they would tell us what to do. Given that I needed to switch the broadband at home from the Parliamentary network into a business one I found the lack of information frustrating and then when the service was withdrawn it was done with no notice which caused a problem with my Internet Service Provider which took several weeks to resolve. Also the computers in my office were shutdown in June as per the instructions that PDVN would cease after one month. We asked what would happen to the machines and were told they would be collected. They never were and we waited and waited and this was despite several phone calls asking what was happening. Eventually when the office was cleared they were disposed of but clearer guidelines on what to do and when to do it would have been appreciated. I do not blame the help desk for this as it was evident that they had not been told what was happening.

Also the switch off of the telcoms side of the office was not smooth and despite calls to the help desk they were not clear what was happening. Eventually we gave up and just arranged the changes to suit ourselves. I have no idea whether this was the correct thing to do or not but was the only option when you could not get full information from the House authorities.

A number of people have tried to get hold of me since the election who only had my Commons email. They eventually found me through the Labour party webpages but providing a directory on the Parliamentary web pages giving details for contacting ex-members (where they want it and provide the information) would be helpful.

We had a couple of leases for equipment where the time frame stretched beyond the close down period with the result that I ended up paying for these out of my own pocket. The amounts were not vast but it does highlight an area where the current arrangements are deficient. Obviously there is the danger of abuse but where this situation occurs it would be better to be able to agree payments with the House authorities rather than simply having a rigid time cut off.

Whilst the issue of security of the Palace is important I think that the question of the 10 year rule for ex-members to qualify for a pass to visit the House should be looked at again. It should be replaced either by a separate category for ex-MPs which a previous Member automatically qualifies for by virtue having served a term or if it is thought that some time period is still required then at least by replacing the 10 years with two Parliaments.

Memoranda submitted by the House of Commons Administration

Memorandum from the Board of Management Review of Post-Election Services for new Members (October 2005)

INTRODUCTION AND METHODOLOGY

1. The views of Members and the House administration have been gathered on the services provided for new Members after the May 2005 general election. All 123 new Members were sent a brief questionnaire which allowed them to rate the service they received and submit comments. 74 were returned, giving a response rate of 60%. These questionnaires were followed up with structured interviews. The comments attributed to Members in this report draw on written comments from the questionnaires and points raised during the interviews.

2. The House authorities separately examined how well the arrangements worked from their own perspective. Departments of the House analysed the lessons they thought they should learn from the experience.

3. This report:

- presents the findings of the survey of new Members; and
- reconciles Members' concerns with the analysis already undertaken by the House administration.

Note: 58 new Members indicated a willingness to be interviewed, but the staff conducting the interviews received few responses to their requests to a representative sample of Members, even when these were followed-up. Only four in-depth interviews were therefore conducted, although every Member interviewed raised very similar points and these were consistent with the comments in the questionnaires. The detailed comments in the questionnaire responses actually removed the need for a large number of detailed interviews.

OVERALL

4. 84% of new Members surveyed were satisfied with the reception facilities and services.

We asked new Members to respond to the statement, "Overall, I was satisfied with the reception facilities and services; all my immediate needs were addressed." 42% of respondents agreed strongly; 42% tended to agree; 8% tended to disagree; 4% disagreed strongly and 4% did not express a view.

5. New Members appreciated the friendliness, helpfulness and professionalism of House staff.

Over 10 new Members commented specifically on the quality of the welcome they received from staff. One wrote: "House of Commons staff were unfailingly courteous, knowledgeable & helpful!"

6. Delays in providing IT equipment and allocating office space caused new Members most dissatisfaction.

Although new Members appreciated the hot-desking facility (though with reservations—see below), more than a dozen Members complained that the time taken to allocate offices was too long, slightly fewer complained that the provision of IT equipment had not met their expectations or business need.

LETTER FROM THE CLERK OF THE HOUSE

7. New Members were overwhelmingly satisfied with the letter from the Clerk of the House which was delivered to them by the returning officer. They thought it could be improved by including a map showing entrances to the Parliamentary estate, making clear any dates fixed by Whips for new Members' first attendance, and providing Whips' contact details.

95% of survey respondents agreed strongly or tended to agree with the statement, "The letter from the Clerk of the House, delivered by the returning officer, was welcoming and helpful." The letter included information about when and how new Members could attend Parliament for the first time. It also advertised a password-protected website which new Members could use to obtain further information, including hotel details. Unfortunately, the website address was misprinted on the letter. The House authorities took steps to notify new Members of the correct address, but this error still caused some new Members problems. In follow-up interviews, new Members suggested that the inclusion of a map showing the buildings and entrances to the Parliamentary estate would help those unfamiliar with Westminster find, for example, St Stephen's Entrance. They also thought there might be scope for

better co-ordination with the Whips so that the letter included not only the times and dates of opening of the reception area, but also any times and dates on which various Whips wished their new Members to gather, as well as office contact numbers for the Whips' offices.

MEMBER'S HANDBOOK AND OTHER INFORMATION FOR NEW MEMBERS

8. The introductory pack of booklets provided the right level of information for new Members and answered most of their questions. New Members sometimes felt over-loaded with information. They found information better when it was consolidated across House Departments, and when duplication was avoided. New Members welcome check-lists which help them ensure that they have done the right things by the correct deadlines. Members who attended briefing sessions found them useful, but there was no significant consensus on when they might be held to maximise relevance and attendance.

88% of survey respondents agreed strongly or tended to agree with the statement, "The introductory pack of booklets provided the right amount of information and answered most of my questions. 5% tended to disagree; 3% disagreed strongly; and 4% had no opinion or did not respond. Several respondents commented that they had received too much information at the start, and that this should be staggered over a longer period. Those Members interviewed welcomed the Q&A format of the Members' Handbook, and believed that hard copy was the best format for introductory information. As one Member pointed out: "You don't know what you don't know."

One interviewee suggested a check-list of things a new Member should have received and know by the end of the first week, and a longer-term check-list supplemented by chasing from the administration for crucial forms. One Member was alarmed to find that she only met by chance the deadline for ensuring her staff were paid in their first month; she felt this was an important deadline for Members who had just engaged new staff, and that they should be reminded of it by the House administration. Another suggestion was that all the forms which a new Member should complete and return should be consolidated into a single, clearly-labelled pack; otherwise, they were received from different sources and got lost with other non-essential papers. The Department of Finance and Administration is due to report shortly to the Advisory Panel on Members' Allowances on a review of the services it provides to Members at the election, including information on allowances.

We asked the Members we interviewed about their experience of the briefing sessions organised for new Members by various House departments. Those who had attended them found them useful, although they recognised that there was a balance to be struck between holding them at an early enough stage for them to be useful and a late enough stage for Members to be available. Two Members suggested that the time around the "second week" (ie after swearing-in but either side of the State Opening) had been less busy for them and was the most convenient time.

NEW MEMBERS' RECEPTION AREA

9. New Members were very satisfied with the help available at the reception area. Some believed that they received so much information at the reception area that it would be better to prioritise it more clearly, or repeat the event later, perhaps in July. Members attach considerable importance to being able to function as Members from day one, and they thought the reception area should focus on achieving that.

81% of Members surveyed agreed strongly and 14% tended to agree with the statement "The reception area was easy to find and I was able to talk to staff who could help me." Members' comments suggested that they found it useful to have information available in one place, even if they did feel slightly over-loaded on their first day. Some suggested repeating the event at a later stage, or keeping the stalls available for a longer period.

In response to the concern about information overload, we asked in our interviews with new Members what they wanted to know in the first day, in the first week, in the first month and at a later stage. There was general agreement among interviewees that they wanted to get up and running on the first day. This was supported by other new Members' written comments about the availability of IT equipment and offices (see below), and meant that they thought that the reception area for day one should focus on practicalities: pass issuing; immediate distribution of IT equipment and very basic training; issuing of phone numbers and voicemail instructions (formal voicemail training was considered excessive); instructions about how to collect post (at least one Member reported not being told about the arrangement, and ended up with a back-log as a result); and the issuing of a single sheet detailing the programme of introductory events in the following days and weeks.

One improvement suggested by the Members we interviewed was the distribution of maps of the estate and a brief tour of the Palace on their first day. They needed to learn quickly how to find their way around the principal floor in particular. This could be combined with practical advice, for example about quick routes to the Chamber, and the location of restaurants. (One Member reported in July that she had only just—and by accident—discovered the Tea Room and the Members' Dining Room.)

HOT-DESKING, OFFICE ACCOMMODATION AND OFFICE SERVICES

10. Over half of the new Members who responded reported using the hot-desking facilities, and a significant proportion said they found them useful. However, more Members commented on shortcomings of the hot-desking arrangements than praised their usefulness. Members felt some users were hogging computers, and that there were not enough computers or printers. Some Members thought the concept of hot-desking was inappropriate for their work because it did not afford them any privacy or because they could not have files close to hand as they worked. Members also thought that there needed to be more telephones at hot-desks. Some Members made clear that the provision of hot-desks did not remove the need for a quiet, private space, for example for work or for media interviews.

35% of survey respondents agreed strongly with the statement "I made use of the hot-desking facilities provided". 20% tended to agree. 23% disagreed strongly. Taken together with the written comments, this suggests that a significant number of new Members found the arrangements unsatisfactory. New Members reported that the hot-desks were often full. When we discussed this further at interview, we were told that some Members (and indeed researchers) hogged hot-desk PCs and would log-in for the whole day, leaving papers around the PC during periods of absence. This prevented other users from logging in. Some Members used PCs in the Library instead, and the House authorities recognise that additional hot-desks could be sited in other rooms after the next election.

Some Members commented that there was not enough printing capacity at the hot-desks. They reported queues of people waiting to log on to those PCs which had printers attached (which were themselves often hogged by forthright users). Several new Members also commented that the access to telephones in the hot-desk area was too limited, and that there needed to be more.

A significant number of new Members suggested either that hot-desking was inappropriate or inadequate for their needs or that they would have been better served by the allocation of temporary offices. One Member commented: "GIVE US TEMPORARY OFFICES!!!! Having to use hot desks, clear our desks at night & unable to set up filing at the very moment we're besieged with correspondence, briefings emails, etc is hopeless. Even if they are just till the summer recess." Other Members pointed to the need for confidentiality when dealing with constituents, and the need for privacy and quiet when conducting media interviews. One Member suggested partitioning Committee rooms and allocating them as temporary offices for Members.

11. A significant number of respondents felt it had taken too long to provide them with permanent offices. They generally recognised that office allocation was the responsibility of the Whips. Some Members considered that this delay, together with delays in the supply of IT equipment, had severely constrained their ability to serve their constituents. Several new Members "squatted" with returning Members who already had access to an office.

As reported above there were complaints that it took too long to allocate offices. Some Members' comments suggested that they could understand the need to wait one week, or perhaps two, but that four was too long. The following comments were typical:

"The situation on late room and IT allocation have seriously marred my ability to service constituents."

"It is 8 June and I am still not yet in an office of my own—this really does need to change."

"There is no substitute for a proper office and it is really hard to believe that the Whips can't sort it out more quickly between them!"

Some Members sought out opportunities to share the offices of Members who already had offices, although this was not ideal. One Member commented that everything takes longer without an office.

12. A significant number of respondents felt that the arrangements for the supply of IT equipment did not meet their business needs. They thought that it took too long to deliver laptops in particular, and that communication with new Members about supply delays was inadequate. The House authorities acknowledge that the staff involved in taking orders from Members need to be aware of delivery times and make them clear. Some new Members suggested that a stockpile of used equipment should be ready for temporary issue after the election to reduce any inconvenience caused by delivery delays.

As reported above, around a dozen respondents complained that the provision of IT equipment had not met their expectations or business need. Of these, one of the most common complaints was the delay in supplying laptops. Some new Members also felt that they had not been updated on progress with their IT orders. One said, "Follow-up by PCD was poor: after initial briefings where we ordered our PC hardware we still have not been informed of progress on our orders." Another suggested that the IT helpdesk needed to be "more responsive". One Member suggested that equipment should be surrendered by retiring Members at the time of the election and re-issued, perhaps temporarily, to new Members to attenuate the inconvenience caused by delays in the delivery of new equipment, which may be beyond the control of the House authorities.

CONCLUSIONS AND LESSONS LEARNED

13. New Members appreciate the well-organised way that both the House authorities and Whips provide them with information. The immediate allocation of fully equipped offices is the change which would most improve their working arrangements. The House authorities and Accommodation Whips should continue to work towards this aim, while recognising that it is not achievable given the constraints which exist in the type, location and amount of the accommodation available.

14. The House authorities recognise that it took too long to move new Members into their offices after the 2005 election. In part, this happened because an attempt was made, in conjunction with the Accommodation Whips to re-organise offices into party blocks at the election, as well as to provide a balance of accommodation across the parties. This involved additional office removals, including some returned Members. Any future re-balancing will seek to avoid these additional moves. Prior to the next election, a target for moving new Members into fully functioning offices will be agreed with the Accommodation Whips and planning and resourcing will be undertaken to achieve this.

15. Hot-desking arrangements, even if improved, will never meet fully new Members' desire for privacy, peace and permanency. Nevertheless, the House authorities will seek to ensure that future hot-desking is improved. Possible methods might include:

- increasing the number of PCs, advertising those available in the Library and investigating other rooms in the Palace for temporary desking;
- increasing the number of printers;
- ensuring that the existing arrangement where some PCs are for Members only are policed effectively;
- automatically logging-out users from hot-desk PCs which remain inactive for a certain period (to prevent hogging of hot-desks);
- providing more telephones on hot desks;
- providing rooms which new Members can use for media interviews; and
- providing lockable file storage for each new Member near the hot-desk facilities.

16. In 2005, some new Members "squatted" in returning Members' offices until their offices were ready. The House authorities should investigate supporting this arrangement better, particularly in respect of IT and telephone services. If this arrangement were to be formalised, the assistance of the Accommodation Whips would be necessary for its smooth operation.

17. The House authorities accept that new Members need to know accurately when their personalised IT equipment will be delivered and that this was not achieved in 2005. Planning for future elections will address this issue.

18. The New Members' Reception Area was a very successful element of the recent reception arrangements. A similar facility should be provided for future elections. Lessons learned are that the House authorities and Whips should liaise closely about the content and timing. New Members' immediate concerns were practical; pass, PC, 'phone, post and pay-roll. This should form the basis for the reception area. Each Member should be given a checklist of things to do within the first day, week and month. This should include important deadlines (eg for the return of forms to ensure staff are paid in the first month). The House authorities should provide all forms which Members must complete in a single pack, with the deadlines repeated. The House authorities recognise that new Members' time is at a premium, and should consider in light of new Members' comments whether some essential information would be better provided in writing (eg basic IT and voicemail instructions).

19. New Members prefer to receive information in writing, but it needs to be consolidated across House Departments. The House authorities should therefore consider reducing the scope of Departments represented at the Reception Area, but expanding the Member's Handbook so it includes supplementary information. Alternatively, an information fair could be organised for the following week to separate the administrative arrangements from information about the functioning of the House.

20. There is little duplication in or conflict between the information for new Members provided by the House authorities and that provided by Whips, but the 2005 experience suggests there may be some gaps, notably in helping new Members navigate the Palace. The House authorities should consider how they could assist new Members to orientate themselves in the period immediately after they join. Options might include offering every new Member a brief, business-oriented tour of the principal floor on their first day, providing a check list of locations and directions or providing a guide service for a short period for those Members who required it.

21. Members appreciate the Clerk of the House's letter to newly elected Members which is handed over by every returning officer. It provides information about arriving at Westminster, and in the future should include a map of entrances to the estate. There is still scope for better co-ordination with the Whips: they might welcome an opportunity to announce via the Clerk's letter to each Member a date for each Party's new Members to assemble at Westminster, for example. Shortly before the election, the House authorities need to remind returning officers to hand over the Clerk's letter to the newly elected Member.

Memorandum from the Serjeant at Arms

(November 2005)

1. At the end of the discussion on Tuesday 8 November the Chairman was kind enough to invite further written submission about issues that had been raised in evidence. I hope that the following supplementary information is helpful to the Committee in its inquiry.

2. I think it would be useful to group those issues raised by the Committee into categories, to deal those categories in the rough order in which they present themselves in the run-up to and post-election periods and then to cover IT matters.

RETIRING MEMBERS

3. The arrangements for Members not standing at the General Election are given at Annex A to the booklet "*General Election Arrangements—Rules for Members*" published in April 2005 by the Clerk of the House with the agreement of the Speaker. A copy of the relevant parts of this booklet was circulated to the Committee. In general they appear to have worked very well. The overall thrust behind the arrangements is that retiring Members should vacate the Parliamentary estate no later than a week after the House is formally dissolved. Typically this would then give some two weeks before polling day for the accommodation formerly occupied by the retiring Members to be refurbished and redecorated where necessary. Should a retiring Member's circumstances prevent them clearing their office within that timescale then every consideration is given to providing the necessary extension of time. Some retiring Members, for whatever reason, do not allocate a high priority to clearing their parliamentary offices. In these circumstances, if the Member is not able to come to Westminster then, with the Member's permission, Serjeant at Arms' staff will pack the office in the Member's absence and arrange for the contents to be transported, at the Member's expense, to wherever the Member requires. This is a measure of last resort. Serjeant at Arms' staff are always available to assist a Member to pack.

DEFEATED MEMBERS

4. The Staff do appreciate that a Member who has lost their seat will feel particularly upset at this time and they do try to act as sympathetically as possible under the circumstances. Nevertheless, the evidence given to the Committee shows that this does not always happen and clearly we can plan to do better in a number of areas:

- (a) **Information for Members who are defeated**—This is an important point. Although the arrangements for defeated Members are contained in the booklet *General Election Arrangements—Rules for Members* it is clear that this information, along with details of the other services which departments of the House can provide to assist the defeated Member could be presented in a more helpful way. Methods of doing this both before and after an election will be investigated. This will also help in briefing staff and ensuring uniformity of treatment for defeated Members.
- (b) **Passes**—all defeated Members' passes were re-enabled on the day after polling day, along with those of new and returning Members. In future this process will be managed much more easily and effectively when a revised access system is agreed by JCOS.
- (c) **Use of Parliamentary offices whilst winding down at Westminster**—The current arrangements envisage that a defeated Member will be able to leave Westminster one week after polling day. In practice most defeated Members achieve this. However, in cases where there are difficulties, consideration is always given to extending the time. Assistance is always available to Members who are leaving the House from the Office Keepers and their teams. Members who require to move papers and equipment out of Westminster can be given details of removal companies who will do this. The costs can be reclaimed out of the Winding up Allowance.
- (d) **The use of e-mail and telephone facilities**—These arrangements were applied in accordance with the dissolution arrangements without any significant difficulties being reported at the time. However, former Members have said it would be helpful if emails sent to their parliamentary address after their account has been closed received an automatic response explaining that they are no longer a Member of Parliament and giving their new contact details. This facility will be investigated for the next General Election. The availability of a greater level of telephone services while defeated Members remain on the Parliamentary Estate will also be investigated.
- (e) **Mail Forwarding**—Royal Mail provide a redirection service to former Members for personal mail for three months from the date of the election. Other mail is redirected to the Member who was returned at the General Election for the same constituency. After three months all mail is redirected to the new Member.

5. Unfortunately, unless and until it is possible to find an arrangement which removes the pressure to make defeated Members' offices available for the new Parliament this will always be a difficult area.

NEW MEMBERS

6. **Joining information**—the suggestions that the letter which is handed to a newly elected Member by the Returning Officer should contain brief information on accommodation arrangements and also details of induction arrangements by both party and House Service is a good one and will be investigated.
7. **The content and structure of the induction package** was the subject of a number of comments. These will be considered and fresh proposals drawn up for the next election. This will be done in consultation and collaboration with party managers and the Committee.
8. **Accommodation, IT and telephone availability**—The major issue for incoming Members was clearly their accommodation and support facilities on arrival.
9. On this occasion “drop-in” type accommodation was provided in the five Upper Committee Corridor rooms. Each room was configured with eight desk spaces with connection points for laptops, as well as a printer, fax and a single stand-alone PC. Each desk had a telephone. Similar network connectivity and a printer was provided at for up to 10 positions in the Chess Room. The 16 PCs in the Members’ Library rooms and between 10 and 16 PCs (depending on other commitments) in the e-library were also available. Each new Member was offered a locker in which to store their papers and laptop.
10. Given the current accommodation constraints it is not possible to handle Members’ accommodation in the brisk and businesslike way which was suggested by some of the witnesses. In practice, it is only after the needs of Ministers and longer serving Members are taken into account that the accommodation available for the Whips to allocate to new Members becomes clear. Given the realities, there were a number of proposals for measures which would provide new Members with a better immediate base and support facilities on arrival. The practicality of these will be considered carefully and appropriate measures put in place before the next election. In particular, the suggestion that more Committee Rooms should be taken out of circulation and partitioned to provide initial individual accommodation for new Members does not, on first examination, appear to be practicable without having a significant impact on Members’ ability to hold large meetings in the weeks after the election. Increasing the density of desk accommodation on the Upper Committee Corridor would also require work to increase network connectivity in the area.
11. **Speed of office moves**—The number of Members’ moves in the weeks following the 2005 General Election was as follows:

	<i>Re-elected Members</i>	<i>New Members</i>
Fri 6 May	1	—
w/c 9 May	16	—
w/c 16 May	21	3
w/c 23 May	30	1
w/c 30 May	30	21
w/c 6 June	33	34
w/c 13 June	28	34
w/c 20 June	19	29
w/c 27 June	—	1
Total	178	123

Note: The first three weeks following the election were unusual in that the Accommodation Whips were still discussing the division of the accommodation between parties with the aim of achieving a more even split across the Palace and outbuildings. This effectively delayed the allocation process by the same three weeks. Had that not occurred all new Members would have been moved into their new offices within about four weeks of polling day.

OTHER ISSUES

12. **Passes for former Members**—it was suggested that all former Members should be issued with former Members’ passes, allowing them limited access to the House and its facilities. When this issue last came before the former Administration Committee it was decided to reduce the qualifying period from 15 years to 10 years but not further. The Joint Committee on Security directed, when advising that MSPs should not be given passes, that the overall number of pass holders should be controlled. The Serjeant at Arms will await the Committee’s recommendation on this matter.

13. **Re-crediting former Members for stationery which is returned**—considerable amounts of unused stationery are collected from former Members at every General Election. The practical implications of implementing the suggestion that returned stationery should be re-credited to former Members’ accounts will be investigated.

IT MATTERS

14. The issues that arose in the Committee fell into two broad categories.

15. First, the speed with which equipment was made available to new Members, how these delays lead to increased customer enquiries and in turn a deterioration in customer service. Second, the range of services made available to new Members, both on arrival and longer term. This response will address both and comment on some of the other points that arose. A separate response is being prepared to the paper by Grant Shapps MP.

SPEED OF DELIVERY

16. The Committee has heard how new Members received a laptop computer, telephone number and voicemail box on day one. Initial user training was either given at that time or a booking taken for training in the future if requested. Members were also able to order equipment having viewed samples of the equipment available. The turnaround time for orders was stated as not exceeding 28 days and PCD expected to come well within that timeframe. In the event a number of factors lead to this not being met.

- (a) **The EU procurement exercise took longer than expected**, which meant that detailed arrangements for the ordering, build and supply of the equipment were still being finalised in the run up to the General Election.
- (b) **The procurement resulted in a change of supplier** which meant that more time was needed to set-up the contract.
- (c) **The delays in allocating offices** meant that many Members deferred ordering their equipment, or could not take receipt of their equipment, until a room had been allocated.
- (d) **The resulting delays led to large numbers of enquiries**. Although the team responsible for the ordering had been allocated extra resource to meet the additional demands that were expected after the General Election this was not sufficient to handle the additional work generated by the status enquiries that arose.

17. Conducting an EU procurement resulted in good quality equipment at highly competitive prices being secured. The process however, took longer than planned and this is at the root of the problems that were subsequently experienced. The lesson to be learned is to ensure that the renewal of the contract is started well in advance of an anticipated General Election. The timing of this exercise may also prove difficult since the timing of a General Election is not known and officials should not be seen to be anticipating it. The letting of a contract too far in advance of a General Election may also lead to a lack of clarity about new requirements and technology.

18. PCD is revising the ordering and delivery process to improve the service to Members.

SCOPE OF THE SERVICE

On arrival

19. The plan was that new Members would be able to use their laptops issued on day one, supplemented in drop-in areas by networked printers, faxes and a single PC, to meet their computing needs until an office was allocated and their other equipment delivered. This proved optimistic. In future PCD will ensure that more networked PCs, printers, and faxes are made available.

20. Unlike the last General Election in 2001, a number of new Members arrived with an existing dependency on IT based on the use of their own equipment. This was not anticipated and the Parliamentary IT network was not configured to allow this. In future PCD will ensure that new Members also have access to temporary ADSL and, if viable, wireless access to the public internet.

Longer-term

21. To date the policy agreed by both Houses, relevant Member committees, and reflected in the SSRB recommendation has been to move towards a standardised IT environment. This has brought about increased network stability and improved levels of support. It also simplifies for Members the process of selecting, installing and looking after their IT equipment. Whilst it is clear this approach has worked well for and been welcomed by the majority of Members there remain a few who find it too restrictive. The following schedule answers the specific points that arose in the evidence given.

- (a) **Wireless and Bluetooth disabled on standard laptop equipment**: These functions will continue to be disabled on the standard laptops to avoid any confusion for new users, but will be enabled upon request for any user who wishes to use them.
- (b) **Wireless and cabled access to the Parliamentary Network and Internet**: PCD are currently working on a pilot project to deliver wireless connectivity to the Parliamentary Network to communal areas within the Parliamentary Estate. These areas are expected to include the Portcullis House atrium. Providing wireless services beyond these “communal” areas is not within current plans since it is

known from past experience that wireless reception in many areas is poor or non-existent. The provision of direct wireless access to the internet, akin to that available in business centres and airport lounges, will be included within the scope of the above work.

OTHER ISSUES

Flexibility

22. PCD are looking again at the options of allowing non-standard equipment to connect to the internet over the Parliamentary Network. All previous technical advice has been to deny this access on security grounds.

23. It would be possible to provide more flexibility in the specification of the IT equipment supplied for Members' computing if approval to do so were obtained. However, to do this retrospectively might be difficult and costly.

Voice mail capacity

24. Voice mail capacity can be increased, subject to there being sufficient quantified demand to make a satisfactory business case.

Recovery of old equipment

25. The recovery of old equipment is being hastened. This process will be re-examined before the current equipment reaches the end of its expected life.

Memorandum from the Department of Finance and Administration

(November 2005)

1. At the end of the evidence session on Tuesday 8 November the Chairman invited further written submissions from officers of the House about issues raised in the evidence. The Department for Finance and Administration (DFA) welcomes the opportunity to provide additional information to the Committee.

OVERVIEW

2. The Department was very pleased to be able to pass on to its staff the many kind references by new Members and former Members about our work over the election period. It is important for management to be able to share the plaudits from Members as well as to ask staff to address the weaknesses in the services provided.

3. Customer expectations always rise and the periodicity of elections means that we cannot be complacent and simply adopt what was done on the previous occasion. Improving significantly on the good practice in 2001 was the Department's objective for 2005.

4. As for all departments of the House, a general election is a significant challenge, requiring the implementation of new procedures and generating extra workloads, whilst much of "business as usual" carries on. The following statistics from 2005 are a good illustration of this:

<i>Core numbers</i>	
New MPs	123
Not returning MPs	136
New Members' staff	565
Redundant MPs' staff	419 (permanent only)

Advice and guidance

"Exit" interviews with retiring Members	75 (86%)
"Exit" interviews with defeated Members	31 (62%, excludes ad hoc advice)
Calls received by the General Election Team (dealing with non-returning Members only)	4,160
Letters sent by the General Election Team	350

<i>Payments</i>	
Winding Up Allowance	958 (total expenditure £3.7 million, including salary and additional redundancy payments)
Statutory redundancy	355 (expenditure £0.8 million)
Resettlement Grant	136 (expenditure £5.3 million)

NEW MEMBERS

5. The general perception is that new Members considered the DFA services to be good or very good. Considerable time and effort was invested in the new Members' reception in Portcullis House. The Department sees these initial dealings with Members as critical to ensuring that the essentials of pay, pensions and allowances are covered early in their tenure.

6. Two particular points were mentioned at the evidence session. First, **advice on staffing arrangements** such as recruitment. The Department took a lot of effort and care in this matter. We tailored our initial employment advice to the needs of new Members and the likely pressures they might face. Particular emphasis was given to advice around short-term employment contracts. In addition, we organised four employment law seminars hosted by an external expert on employment in the small business context. Unfortunately these were poorly attended with fewer than 20 new Members taking an interest. Some thought is necessary about the organisation and timing of similar events in the future.

7. Secondly, new Members mentioned problems **contacting the Department**. A new, single helpdesk was set-up in late March as a contact point for the majority of customers, including Members' staff and suppliers. Unfortunately, teething problems with the helpdesk's introduction meant that the service fell below the standards we had hoped to deliver. This should not reoccur in the future.

FORMER MEMBERS

8. The principal lesson for the Department was that the **key guidance** for the administration of the relevant allowances was developed and approved by the House too close to the General Election. The relevant document, *Pay and allowances for Members who leave the House at a General Election*, was published at the end of March 2005 after it had been approved earlier that month by the Members Estimate Committee (MEC). This was too late for many of the Members who had already taken the decision to stand down and had made early contact with the Department. The inconvenience was in some cases made worse by the fact that some Members had inadvertently been given incorrect advice in certain aspects of the arrangements by DFA at their "exit" interview.

9. This was the first time that comprehensive guidance was produced in a single accessible document for Members for a general election. It was generally very well received because it covered not only the processes by which the allowances could be claimed, but also the way in which the redundancy of staff needed to be handled from a personnel perspective. This guidance needs to be reviewed and signed off by Committees of the House well in advance of the next election

10. Any review of the guidance should look at the **redundancy provisions** for Members' staff. The MEC considered in detail and approved the redundancy arrangements, including the provision for discretionary matched payments from the Winding Up Allowance, over and above staff's contractual statutory entitlement. Taken together with notice pay and final performance bonuses, it was possible for long serving staff to receive a termination payment of about £20,000. Generally, therefore, the redundancy provisions provided both flexibility for Members and adequate compensation for staff who lost their jobs. However, this was a somewhat complex area and simplification of the arrangements and guidance is desirable. An alternative redundancy procedure was suggested at the evidence session and this will be investigated.

11. The Department aimed to pay the **Resettlement Grant** by 30 June. Three-quarters of former Members received their Grant on or before this date. In July, DFA staff contacted Members who had not applied for the Grant to remind them to do so. All but a handful of cases were settled by 31 July.

12. The Green Book and the General Election guidance document are both clear that the Grant should only be paid once the former Member had met any outstanding liabilities to the House, suppliers and staff. Before the Grant was paid, DFA asked former Members to confirm that they had planned and made arrangements for the redundancy of their staff and also liaised with other departments of the House in case of other financial liabilities. In certain cases this proved not to be entirely straightforward and some delay ensued.

13. The **Winding Up Allowance** has always operated on the basis of **reimbursement** as set out in the Green Book; that is, Members were required to settle any invoice themselves and then seek repayment of the cost from the Department. Generally this worked well, but there were a few instances where Members requested payment direct to a supplier. In exceptional cases—for instance, where a bill was unusually large—the Department tried to respond flexibly by agreeing to pay the supplier direct, knowing that this ran the risk of complaints about inconsistent practice.

14. There is an administrative cost to allowing direct payments rather than operating on a reimbursement basis. However, whether the balance was right will be considered as the guidance booklet is reviewed.

15. Former Members did seem to be in something of a **“benefit trap”** whilst winding down their offices. House officials will liaise with the Department for Work and Pensions about the issue with a view to seeing whether guidance can be agreed for jobcentre staff.

16. A number of **pensions** problems were identified in the evidence. These tended to be very specific to the individual concerned. Pensions is a notoriously complex area and the Parliamentary Contributory Pension Fund (the Members’ pension scheme) and the supplementary scheme for Ministers and other office-holders is probably more complex than most. The House is moving towards a fully professional Pensions Unit which should over time improve the administration and management of pension matters.

Conclusion

17. The Department is keen to learn the lessons from 2005 and welcomes the Committee’s inquiry. As indicated above, the Department will be reviewing issues raised in the course of this inquiry.

18. Separately, we are conducting our own review in respect of the Parliamentary allowances which will be reported shortly to the Advisory Panel on Members Allowances.

Previous Reports from the Administration Committee

The following reports have been produced in the present Parliament.

Session 2005–06

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