



House of Commons  
Administration Committee

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# Information and Communication Technology Services for Members

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**Second Report of Session 2006–07**

*Report, together with formal minutes and  
written evidence*

*Ordered by The House of Commons  
to be printed 24 April 2007*

**HC 498**  
Published on 8 May 2007  
by authority of the House of Commons  
London: The Stationery Office Limited  
£0.00

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## Summary

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The Parliamentary Information and Communications Technology Department (PICT) was established in January 2006, bringing together ICT staff and other resources from across both Houses of Parliament into a unified organisation. Our focus in this Report is on those services provided for Members of the House of Commons and their staff. In the context of a significant undertone of dissatisfaction with these services, we want to ensure that processes are in place to enable Members' services to be delivered efficiently and to an agreed standard, and to manage Members' often divergent ICT preferences.

In this Report, we describe how ICT services are currently provided and outline the work undertaken by Members and others in the recent past to create the current system of provision (*Part One*); and we seek to identify best practice elsewhere and possible points of comparison with the way services are provided in Parliament (*Part Two*). We then look at how Members' emerging requirements can be plugged into PICT's strategic planning, and how PICT could make itself better aware of Members' evolving use of ICT, in part through a new forum for investigating possible improvements to the existing service (*Part Three*).

We then go on to tackle the issues of most direct concern to individual Members: the tension between providing consistent, stable services and meeting Members' varying requirements (*Part Four*); extending services in the constituency so that they are comparable with those on offer at Westminster (*Part Five*); providing professional and reliable customer service with clear escalation procedures (*Part Six*); and providing up-to-date, good-value ICT equipment to Members that meets their requirements in a timely way (*Part Seven*). Finally, we investigate new services from which Members would be likely to benefit, either in the very near future or in the slightly longer term (*Part Eight*).

PICT's first priority must be to optimise existing services, starting with stability issues and connection speed, especially in the constituency, and ensuring that future roll-outs of new equipment are seamless and well-managed. But there is a strong expectation that new services, including wireless networking, will also be provided very soon—and the speed of technological development demands it. At the same time communications between PICT and Members need to be significantly scaled up. Real ongoing consultation is required for PICT to understand and meet Members' needs and to measure demand for services. This will require dedicated PICT staff responsible for developing relationships with Members and their staff, and a separate Members' customer forum, also involving Members' staff, to help to develop strategies and service levels. We want to ensure that PICT has a better understanding of Members' expectations, and that Members have a correct sense of what PICT can and cannot do for them.

Members as well as PICT have responsibility for the ICT systems in their offices. We are sure that most Members would not welcome further limitations on their freedom to customise centrally provided equipment. However, Members' freedom to install unsupported applications locally makes PICT's task more costly and complicated than it would otherwise be. Until they can access the full range of Parliamentary ICT services securely over the Internet, Members will need to accept the existing restrictions on the equipment they can use and on how they can use it. In return, however, they have every right to expect a good standard of service.



# 1 Introduction

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## Background to the inquiry

1. Information and Communications Technology (ICT) services have become critical to the work of Members of Parliament, and this importance can only increase. Even the decreasing number of Members who do not use computers themselves rely on staff who do.

2. The Parliamentary Information and Communications Technology Department (PICT) was established in January 2006, bringing together for the first time ICT staff and other resources from across both Houses of Parliament into a unified organisation under a single accountable Director. This was a strategic response to the previously fragmented planning and implementation of ICT across Parliament, which involved numerous separately managed teams working on overlapping and often inter-dependent systems, without an overview of resources.

3. PICT provides services to the Members and staff of both Houses of Parliament. Our focus is on those services provided for Members of the House of Commons and their staff. Members of Parliament are not a homogenous body of people. They work in different ways and they have correspondingly divergent demands for ICT services. **The feedback we have received from Members since we were appointed in July 2005 has made us aware of a significant undertone of dissatisfaction with the ICT services provided by Parliament. We want to ensure that processes are in place to enable appropriate Members' services to be delivered efficiently and to an agreed standard.**

4. We announced terms of reference in July 2006 and issued a notice to all Members and their staff calling for written evidence. We received evidence from 30 Members and 43 Members' staff, as well as from the Parliamentary Resources Unit (PRU), who assist over 150 Conservative and Democratic Unionist Party Members and their staff in their parliamentary duties; their evidence is published with this Report. We are particularly grateful to the three serving Members and the one former Member who chaired the House of Commons Information Committee between 1997 and 2005 (the year in which we—the Administration Committee—replaced it), all of whom have contributed to our inquiry. We have also received submissions from organisations outside Parliament, thanks to the assistance of PITCOM (an Associate Parliamentary Group set up to provide a bridge between Parliament and the IT industry) and EURIM (a not-for-profit membership organisation which sees itself as the independent UK-based Parliament-Industry Group dedicated to improving the quality of ICT policy). PICT has provided us with a considerable amount of written evidence, and we have held two formal discussions with the PICT senior management in the course of our inquiry. As well as this formal activity, we have held informal discussions with the following experts from within the House and outside:

- Chris Montagnon, who, from January 2006 to January 2007, was the external member of the Joint Business Systems Board (a group of officials of both Houses responsible for ensuring that the business plans of both Houses are reflected in and supported by a viable and affordable business systems and ICT strategy for both Houses; and that

programmes of activity to realise the benefits of this strategy are being managed in a coherent and cost-effective way);

- Michael Fabricant MP, a former chairman (2001–2003) of the Information Committee;
- Rt Hon Alun Michael MP, a Director of EURIM;
- Andrew Miller MP, Chairman of PITCOM, and a former Member (1992–2001) of the Information Committee;
- Richard Allan, a former Chairman (1997–2001) and Member (2001–2005) of the Information Committee, subsequently Head of Government Affairs UK and Ireland for Cisco Systems; and
- Andrew Hardie, an independent consultant with experience of a number of Parliaments.

We are publishing the notes of all of these discussions together with this Report. We are grateful to all of those who took the time to talk to us.

5. We reserve particular thanks to our two specialist advisors, Professor Jim Norton and Mr John Milner. Their expert assistance has been invaluable in making sense of technically complex issues, and in providing an objective comparison of the ICT service Members receive with similar services elsewhere.

### Current service provision

6. At the end of March 2007, PICT employed (or contracted with third parties for the services of) 242 full time equivalent people.<sup>1</sup> As with other parts of the parliamentary service, PICT does not have a fixed staff complement at any given time and overall staff costs are managed through budget controls. Because of the need for scarce specialist skills and the nature of the employment market in ICT, 53 of these people were engaged on short-term contracts for service or consultancy, many through third parties. All of the staff directly employed by PICT are based at Westminster. Very few staff are dedicated specifically to Members and their staff, but the majority of service desk calls are received from these customer groups.

7. PICT is responsible for providing a service to a variety of client groups, of which Members of the Commons and their staff are only one. PICT also provides a service to Members of the House of Lords and their staff, to Departments of both Houses, and, through the Internet and the structures underpinning it, to the public. The client groups are by no means completely separate: much of the work done by House of Commons staff using ICT is carried out on behalf of Members, and while the direct customers of systems such as the security pass system, division bells and payroll are Departments of the House, Members appreciate and benefit from these systems as well.

8. PICT draws its funding from a number of budgets:

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<sup>1</sup> Excluding the telephone operator bureau and telecoms engineers, but including staff working on the project to redevelop the parliamentary website. Information provided by PICT

- the main PICT budget. This was approximately £20.7 million resource in 2006–07,<sup>2</sup> and £1.2 million capital. Approximately 80% (£15 million) was paid from the House of Commons Administration Estimate, the other 20% being funded by the House of Lords;
- the House of Commons Members' Estimate for spending on Members' IT, including equipment, the Commons share of the running costs of the Virtual Private Network (VPN) and of mobile computing, and the cost of temporary staff dedicated to supporting mobile computing for Members;
- the House of Lords budget for IT capital and Peers' expenditure; and
- project budgets for agreed and mainly shared project expenditure, such as the Internet project and an exploratory project looking at Electronic Document and Records Management.

9. Any increase in funding for PICT from the House of Commons Administration Estimate to improve services for Members and their staff would require agreement from the Finance & Services Committee and the House of Commons Commission, and (unless the funding was redistributed from other Departments) from the House itself. Any increase in the provision from the Members' Estimate would normally be subject to a review by the Senior Salaries Review Body and would also have to be agreed by the House.

10. The main PICT budget from the Administration Estimate enables the provision of services including servers and networking (but not local networking at a constituency level), telephony within the Parliamentary Estate, licences and support for common and specialist parliamentary applications, and all time and services provided by PICT staff, such as customer assistance. More than 25% of the budget is for spending related to the specialist applications in use by the two Houses, such as the Parliamentary Information Management System (PIMS).

11. Members' ICT equipment both at Westminster and in the constituency is provided from a separate budget, the Members' Estimate, as an allowance. Each Member is entitled to a total of up to five desktop and laptop computers and up to two printers. Members can if they wish purchase additional equipment from the Parliamentary catalogue, using their own money or the Incidental Expenditure Provision (IEP), a separate cash-limited allowance. The equipment is provided and supported via a contract, currently with Dell, and this contract is managed by PICT. Broadband connections in Members' homes and offices are provided via a separate contract, with THUS/Demon, paid for from the Members' Estimate budget. Members must pay themselves for the telephone line needed to access this service, using the IEP if they wish. As of July 2006, pocket mobile computing devices have also been available for Members to buy from the Parliamentary catalogue.

12. Only equipment provided through the Parliamentary catalogue and only the centrally specified broadband provision may be used to connect directly to the Parliamentary Network.

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2 Including £2.6 million for non-cash items (depreciation and staff pensions)

13. During the period of dissolution before a general election, Members' Parliamentary Network accounts and e-mail access have historically been suspended, although a facility to allow Members to redirect their e-mails has been offered. Members have lost access to telephones at Westminster, and voicemail storage has been withdrawn. In 2005, Members remained able to use equipment in their constituency for ongoing casework, and Internet access via broadband remained available. No equipment provided centrally or paid for using the IEP may be used for party political purposes at any time.

14. We are responsible for considering the services provided for and by the House. Allowances, including the provision of ICT equipment to Members, are overseen by an Advisory Panel on Members' Allowances and by the Members' Estimate Committee. However, we (and the Information Committee before us) have generally found that it is impossible sensibly to consider the provision of ICT services without making reference also to the equipment being provided. Our responsibilities are interlinked. We aim to be clear in this Report where we make recommendations with implications for services and equipment provided from the Members' Estimate.

15. PICT does not yet have a clearly defined and communicated strategy for delivering ICT services to Members. There is a risk that without clear strategic direction, services for Members will not be given the priority they deserve. We aim in this Report to help provide that direction.

## Previous work

16. Until relatively recently, Members were responsible for choosing and buying their own ICT equipment. It was only with the development of a central Parliamentary Network, the stability of which depends on the consistency and reliability of the systems connected to it, that equipment procurement has been centralised and standardised. Longer-serving Members' desire to maintain the wide choice of ICT equipment they enjoyed in the recent past has been at odds with this development. As Members have come to rely on networked systems, they have had reluctantly to restrict this flexibility.

17. In 1993, the Information Committee did "not recommend the central provision of equipment, but consider[ed] that a list of 'registered' suppliers should be available to Members on request".<sup>3</sup> By 1998, they recommended that "the time [was] not yet right for central provision", but agreed to the introduction of an approved list of equipment which Members could purchase centrally and recommended that the issue be reviewed in the next Parliament.<sup>4</sup> However, the issue reached a crisis point sooner than the Committee had anticipated. In 2000, "in the light of a dramatic increase in the use of IT by Members" and noting "the prospect of an erosion of the value" of the Parliamentary Network and of the support that could be provided, the Information Committee recommended "that central provision of IT hardware and software for Members, together with a maintenance and

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3 *The Provision of Members' Information Technology Equipment, Software and Services*, First Report from the Information Committee, Session 1992–93, HC 737, para 34

4 *The Supply of Members' Information Technology Equipment, Software and Associated Services*, First Report from the Information Committee, Session 1998–99, HC 74, paras 49, 52 and 59

support service in Westminster and in the constituency, be introduced at the earliest opportunity”.<sup>5</sup>

18. This system of central provision was introduced following the general election in 2001 and the agreement of the House in July of that year that “specific financial provisions should be made for the supply and maintenance of a standard package of information technology equipment and services for each Member to be used exclusively in discharging their duties as Members”.<sup>6</sup> It is worth noting that the “standard package” to which the House agreed in 2001 included services as well as equipment. While the package of equipment has always been clearly defined, the package of services has not.

19. The Senior Salaries Review Body (SSRB) recommended the central provision and funding of Members’ IT equipment as early as 1992.<sup>7</sup> More recently, in 2004, the SSRB recommended that “the level and range of IT support offered to constituency offices should be improved to a level comparable with that offered on the Parliamentary Estate”.<sup>8</sup> This recommendation has already had a significant impact on Members’ expectations of the ICT services they should receive. One of the aims of this Report is to suggest how this challenging goal might best be approached. It is indisputably the case that the level and range of IT support in the constituency continues to fall far short of that offered at Westminster.

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5 *Information Technology provision for Members*, Second Report from the Information Committee, Session 1999–2000, HC 758, paras 15, 29 and 33

6 Votes and Proceedings 5 July 2001

7 Top Salaries Review Body, Report No. 32, Cm 1943, Chapter 4.

8 Review Body on Senior Salaries, Report No. 57, Cm 6354-I, p 30

## 2 Establishing best practice and identifying possible comparators

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20. We have sought to compare the way in which ICT services are delivered to Members at Westminster and in the constituency to the way in which similar services are delivered elsewhere. This has not proved straightforward.

21. An obvious obstacle to drawing comparisons between the House of Commons and other organisations is that the House has a highly unusual structure, consisting as it does of 646 independent small businesses (its Members) located across the country, linked to a single much larger metropolitan hub, which is more reminiscent of a large corporate body. Suppliers of IT equipment and services tend to be either national providers specialising in the higher end of the corporate market or local suppliers specialising in smaller businesses. Because the House of Commons does not neatly fit into either bracket, finding appropriate suppliers is not always an easy task.

22. Businesses can impose top-down control on their staff, in the interests of cost, efficiency of support and security, by insisting on the use of specific equipment and on particular working practices. Members of the House of Commons, however, are not staff of the House but self-employed individuals who value their independence.

23. IT systems in the corporate sector are critical to an organisation's commercial success, and high levels of expenditure are normally justified by the resulting profit. There is no equivalent profit motive in the public sector. Although Members require high quality IT systems to enable them to carry out their parliamentary work, these are unlikely to need to be as technically advanced as some of the very high specification systems in use in the corporate sector.

### Specific examples

24. In the course of our inquiry, we talked to Richard Allan, who has an unparalleled understanding of the provision of ICT services to Members and in the corporate sector. He was a Member of the Information Committee for eight years from 1997 to 2005, and its Chairman for half that time. Since leaving the House, he has worked as Head of Government Affairs UK and Ireland for Cisco Systems, a leading corporate provider and user of IT systems. The notes of our informal discussion are published as an annex to this Report.

25. The range of ICT solutions in use at Cisco shows what can be achieved with modern technology beyond those services currently available at Westminster, for example:

- the use of wireless technology as standard,
- computer-based telephony (generally using Voice over Internet Protocol—VoIP),
- extensive use of audio and video conferencing,

- online management tools, such as web-based expenses, supplies and pensions systems, and online training, and
- ICT systems which look and feel the same to a user wherever they might be in the world.

26. We also spoke in the course of our inquiry to Chris Montagnon, who at the time served as the external member of the Joint Business Systems Board (JBSB), a board otherwise made up of senior staff from both Houses. The JBSB is responsible for ensuring that the business plans of both Houses are reflected in and supported by a viable and affordable business systems and ICT strategy for both Houses; and that programmes of activity to realise the benefits of this strategy are being managed in a coherent and cost-effective way. Mr Montagnon noted that, from his experience of a large retail company with 500 remote locations, these locations were given no flexibility as to the service provided. Everything was decided by the central IT service. From his more recent experience of a university environment, although it initially seemed that there was a much greater degree of flexibility, in fact any proposed new ICT applications had to be submitted to the centre to make sure they would work on the network and to ensure the legality of the licensing situation.

### **Possible comparators**

27. Although most other organisations are unlike the House, we have identified two possible comparators:

- a) Franchise operations with independently owned points of sale.
- b) Universities, where the principal clients include highly independent-minded professors, questioning of central diktat and with varying IT needs and expectations.

28. Seeking to control Members' behaviour too closely is unlikely to be a successful approach to the provision of ICT services, and is bound to be unpopular. The experience of universities in particular suggests that a more constructive approach is to concentrate on ensuring that services remain coherent, rather than on controlling what Members do. This would mean defining standards (for example, requiring web browsers to comply with HTML 1.1 and be Java-enabled) rather than prescribing exactly how the standards should be met (in this case, by specifying exactly which browser should be used), and it would mean having clear and transparent processes for requesting and approving new services. Some of these issues are discussed further in part four of this Report.

### 3 Departmental structure and goals

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29. The creation of PICT has involved the difficult task of moving disparate IT professionals with specific clients across Parliament into a single central source of service and expertise. Such an exercise requires a clear and coherent strategic approach if it is to be successful. Even with such an approach, it will take time—years rather than months—for the new organisation to work optimally.

30. All of the experts to whom we have spoken have been unanimous that the creation of a centralised parliamentary IT service was a sensible step: it allows knowledge among IT professionals to be shared and used effectively, it allows risks such as staff absence to be better managed, and it provides a more varied and attractive career structure for IT staff which should help recruitment and retention.<sup>9</sup>

31. Key client groups, such as Members, however, are used to having dedicated points of contact within relatively small teams. To some extent they have continued to use these points of contact, especially where the newly centralised service has failed to produce immediate results for them. **There is undoubtedly a risk that PICT will be perceived as less personal and less understanding of the needs of specific groups of customers than the smaller dedicated services that preceded it. Members and other customers of PICT will not appreciate the benefits of a centralised IT service if it is unable to deliver the disparate and distributed services they expect and to support them in a timely and efficient manner.**

32. **We recognise that a number of the recommendations in this Report may require additional funding from various budgets. However, the re-organisation and rationalisation carried out by PICT since its establishment should have liberated resources, both human and financial, for redeployment. We ask that PICT should report to us on the savings achieved to date from this rationalisation, on the redeployment of resources and on the extent to which additional funding may still be required.**

#### Formal channels of communication

33. The PICT Forum is a new development that aims to help improve understanding between PICT and its main clients within the services of the two Houses. This customer forum is made up of senior managers from departments and offices across Parliament, and is intended to coordinate the future development of thinking about electronic information management in Parliament, by concentrating on defining a ‘vision’ for ICT services and developing a single programme of activity to implement this vision. The House Services are large corporate-style structures and the services they need are very different and more ‘corporate’ in feel from those services needed by Members and their staff. It would not necessarily make sense for the latter to be closely involved in the PICT Forum.

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9 Annex pp 42– (Discussions with Chris Montagnon, Richard Allan, Andrew Hardie)

34. There seem, however, to be no formal channels, other than through occasional meetings with us, by which PICT makes itself aware of Members' evolving use of ICT and discusses possible improvements to their existing service. In previous Parliaments, the Information Committee served as a regular dedicated sounding board of Members. We replaced the Information Committee in 2005, but our responsibilities extend across the whole of the House Administration. The Advisory Panel on Members' Allowances also has an interest in this area, but it too has responsibilities which mean that it is less specialised in the provision of Members' ICT services than the Information Committee was.

35. There is a clear need for a more regular formal channel of communication between PICT on the one hand and Members and their staff on the other. **We recommend the establishment of a Members' ICT customer forum to discuss the development of Members' ICT services.** The forum should be made up predominantly of Members' staff working both at Westminster and in the constituency, but should be chaired by a Member of this Committee and should report to us. The Advisory Panel on Members' Allowances may also wish to nominate a Member to the forum. The forum should meet at least every two months, but it may also be appropriate for some of its business to be carried out virtually.

36. Neither we nor a formal customer forum should be the only sources of feedback to PICT on the services it provides. Structured processes for gathering feedback from a wide range of customers are crucial to provide adequate information on the quality and development of these services. **We recommend that a small number of dedicated PICT staff should be responsible for communicating with Members and their staff, gathering feedback on existing services, and understanding how services might be improved.** This should involve a rolling programme of visits to Members' offices in the constituency as well as at Westminster. These staff should also attend the Members' ICT customer forum.

37. **We and the customer forum would benefit from being able to consider key statistical information which PICT should collect on its work with Members.** This information might include the number of 'trouble tickets' raised per week, the percentage resolved to the customer's satisfaction, and the mean time to resolve.

## Strategy and roadmap

38. The idea of a Members' ICT strategy has existed for some time. A draft strategy was brought to and endorsed by the Information Committee in March 2005.<sup>10</sup> In the light of the creation of PICT, **a revised Members' ICT strategy now needs to be developed in consultation with us and other relevant bodies, together with a roadmap for delivery. This roadmap needs to be tested against Members' genuine needs and expectations, then overlaid with clear deliverables with dates and milestones. Appropriate service levels should be agreed with us, widely communicated, and regularly measured. There must be a process of regular reporting back to us on achievements and failures.**

39. A highly disciplined process will be needed to keep the roadmap up-to-date, as needs and circumstances change. The Members' ICT customer forum is likely to have an

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10 Information Committee, Minutes of Proceedings for Session 2004–05, HC 526

important role in identifying these changing needs. It is important that only genuinely essential changes to the roadmap should be agreed, with impacts on resources and timescales fully recognised and budgeted. Changes to the roadmap should be agreed by us; if they have resource implications they will also have to be considered by the Finance and Services Committee.

## 4 Stability v flexibility

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40. Members are required to use specified equipment, supplied by a specified source, if they wish to connect directly to the Parliamentary Network (PN). Members are, however, given local administrator rights, which allow them to install applications of their choosing on these machines, although they may only use specified applications to connect to the Internet.

### Members' views

41. Members are individuals who value their independence. Ideally they would want the ability to use equipment, operating systems and applications entirely of their choosing to connect to the Parliamentary Network, and to receive a full support service from PICT. The unanimous view of all of the experts to whom we have spoken is that this would be impossible to support, and would present real security risks to the network and to other users. It would be a return to the fragile and untenable situation that existed before 2001. As a former chairman of the Information Committee has told us:

In other organisations and business units with which I have been associated, ICT services in both the commercial and public sector have always been centrally designed and centrally administered with centrally selected hardware and software. I am glad that the House of Commons has now moved to this position from the chaotic situation of a few years ago when Members could purchase any kit they liked — with disastrous consequences.<sup>11</sup>

Another senior Member told us that “the variety of equipment being used had brought the previous system at Westminster to meltdown”.<sup>12</sup>

42. However, some Members feel that the current service has moved too far towards the other end of the spectrum: a “one size fits all” service.<sup>13</sup>

43. Some of the demand for flexibility may not be because of a resistance to the theory of centrally provided equipment, but because in practice some of the equipment provided is less effective than Members expect. In Part 7 below, we examine the way in which equipment has been procured on Members' behalf and rolled out to their offices.

44. Stability of service in constituency offices has been a major issue for Members in recent months, and is discussed in the next part of the Report.

### PICT's view

45. PICT's perspective is rather different from that of Members. They appreciate that Members are “individual customers rather than a single customer group”; however, from their professional point of view, the ability to install applications means that Members

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11 Ev 18 (Robert Key MP)

12 Annex, p 45 (Alun Michael MP)

13 Ev 17 (Ms Sally Keeble MP). See also Annex, p 45 (Michael Fabricant MP), and Ev 21 (Peter Luff MP).

already have a high degree of flexibility which PICT finds difficult to support, and they describe a situation in which there is “little standardisation of the desktop environment”. As they explain, “flexibility makes the desktop more difficult to support, [it is] more difficult to introduce general improvements, and it is more difficult to diagnose problems if there is a fault”.<sup>14</sup>

46. It is worth noting that PICT does not seem to be suggesting that Members’ ability to install applications endangers *network* stability, but rather that it makes the *desktop* more fragile and harder to support. Together with the flexibility Members have in the way they set up their equipment, this makes support “more costly and problematic than it would otherwise be”.<sup>15</sup>

### Professional views

47. There seems to be some professional disagreement about those areas in which standardisation is necessary to ensure stability and those in which some flexibility could more readily be allowed. Richard Allan represents one point of view. He told us that “allowing Members to have non-standard equipment was much more of a problem than allowing them to have non-standard applications”.<sup>16</sup>

Stability concerns about the operating system can be overstated and on balance should not be a reason on their own to obstruct user choice. If a clear policy of user responsibility is adopted, i.e. if there is a major problem with user-installed software then the House of Commons only undertakes to restore the standard configuration plus any user data (see also backup proposals above), then this need not necessarily open the door to excessive and problematic support requests.<sup>17</sup>

48. On the other hand, one of our specialist advisers has told us that it is “not difficult to support a wide range of standard hardware” conforming to a common architecture and running a single operating system. He has suggested that Members “should be able to choose equipment from more than one supplier, with the resulting competition acting as “a useful lever to ensure product quality”. His view is that a wide range of software and operating systems “would be much harder to support” and that the existing range of applications supported by PICT is already too wide and should be “culled”.<sup>18</sup>

49. A third point of view is provided by an IT manager from the private sector, who recommends ‘locking down’ the operating system configuration to only allow specific changes to be made. According to him, “this will result in improved security, less likelihood of change (and subsequent support calls) and easier management of the devices by PICT”.<sup>19</sup> As the Chairman of PITCOM told us, “industry experts were horrified that a locked-down approach could not apply in Parliament. The diversity of systems and

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14 Ev 9, para 13

15 Ev 4, para 23

16 Annex, p 50

17 Ev 45, para 48

18 Annex, p 43 (Jim Norton)

19 Ev 51 (Colin Lobo)

practices put the network at risk”.<sup>20</sup> However, other experts, our advisers included, believe that even from an administrative point of view, a locked-down environment would be too inflexible for the constituency office environment.

## A way forward

50. This apparently conflicting advice suggests that further exploration of the possibilities and their implications needs to be carried out. It is clear to us, however, that any future provision will need to be based on the following clear principle: **no-one should be allowed to connect systems to the Parliamentary Network or to carry out activity on these systems which might endanger the security of other systems or compromise the stability of the Network. PICT should, however, aim to provide as flexible a service as possible within this one constraint.**

51. We recommend that PICT, in co-operation with us and with the Advisory Panel on Members’ Allowances, should explore extending the range of equipment and service options available to Members. One option for exploration should be the possibility of procuring more than one specification of standard desktop or laptop from which Members might choose. It is worth noting that there are several specifications of standard mobile computing device. Another should be the extent to which non-standard peripherals, such as printers, should be allowed to connect to machines with Parliamentary Network connections.

52. It is clear that Members’ flexibility in the applications they can install on their centrally provided equipment creates support difficulties for PICT and has cost implications. New untested software can by its presence stop other software from working properly. **Members who install their own applications locally may, by doing so, make it more difficult for PICT to guarantee them the same core service level it is expected to provide to other customers.** With the growing sophistication of services, there is an unavoidable trade-off between high flexibility and low cost. If PICT is to be set achievable goals, an agreed compromise will need to be reached.

53. We suggest that, **rather than reducing Members’ flexibility to install applications on centrally provided equipment, there should be greater clarity as to the level of support PICT is able to provide and the specific applications it is resourced to support.** This clarity should be achieved through service level agreements, an area we discuss in greater depth in part 6 of this Report. **There should also be a greater effort to communicate to Members and their staff the implications of installing unsupported applications on centrally provided equipment for future support of this equipment.**

54. This arrangement would allow Members to continue to install software on centrally provided equipment without PICT’s knowledge or agreement. **Individual Members, not PICT, must be held responsible for ensuring that any software they or their staff install on parliamentary equipment is properly licensed.** PICT will naturally retain responsibility for the licensing of centrally provided software.

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20 Annex, p 46 (Andrew Miller MP)

## Alternative ways of accessing parliamentary services

55. An increasing range of applications is becoming available via web browsers. This development may reduce the need for Members to use standard equipment to access parliamentary services. This and other Internet-related developments were the focus of the evidence we received from Andrew Hardie, an independent consultant with a particular interest in Web 2.0.<sup>21</sup> In some work environments outside the House, new services are now provided only if they are available via web browsers. Currently, PICT can make secure remote access to Microsoft Outlook, the Parliamentary Intranet and network drives available from almost any computer with an Internet connection. **Development of browser-based services would allow those Members who choose not to use centrally provided equipment to access some centrally provided services.** Conversely, browsers also increasingly allow access to non-parliamentary services for Members using standard parliamentary equipment.

56. PICT has also piloted the provision of direct ADSL<sup>22</sup> at Westminster for those Members who choose not to use centrally provided equipment—at those Members' expense.<sup>23</sup> We welcome this approach, which is an example of precisely the kind of flexibility that Members appreciate.

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21 Ev 46–50 (Andrew Hardie)

22 A direct broadband connection to the Internet, using the telephone network and bypassing the Parliamentary Network.

23 Ev 9, para 14. See also Ev 16 (John Hemming MP).

## 5 Constituency provision

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57. In the light of the recommendation from the Senior Salaries Review Body (SSRB) already mentioned above, there is an increasing expectation among Members that “the level and range of IT support offered to constituency offices” will “be improved to a level comparable with that offered on the Parliamentary Estate”.<sup>24</sup> This would bring other potential benefits as well as the smoother running of Members’ offices and an improved quality of service to constituents. In our Report on House of Commons accommodation, we concluded that “the gulf between the quality of the Parliamentary ICT service provided in the constituency and that provided at Westminster is a major disincentive to Members locating their staff in the constituency”,<sup>25</sup> exacerbating the already significant pressure on accommodation at Westminster.

58. Although the House has agreed to the SSRB’s recommendation, there has been no decision on how it should be implemented. PICT is not funded to provide the same level of support around the country as at Westminster.<sup>26</sup> To provide a full support service in more than 600 constituency offices would have significant cost implications.

### Virtual Private Network service issues

59. Members’ sense of grievance at the service received in the constituency was exacerbated during 2006 by serious problems experienced with Virtual Private Network (VPN) access to Parliamentary services. Some of the evidence we have received from Members reflects these problems,<sup>27</sup> the worst of which seem now to have been overcome. Nonetheless, even with a comparatively effective VPN service, it remains the case that the service available in the constituency is less extensive than that available to Members and their staff at Westminster, particularly in terms of support.

60. It is vital for a smoothly functioning constituency office that the standard of connection to the Parliamentary Network should be both fast and reliable. This is not always within PICT’s direct control. The speed and reliability of broadband connections in a Member’s office, for instance, depend on the performance of a third-party supplier. **If there is to be a reliable service in the constituency, PICT will need to clearly define and closely manage standards for elements of the service outside its direct control.**

61. We have already mentioned at paragraph 55 above the desirability for further development of browser-based services as an alternative to the VPN for those Members not using parliamentary IT equipment. These services could also provide a useful stop-gap for Members using the VPN if there should be problems with this service in future. **We**

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24 See paragraph 19. Cm 6354-I, p 30.

25 HC 1279, para 94

26 Ev 9, para 16

27 Ev 18 (Robert Key MP), Ev 22 (Mrs Madeleine Moon MP), Ev 24 (Jo Swinson MP), Ev 26 (a Member who has asked to remain anonymous), Ev 27 (Michele de Angeli, Office of Mr Richard Benyon MP), Ev 33 (Rory Palmer, Office of Sir Peter Soulsby MP), Ev 34 (Richard Robinson, Office of Mr Andy Reed MP), Ev 35 (Roger Thistle, Office of Tom Brake MP), Ev 37 (Alexander Woodman, Office of Stephen Williams MP), Ev 38 (a Member’s employee who has asked to remain anonymous), Ev 40, para 20 (Parliamentary Resources Unit)

**recommend that PICT should further research and seek to extend the availability and functionality of browser-based services, including ‘browser-based VPN’.**

### Options for improving the constituency service

62. A survey of Members carried out on PICT’s behalf in 2005 found that the key additional areas in which Members felt they needed local support were:

the setting up and maintenance of small local networks, installation and training in the use of software, and routine “health check” site visits to check on system set-up, apply any routine upgrades, check on file management, and back-up and check on the general serviceability of equipment (i.e. preventative maintenance and advice).<sup>28</sup>

63. At our request, PICT has conducted initial investigations into various options for improving the standard of service in the constituency, and has estimated how much these options would be likely to cost. The options they have suggested are as follows:

- i. Support 24 hours a day, 7 days a week for the service desk, servers and network;
- ii. Account management to provide a single point of contact for services to constituency offices. This would involve PICT managing the interface with 3<sup>rd</sup> party contracted services to provide a cohesive managed service for procurement, installation and maintenance of equipment;
- iii. Further web-based services – such as virtual ‘drop-in ICT surgeries’ and extended remote command of the PC software;
- iv. A managed LAN (local area network) in constituency offices and a higher specification of network connection to Westminster; and
- v. Regional support units (probably 3<sup>rd</sup> party contracts).<sup>29</sup>

64. While the first of these options is not specifically a matter of improving services in the constituency, Members are more likely to be working in the constituency than at Westminster at times when the service desk is not currently available. **We welcome the proposal that support services should be provided at times when Members are likely to be in the constituency, as well as when the House is sitting.** The cost of this service is included within current budget plans. We consider customer service issues more fully in the next part of this Report.

65. The second option is also included within existing budget plans. Members and their staff are currently expected to manage the various services delivered by a variety of providers to their homes and constituency offices, from the supplier of parliamentary equipment, to the specified broadband provider, to the provider of line rental. The burden on Members to manage these relationships causes significant levels of aggravation, particularly when it is not obvious to the customer which of the various providers is

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28 Ev 4, para 29

29 Ev 9, para 17

responsible for a service problem.<sup>30</sup> Recent issues with the VPN were a case in point: Members and their staff could not be certain if the problem was the responsibility of PICT, who manage the servers and central network, of the provider of their broadband connection, or an issue with their telephone line. **We welcome the proposal that the PICT Service Desk should become a single point of contact for all services related to Parliamentary ICT, with PICT staff rather than Members managing the interface with contracted services.** In practice, such a development will only be effective if the ‘single point of contact’ effectively ‘owns’ the problem, keeping the Member informed of the steps being taken and finally confirming with the Member that resolution has been achieved to the Member’s satisfaction before the issue is closed. We comment further on customer service issues generally in the next part of this Report.

66. The third option proposes the extension of PICT’s ability to provide remote support to constituency offices. This is again a service which PICT plans to introduce at no additional revenue cost. It should in theory be possible to provide remote support to the constituency nearly as effectively as remote support to offices at Westminster. This will, however, depend on the reliability of the network connection to the relevant machines. PICT’s proposal for virtual ‘drop-in surgeries’ may also go some way towards meeting the demand from constituency-based staff for further ICT training.<sup>31</sup> A small number of ICT-related courses for Members’ staff are already provided at centres across the country in partnership with WWP training. **We recommend that PICT should continue to improve the speed, quality and range of support and training that can be provided by remote means to Members’ constituencies across the country.**

67. The more effective the provision of remote support to constituencies, the less need there should be for engineers to visit in person. However, there will be situations which can only be resolved by a site visit.<sup>32</sup> PICT’s current capability to visit constituencies is very limited indeed and involves removing London-based staff on an ad hoc basis from duties at Westminster. If the service in the constituency is to become genuinely comparable to that at Westminster, regional support units will be required, as PICT suggests in the fifth option above. This is one proposal for which PICT has been unable to provide indicative costs, but they would be likely to be substantial. **We recommend that PICT should commence market investigation so that we and other relevant bodies can be presented before the end of the year with a range of costed options for the provision of regionally based support units.**

68. PICT’s final proposal, the fourth in the list above, is that PICT should manage local area networks (LANs) in constituency offices and that there should be a higher specification of network connection between constituencies and Westminster. Some Members would certainly appreciate assistance from PICT in managing the LAN in their constituency office; indeed, it has been suggested by several of those who have written to us:

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30 eg Ev 14–15 (Rosie Cooper MP), Ev 21 (Ann McKeichin MP), Ev 23 (Ms Gisela Stuart MP), Ev 24–25 (Mr Andrew Turner MP), Ev 38 (a Member’s employee who has asked to remain anonymous)

31 Ev 23, para 4 (Alison Seabeck MP); Ev 31 and 33 (Lena Huskinson and Hazel Priest, Office of Jim Knight MP)

32 Ev 15, para 6 (Don Foster MP); and Ev 34 (Richard Robinson, Office of Mr Andy Reed MP)

I think it would ... be extremely useful if PCD were able to take responsibility for all of the computer systems within a Member's office.<sup>33</sup>

PICT do not give advice on or support for networking in Constituency offices. This is a major deficiency in the services they offer.<sup>34</sup>

Other Members are likely to have alternative arrangements already in place and would not want to take up such a service, in the short term at least.

69. In theory, there should be fewer compatibility problems between the constituency office local network and the Parliamentary Network if the two were managed by the same organisation. Regionally based support staff would be needed to provide this service across the country. The issues of managing and supporting 'legacy' constituency networks need to be carefully identified and scoped to ensure that resourcing is realistic.

70. The specification of network connection between constituencies and Westminster needs to be as robust as possible, and fast enough to ensure that those working in constituencies are at minimal disadvantage compared to their colleagues working at Westminster. However, providing dedicated lines is unlikely to prove cost-effective, as a new line would need to be installed, at significant cost, every time a Member moved to a new constituency office. We are also unaware of any clear evidence that the quality of the existing network connections in constituency offices is a significant problem. The network connection provided in the constituency would be a service paid for from the Members' Estimate.

71. The estimates provided by PICT do not disaggregate the costs of managing LANs from the costs of providing a higher specification of network connection. Assuming full take-up and based on the highest specification of equipment and 3rd party support available, they suggest annual costs of between £6 million and £10 million.<sup>35</sup> In practice, they would be likely to be significantly lower. Most of the costs appear to be related to networking rather than additional staffing. PICT notes that the options "require clearer specification and market testing". **We recommend that PICT should conduct initial market testing of clearly specified options for managing local area networks in constituency offices and should return to us in due course with the results.**

72. PICT has suggested that in order to meet Members' varying requirements for constituency support, it might offer "a range of differentiated and clearly defined service levels" branded "platinum, gold, silver etc – for maximum clarity":

For example, "platinum" might provide a PICT-supported local area network (LAN) for PICT equipment only and connectivity guidance for any non-PICT equipment, with next day on-site technical support and regular "health checks"; by contrast a minimal "bronze" service would offer only connectivity for PICT provided laptops.<sup>36</sup>

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33 Ev 15, para 6 (Mr Don Foster MP)

34 Ev 29 (Malcolm Clarke, Office of Barbara Keeley MP)

35 Ev 10, para 19

36 Ev 4, para 31

73. This is an interesting idea in principle, but it implies charging individual Members in some way for the level of service they choose: there is no obvious mechanism within the existing allowances regime for doing this. We also suspect that there are more levels proposed to this service than Members are likely to require. **We invite the Advisory Panel on Members' Allowances to consider whether to pursue the idea of differentiated service levels for constituency office ICT support and to investigate how Members might be charged for this.**

### Support for applications used in Members' constituency work

74. Several of our submissions suggest that casework management software might be provided or managed by PICT.<sup>37</sup> We understand that a single product is provided as a matter of course by the Scottish Parliament to MSPs.<sup>38</sup> However, there is more than one software package in use among Members, and providing a single product centrally is unlikely to meet Members' needs. Most of the problems in this area raised with us by Members and their staff concern the interaction between the software they have bought and the parliamentary equipment on which they have installed it. Changes to the parliamentary system can affect the running of software, and software updates can also bring about unexpected compatibility problems.<sup>39</sup>

75. PICT has suggested to us that it might “identify and work more closely with the top five software suppliers to Members to encourage joint working and support ... to cover all the main suppliers of casework management software”. We welcome this proposal. **PICT cannot be expected to support the wide range of software that Members choose to install on their centrally provided computers, but it makes eminent sense for them to work more closely with the principal suppliers of software to Members to identify and resolve support issues.**

### Testing and development

76. Equipment to support PICT's constituency network and support proposals (including wireless technology) was procured in February and is currently being configured, tested and documented. Following this work a ‘model’ constituency office will be set up in Norman Shaw South to demonstrate both the proposed, near-future, model office environment, and potential future technologies such as desktop video-conferencing. The model office will be available to all Members who are interested in Constituency IT. In parallel PICT propose to pilot elements of the future proposed constituency environment in selected constituency offices. A combination of feedback from both of these initiatives will then be used to refine the proposal. **We look forward to visiting the ‘model’ constituency office being set up by PICT, and invite other Members who are interested to do the same.**

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37 Ev 17 (Ms Sally Keeble MP), Ev 24, para 8 (Mr Andrew Turner MP), Ev 32, para 1 (Henry Matthews, Office of Lynne Jones MP), Ev 34–35 (Paul Scully, Office of Mr Andrew Pelling MP)

38 Ev 35, para 5 (Paul Scully, Office of Mr Andrew Pelling MP)

39 Ev 29 (Sarah Coleby, Office of Anne Milton MP). See also Ev 12 (Mr James Arbuthnot MP).

## 6 Customer service

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77. A single service desk is currently responsible for responding to service queries by phone and by e-mail from all of PICT's various customers. The majority (about three-quarters) of service desk calls received are from Members and their staff.

78. The service desk is open from 8.30 am until 8 pm on weekdays when the House is sitting, except for Fridays, when it closes at 6 pm. It closes at 6 pm on all weekdays when the House is in recess. On Saturdays and Sundays it is open from 11 am until 3 pm. It is closed on English bank holidays.

79. Service desk and network service support should be available whenever Members need it. We have already recommended at paragraph 64 the introduction of extended opening hours for the service desk. The centralisation of PICT provides a welcome opportunity to extend out of hours support in this way.

80. Comments we have received from Members and their staff suggest a mixed experience of the service provided:

...excellent. The staff are friendly, patient and helpful.<sup>40</sup>

The staff who provide the help line service are usually very helpful when you get through to them - it is a question of service design and training which I think is the problem.<sup>41</sup>

Quite a large number of the PICT helpdesk staff don't always seem to have a full grasp of the systems they are trying to help with.<sup>42</sup>

Sometimes I speak to someone who knows how to resolve the problem - sometimes not. ... Sometimes the Help Desk ring back or pass on the problem - sometimes not.<sup>43</sup>

On approximately 12 occasions we have reported problems to PICT and been advised that an engineer or technician will call back to assist in rectifying the problem. In each case, the call back has taken at least three days.<sup>44</sup>

Basic customer care processes ... seem to be poor, with calls and problems having to be chased up for resolution, sometimes over weeks. If they are being systematically logged, it must be too easy to regard the call as resolved ... Only last week I responded to a call back from PICT only to find the job had been marked 'closed' because they had left me a message!<sup>45</sup>

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40 Ev 33 (Veronica Oakeshott, Office of Ms Sally Keeble MP)

41 Ev 18 (Ms Sally Keeble MP)

42 Ev 35 (John Stewart, Office of Sir Robert Smith MP)

43 Ev 38 (A Member's employee who has asked to remain anonymous)

44 Ev 37, para 7 (Alexander Woodman, Office of Stephen Williams MP)

45 Ev 16, para 5 (Martin Horwood MP)

If a computer problem is referred by a helpdesk operative to an engineer there frequently appears to be no communication between the two. As a result any findings of the first technician are not relayed to the second. My staff and I often have to explain, again and again, what the problem is and even more frustratingly try to explain what the helpdesk have done to attempt to fix the problem. The process could be much more efficient and less time consuming with better communication.<sup>46</sup>

81. PICT has been working on improving the Service Desk since June 2006. The time taken to answer calls—a common subject of complaint in the past—has been greatly improved and now meets national benchmark standards, with most calls being answered in less than 30 seconds. Fewer calls are also now being lost.<sup>47</sup> But the quality of response varies.

82. Where the response is inadequate, sometimes this may be because of the quality of individual Service Desk staff or the training they have received. It may also sometimes be because Members are asking for support in areas which are not PICT's responsibility (see paragraph 86 below). But part of the problem is that the range of services now being offered by PICT mean that more complex issues cannot be resolved at the Service Desk level,<sup>48</sup> and systems do not yet appear to be in place for ensuring that this kind of query is always adequately resolved and for reassuring the customer of progress.

**83. Service levels need to be agreed for those cases where the Service Desk is unable to resolve a problem at initial contact: these should cover both callback times, and the way in which the issues raised are logged and processed. An issue should only be regarded as closed once resolution has been achieved to the customer's satisfaction. There must be clear and widely publicised steps of escalation that flow automatically if an issue remains unresolved beyond a specified period of time. Ultimately escalation should reach the Director of PICT.**

84. Many of the frustrations experienced by Members when following up service issues reflect the way in which they have been given the burden of identifying which service provider is responsible and for monitoring progress.<sup>49</sup> Our recommendation at paragraph 65 seeks to shift the burden away from the Member and onto PICT, which is better placed to manage it, and which must continue to 'own' an issue even when it cannot take direct steps itself to resolve it.

85. Service desk staff have to deal with requests from various types of customer on a wide range of issues. Given this, even the most experienced are unlikely to be able to provide solutions at the first call. Two of those giving evidence to us, including a former Chairman of the Information Committee, have suggested to us that some specialisation of service is needed:

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46 Ev 24, para 2 (Mr Andrew Turner MP)

47 Ev 8

48 Ev 36 (Vivienne Windle, Office of Liz Blackman MP)

49 eg Ev 14–15 (Rosie Cooper MP), Ev 20, para 2 (Mrs Jacqui Lait MP), Ev 21 (Ann McKechnin MP), Ev 22 (Julie Morgan MP), Ev 23 (Ms Gisela Stuart MP), Ev 24–25 (Mr Andrew Turner MP)

I really do not think it is unreasonable to ask that Members of Parliament should have a different number to staff.<sup>50</sup>

It is now time to split the duties of the PICT team and have specific numbers for specific problems, so we know that even if we have to wait a little longer for an answer, when we do get to speak to someone they will be someone who can definitely help.<sup>51</sup>

86. Given that Members and their staff already make up a significant majority of the customers of the PICT Service Desk, we are not convinced that providing a dedicated desk or number for Members is the answer; nor is it necessarily helpful to provide different numbers for different problems; in a technical environment, it is not always obvious to the non-expert what the problem is. We believe that the implementation of our recommendation above should help Members to get better customer service, by ensuring that PICT takes up ownership of problems raised at service desk level. We also welcome PICT's proposal for a 'one-stop shop' in a room in Norman Shaw South, which will give service desk staff and engineers the opportunity for face-to-face contact with Members and other customers they otherwise rarely see.

87. PICT offers 'best endeavours' support to Members, meaning that it tries to help even when an enquiry is not its responsibility. This may lead to unrealistic expectations of assistance in areas which are not in fact PICT's responsibility. Clear guidelines should be developed and widely distributed, explaining the limits of those areas for which PICT is responsible. **We recommend that PICT should continue to offer 'best endeavours' back office support in areas for which it is not responsible, where it can do so safely and within its existing resources; but where this is the case, the situation should be made absolutely clear to the customer, to avoid creating unrealistic expectations of support in future.**

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50 Ev 19 (Robert Key MP)

51 Ev 36–37 (Vivienne Windle, Office of Liz Blackman MP)

## 7 Providing IT equipment to Members

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### The 2005 roll-out of equipment

88. New ICT equipment was provided to all Members following the general election in 2005: first to newly elected Members, and then to serving Members to replace their existing equipment. The roll-out took considerably longer—approximately a year longer—than originally planned, partly because of the complexities involved in transferring data, applications and settings from the old to the new machines and partly because of difficulties in obtaining orders and agreeing delivery schedules with individual Members. All Members who had placed their orders before the 2006 summer recess had equipment delivered by the end of the recess.

89. The roll-out was a complex exercise, as different Members asked for different quantities of standard equipment, set up in different ways, to be installed in various locations all over the country. We commented on the roll-out, particularly the service provided to Members newly elected in 2005, in our Report on Post-Election Services.<sup>52</sup>

90. PICT has conducted a ‘lessons learned’ exercise on the project. One of its main conclusions is that PICT “underestimated the complexities of installation”, in particular the amount of “customised and locally loaded software” on existing equipment in Members’ offices. As a result, “the project was initially under-resourced”.<sup>53</sup> In addition, delays were caused because a supplier was not chosen until February 2005: this despite the fact that the election date had been predicted long in advance.

91. New Members understandably want to receive working equipment as soon as possible after a general election. Re-elected Members who already have computer equipment are a less urgent priority, but they too have not always been happy with the length of the upgrade process.<sup>54</sup>

92. In several cases there seems to have been a considerable delay between the equipment being supplied and it being installed.<sup>55</sup> While in some cases installation difficulties may have been because Members or their staff failed to provide sufficiently detailed survey information in advance,<sup>56</sup> delays were also apparently caused because computers were not ordered or built until after the election, installation was only organised once the equipment had already arrived at its destination, and in some cases appointments were not kept.<sup>57</sup>

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52 First Report from the Committee, Session 2005-06, HC 777, paras 14-15

53 Ev 6, paras 43-44

54 Ev 17 (Ms Sally Keeble MP), Ev 19 (Robert Key MP), Ev 20 (Mrs Jacqui Lait MP)

55 Ev 24, para 10 (Mr Andrew Turner MP); Ev 37, paras 9-11 (Alexander Woodman, Office of Stephen Williams MP)

56 Ev 6, para 44

57 Ev 27, (Michele de Angeli, Office of Mr Richard Benyon MP)

## Future roll-outs

93. A roll-out of equipment on this scale is never going to be a simple exercise. But there are steps which could make the process smoother in future. To ensure that the equipment being supplied continues to meet business need, the service definition should be reviewed regularly and updated incrementally. Major upgrades, for example to a new operating system, would need to be considered and rolled out separately.

94. Decoupling the roll-out of new equipment as much as possible from the general election cycle would allow the upgrade process for Members to take place in a more measured and regular way. However, there would be some difficulties with timing the supply of equipment differently. As we noted in 2005,

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.<sup>58</sup>

95. These problems could be mitigated if lead times for the supply of new equipment could be significantly shortened. There is no reason why the process of choosing a supplier should not begin well in advance of the anticipated date of a general election, as PICT has acknowledged to us in the past.<sup>59</sup> Having contractual structures in place to supply ICT equipment to Members at short notice is sensible contingency planning. In our opinion, the concern that has been expressed to us in the past that “officials should not be seen to be anticipating” a general election is misplaced.<sup>60</sup> **If it has not already begun, we recommend that work should commence at once on ensuring that there are no contractual obstacles to the speedy roll-out of ICT equipment to new Members after the next general election, whenever it may take place.**

96. **Other planning issues should also be decoupled from the roll-out**, as PICT has recognised by suggesting:

- a dedicated engineering team trained to understand Members’ requirements (which would need to be part of or closely linked to the regionally based support units recommended at paragraph 67),
- an agreed (and contractually enforceable) service level on which we and the Advisory Panel on Members’ Allowances should be consulted,<sup>61</sup> and
- a more closely managed deployment schedule.

**We agree to all of the above proposals and recommend that they should be implemented as soon as possible.**

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58 HC 777 (2005-06), para 15

59 HC 1027, Session 2005-06, para 3

60 HC 777 (2005-06), Ev 24, para 17

61 See paragraph 38.

97. Mechanisms are also needed to encourage efficient delivery under any future contract. Such a contract must provide for penalties if agreed delivery dates are missed. Another possibility might be to offer a choice of standard equipment from a pool of suppliers to offer variety and provide a competitive market to raise standards. However, there is a risk that the increased variety would also make support more complex and the network more fragile. **We recommend that PICT should investigate cases in which other public sector organisations have procured ICT equipment from a pool of suppliers rather than from a single supplier, should seek information on whether this procurement method was successful, and should return to us with a recommendation as to whether it might be applied in the parliamentary environment.**

### Quality and cost

98. Although Members and their staff seem in most cases to have been satisfied with the quality of the computers provided once they were successfully installed, we have received a large number of complaints about the quality of the printers supplied and the cost of the related consumables.<sup>62</sup> We have already made relevant recommendations at paragraphs 65 and 97 above.

99. Members are also concerned about the cost of the equipment, given that it is published as an expense that they have personally incurred, although they have no control over the price. It has been suggested that the cost of the centrally provided equipment is high compared with that available for purchase elsewhere:

Usually the advantage of purchasing from one supplier is economies of scale, but PICT prices suggest that they do not currently have a bulk-buy discount for IT equipment.<sup>63</sup>

This contrasts with PICT's assertion that the existing contract provides "good quality equipment at highly competitive prices".<sup>64</sup> What Members may fail to appreciate is that **the price of centrally provided equipment includes a substantial element for licensing, and for four years of maintenance and support. This is far more extensive than that normally included in the price of equipment available from other sources.**

100. A concern which has been raised with us is that equipment that was considered value for money at the outset of a contract may soon cease to be so.<sup>65</sup> However, under the existing contract, prices are reviewed each time that there is an equipment upgrade—approximately three times a year. Prices are then fixed until the next upgrade, which could indeed be disadvantageous over time as market prices fall. PICT, however, takes steps to

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62 Ev 12 (Mr James Arbuthnot MP), Ev 14 (Rosie Cooper MP), Ev 15 (Mr Andrew Dismore MP), Ev 20 (Ian Kirkbride, on behalf of Miss Julie Kirkbride MP), Ev 21 (Peter Luff MP), Ev 22 (Mrs Madeleine Moon MP), Ev 23 (Ms Gisela Stuart MP), Ev 25–26 (Miss Ann Widdecombe MP), Ev 28 (Shirley Buckley, Office of Mr Michael Meacher MP), Ev 29 (Phil Cole, Office of Caroline Flint MP), Ev 31 (Jane Gordon-Cumming, Office of Mr Quentin Davies MP; Lena Huskinson, Office of Jim Knight MP), Ev 33 (Heather Millican, Office of Patrick Mercer MP; Rory Palmer, Office of Sir Peter Soulsby MP; Hazel Priest, Office of Jim Knight MP), Ev 35 (Paul Scully, Office of Mr Andrew Pelling MP), Ev 36 (Roger Thistle, Office of Tom Brake MP; Sarah Vero, Office of Dr Ian Gibson MP; Charlotte Wallis, Office of Mr Kenneth Clarke MP)

63 Ev 40, para 12 (Parliamentary Resources Unit)

64 HC 777 (2005-06), Ev 24, para 17

65 Ev 40, para 12 (Parliamentary Resources Unit)

ensure that prices are competitive when set; according to PICT, they are consistently better than those available through the Office of Government Commerce e-catalogue. PICT also receives monthly benchmark information on prices which is checked against the prices of machines of equivalent specification offered by other manufacturers.

## 8 New services

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101. Newly elected Members with experience of IT provision elsewhere—especially in the private sector—have corresponding expectations of the service at Westminster, and are often disappointed by what they find.

102. A wide range of new technology is used in cutting-edge businesses, such as those we heard of at Cisco (see paragraphs 24 and 25 above), which scarcely exist in Parliament. Examples of such services include

- extensive use of high quality audio and video conferencing,
- online self-service management systems, for example to claim expenses or to book meeting rooms, and
- online training.

103. We have already mentioned the developing use of the Internet as a flexible and relatively secure communication channel and platform for services (see paragraph 55 above). Various wireless technologies are now well-established, and mobile computing using a wide variety of portable devices is increasingly the norm in business.

104. It is important not to pretend that Parliament will ever be at the cutting edge of business technology. There is no profit motive or business need to justify the expense. Parliamentary ICT also needs to be secure, and is likely to rely on more tried and tested technologies to ensure this. As one Member has put it to us, “for PICT to provide leading-edge technology would strain the Parliamentary Network in a way that would be against the interests of the majority”.<sup>66</sup>

105. Neither, however, should Parliamentary ICT services fall too far behind best practice elsewhere. Some fairly well established technologies are significantly under-used in Parliament: audio-conferencing, and wireless and mobile computing in particular.

### Audio-conferencing

106. An improvement in audio-conferencing facilities, whether computer-based or working from more traditional telephony, would allow for better communications generally. In particular it would be likely to assist contact between Members at Westminster and their constituency offices, and between Members in the constituency and their staff at Westminster. **We recommend that options should be brought to us before the end of 2007 for increasing the availability of audio-conferencing facilities at Westminster—both in Members’ offices and in meeting rooms—and in the constituency.**

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66 Annex, p 46 (Andrew Miller MP)

## Wireless and mobile computing

107. Wireless and mobile computing would allow Members to work online when away from the office.

108. A large number of those who have written to us view wireless access to the network as a priority.<sup>67</sup> Some steps have already been taken to achieve this, but these have not yet been widely publicised among Members.

109. An interim wireless network was set up in the Portcullis House atrium in October 2006 on a pilot basis. This seems to have been a success for the relatively few people who have used it. As of 12 April 2007, 82 Members had had their laptops enabled for use of the wireless network.<sup>68</sup> **We recommend that the wireless network in Portcullis House should be made permanent.**

110. PICT has also commissioned survey work and purchased equipment to allow wireless access to the Parliamentary Network from key parts of the Estate, in response to the recommendation we made in January 2006, that “wireless Internet access should be provided in those areas likely to be of most use to Members”, including the House of Commons Library, the Committee Corridor, and a number of committee rooms.<sup>69</sup> We have received an undertaking from the Board of Management that the service will be made available in these locations before the next election.<sup>70</sup> The main purpose of this work from Members’ perspective has been to ensure that, after a general election, new Members without an office can have immediate access to the Parliamentary Network. **We look forward to the imminent extension of wireless networking to areas including the House of Commons Library and Committee Corridor.**

111. The work already carried out by PICT goes some way towards providing the level of wireless access needed by Members, but there are strong reasons for continuing to extend it to other parts of the Estate: meeting rooms are an obvious priority, but availability in shared work areas should also, as we have noted previously, “be of use in reducing the demand for fixed workstations for temporary staff and possibly for others as well”.<sup>71</sup> We would expect the installation of wireless access to accompany any redesign of ministerial accommodation and Members’ staff accommodation on the lower floors of the Palace, and it would also be likely to be of benefit in shared Members’ staff accommodation in other buildings. We understand that some of these rooms are currently difficult to reconfigure for optimal use because of cabling limitations; in these locations, wireless networking might allow for higher occupancy.

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67 Ev 13 (Mr Charles Clarke MP), Ev 17 (Mr David Jones MP), Ev 25 (Steve Webb MP), Ev 26 (a Member who has asked to remain anonymous), Ev 28 (Michele de Angeli, Office of Mr Richard Benyon MP), Ev 35 (Paul Scully, Office of Mr Andrew Pelling MP), Ev 37 (Alexander Woodman, Office of Stephen Williams MP), Ev 41 (Parliamentary Resources Unit).

68 Information provided by PICT

69 *Post-election Services*, First Report from the Administration Committee, Session 2005–06, HC 777, para 26

70 Second Special Report from the Administration Committee, Session 2005–06, HC 1027, para 11

71 *House of Commons Accommodation*, Third Report from the Administration Committee, Session 2005–06, HC 1279, para 134

112. The Palace of Westminster was not constructed in a way conducive to a single wide-ranging network, and the cost of carrying out the necessary surveys and of installing equipment to allow wireless access may be significant. The work carried out so far—including work in House of Lords areas and for Refreshment Department and PICT staff—has cost in the region of £70,000. PICT has estimated that to provide wireless access throughout the Parliamentary Estate (including Lords areas) would cost in the region of £250,000, but the cost would be considerably reduced by identifying priority areas. **We recommend that PICT should continue to extend wireless networking across the Estate, and invite PICT to draw up costed proposals for consideration by the Finance and Services Committee. These proposals should include the provision of wireless access in meeting rooms in the Palace, Portcullis House and other outbuildings, in the Library in Derby Gate, and in larger shared offices where existing cabling is a limitation to the efficient use of space. We also welcome PICT’s plans to test wireless networking in constituency offices,<sup>72</sup> and we ask PICT to come forward with proposals to allow the wireless functionality of Members’ centrally provided laptops to be used as widely as can be achieved with reasonable security.**

113. As of 12 April 2007, 106 Members had a mobile computing device provided by PICT, with a further two awaiting training.<sup>73</sup> The availability of mobile computing devices seems to have been generally welcomed,<sup>74</sup> although not all those who received them were entirely happy with the service. Network coverage in some parts of the country seems to have been a particular issue.<sup>75</sup> **We welcome the addition of mobile computing devices to the catalogue of equipment available to Members, and encourage PICT to continue promoting their availability.**

114. The trial of mobile computing devices involving a group of around 50 Members helped to identify those devices most suited to Members’ requirements and enabled Members participating in the trial to communicate the benefits of the devices to their colleagues. There are likely to be other devices and services that would benefit from being piloted in a similar way.<sup>76</sup> **As new technologies become available, we recommend that PICT should consider conducting further pilots involving a selection of Members wherever this is appropriate. We intend to keep the development of wireless and mobile computing under review.**

## Online services

115. PICT has let us know of a feasibility study for self-service submission and review of Members’ expense claims. The feasibility of offering other services to Members via the Parliamentary Intranet is to be investigated separately.<sup>77</sup> **We recommend that options should be brought to us before the end of 2007 for new Web-based services hosted on**

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72 See part 5 above.

73 Information provided by PICT

74 eg Ev 20 (Mrs Jacqui Lait MP), Ev 24 (Jo Swinson MP)

75 Ev 15 (Nick Harvey MP), Ev 17 (Ms Sally Keeble MP). See also Ev 13 (Ms Dawn Butler MP).

76 eg Ev 17 (Mr Michael Jack MP)

77 Ev 7, para 51

**the Parliamentary Intranet, including the facility to manage allowances and to book Refreshment Department facilities and meeting rooms online.**

### Improvements to existing services

116. The new services mentioned above will take a little time to introduce. There are, however, several ‘quick wins’ to be achieved from extending existing services swiftly and straightforwardly. A common complaint from Members has been that they are provided with insufficient network drive capacity and, in particular, mailbox size:

The main area in which the service offered by PICT falls short of the ICT service provided in other organisations including both the commercial and public sector, is individual storage limits. The storage offered, for both the network drives (U and S drives) and the Parliament Outlook e-mail, is a problem for most Members and their staff.<sup>78</sup>

My Inbox/Delete Box needs to be deleted roughly every 300 items. This is ludicrous.<sup>79</sup>

... our inboxes get full too quickly. All it takes is a couple of PR firms to email around pictures and sometimes that is about enough to do it!<sup>80</sup>

I am finding the very limited size of the parliamentary mailbox increasingly frustrating. As constituents and others send me larger and larger attachments, the ridiculously small size of our mailbox is becoming a real problem.<sup>81</sup>

I am *constantly* receiving notices that my mailbox is over its size limit, and archiving material to remedy the problem. I cannot, at present, however keep even fourteen days' worth of material on the server, so that it is available wherever I log in on the Estate.<sup>82</sup>

**117. Electronic storage is inexpensive, and in our view increased provision would represent value for money and would be appreciated by Members. We recommend that Members' mailboxes and network drives should be increased in size: mailboxes to up to 500 MB.** If implementing this recommendation would incur additional unbudgeted expenditure, we invite the Finance & Services Committee to approve the additional provision. We understand that PICT has already taken steps to enlarge individual Members' mailboxes to 500 MB when asked to do so. **PICT should also ensure that Members and their staff are aware of best practice in the management of their mailboxes at the same time as mailbox size is increased.**

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78 Ev 39 (Parliamentary Resources Unit)

79 Ev 20 (Mrs Jacqui Lait MP)

80 Ev 18 (Ms Sally Keeble MP)

81 Ev 21 (Peter Luff MP)

82 Ev 30 (Alexander Davies, Office of Mr Dan Rogerson MP; and Alistair Douglas, Office of Mr Dominic Grieve MP).

118. A second request from Members has been that they should be provided with a second personal e-mail address on the Parliamentary Network, which could not be guessed by the general public, unlike the current addresses provided:

I have suggested I be given two e-mail addresses: one which would be public and would receive all my general correspondence and which my staff could filter first, and the second which would be a private address on which I would receive specific confidential correspondence. This would mirror the arrangements we have in the office for correspondence delivered by post. I am told other MPs have had similar requests denied because of the problem of capacity on the system. I have to say I do not understand this as there would not be any more e-mails generated but, simply, more ways of dealing with them would be available to myself and other MPs.<sup>83</sup>

It is bonkers that we employ staff to answer our phones and handle our correspondence, but our inboxes are clogged with every bit of nonsense anyone in the world chooses to send.<sup>84</sup>

119. This is again an extension of an existing service which should be simple and cheap to put into effect, as well as popular among Members. **We recommend that Members should be provided on request with a second personal e-mail address on the Parliamentary Network.** If implementing this recommendation would incur additional unbudgeted expenditure, we invite the Finance & Services Committee to approve the additional provision.

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83 Ev 12 (Mr Clive Betts MP)

84 Ev 15 (Nick Harvey MP)

## 9 Conclusion

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120. PICT is a new Department and much of its work in the short term has focused on its own internal structures and on bringing its people together into a single cohesive organisation. Given the upheaval caused by a major reorganisation of this kind, the service to Members has been remarkably little affected. But Members now expect to see a significant improvement in the service they receive. Some of the resources previously occupied in rationalising the vast range of legacy services and systems can now begin to be redeployed to meeting Members' needs.

121. The first priority must be to ensure that the existing services work as well as they possibly can, starting with stability issues and connection speed, especially in the constituency, and ensuring that future roll-outs of new equipment are as seamless and well-managed as possible. But there is a strong expectation that new services, including wireless networking, will also be provided very soon—and the speed of technological development demands it if Parliamentary ICT is not to fall far behind best practice elsewhere.

122. At the same time communications between PICT on the one hand and Members and their staff on the other need to be significantly scaled up. Real ongoing consultation is required if PICT is to understand what Members need and want and to interpret this into effective deliverables, and if demand for particular services is to be measured effectively. Our role is as the House's appointed supervisory and advisory body on behalf of Members, and we expect to be consulted before strategies and service levels are finalised, but a separate Members' customer forum, also involving Members' staff, might help to develop these strategies and service levels. The appointment of dedicated PICT staff as account managers responsible for developing relationships with Members and their staff should also help to ensure that PICT has a better understanding of Members' expectations, and that Members have a correct sense of what PICT can and cannot do for them.

123. Members for their part need to understand the extent to which they have responsibility for the ICT systems in their offices. The level of freedom they have to customise their machines already goes far beyond that normally allowed in other organisations. PICT could not be expected to support the full range of activities Members carry out using ICT unless this freedom was restricted, and we do not think most Members would welcome further restrictions.

124. New developments may eventually lead to a situation in which Members can access the full range of Parliamentary ICT services securely over the Internet from any computer no matter its specification. But this situation does not yet exist, and until it does, Members will need to accept the existing restrictions on the equipment they can use and on how they can use it. In return, however, they have every right to expect a standard of service which delivers their requirements both at Westminster and in the constituency.

# Conclusions and recommendations

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## Introduction

1. The feedback we have received from Members since we were appointed in July 2005 has made us aware of a significant undertone of dissatisfaction with the ICT services provided by Parliament. We want to ensure that processes are in place to enable appropriate Members' services to be delivered efficiently and to an agreed standard. (Paragraph 3)

## Departmental structure and goals

2. There is undoubtedly a risk that PICT will be perceived as less personal and less understanding of the needs of specific groups of customers than the smaller dedicated services that preceded it. Members and other customers of PICT will not appreciate the benefits of a centralised IT service if it is unable to deliver the disparate and distributed services they expect and to support them in a timely and efficient manner. (Paragraph 31)
3. We recognise that a number of the recommendations in this Report may require additional funding from various budgets. However, the re-organisation and rationalisation carried out by PICT since its establishment should have liberated resources, both human and financial, for redeployment. We ask that PICT should report to us on the savings achieved to date from this rationalisation, on the redeployment of resources and on the extent to which additional funding may still be required. (Paragraph 32)
4. We recommend the establishment of a Members' ICT customer forum to discuss the development of Members' ICT services. (Paragraph 35)
5. We recommend that a small number of dedicated PICT staff should be responsible for communicating with Members and their staff, gathering feedback on existing services, and understanding how services might be improved. (Paragraph 36)
6. We and the customer forum would benefit from being able to consider key statistical information which PICT should collect on its work with Members. (Paragraph 37)
7. A revised Members' ICT strategy now needs to be developed in consultation with us and other relevant bodies, together with a roadmap for delivery. This roadmap needs to be tested against Members' genuine needs and expectations, then overlaid with clear deliverables with dates and milestones. Appropriate service levels should be agreed with us, widely communicated, and regularly measured. There must be a process of regular reporting back to us on achievements and failures. (Paragraph 38)

## Stability v flexibility

8. No-one should be allowed to connect systems to the Parliamentary Network or to carry out activity on these systems which might endanger the security of other

systems or compromise the stability of the Network. PICT should, however, aim to provide as flexible a service as possible within this one constraint. (Paragraph 50)

9. We recommend that PICT, in co-operation with us and with the Advisory Panel on Members' Allowances, should explore extending the range of equipment and service options available to Members. One option for exploration should be the possibility of procuring more than one specification of standard desktop or laptop from which Members might choose. Another should be the extent to which non-standard peripherals, such as printers, should be allowed to connect to machines with Parliamentary Network connections. (Paragraph 51)
10. Members who install their own applications locally may, by doing so, make it more difficult for PICT to guarantee them the same core service level it is expected to provide to other customers. (Paragraph 52)
11. Rather than reducing Members' flexibility to install applications on centrally provided equipment, there should be greater clarity as to the level of support PICT is able to provide and the specific applications it is resourced to support. (Paragraph 53)
12. There should also be a greater effort to communicate to Members and their staff the implications of installing unsupported applications on centrally provided equipment for future support of this equipment. (Paragraph 53)
13. Individual Members, not PICT, must be held responsible for ensuring that any software they or their staff install on parliamentary equipment is properly licensed. (Paragraph 54)
14. Development of browser-based services would allow those Members who choose not to use centrally provided equipment to access some centrally provided services. (Paragraph 55)

### Constituency provision

15. If there is to be a reliable service in the constituency, PICT will need to clearly define and closely manage standards for elements of the service outside its direct control. (Paragraph 60)
16. We recommend that PICT should further research and seek to extend the availability and functionality of browser-based services, including 'browser-based VPN'. (Paragraph 61)
17. We welcome the proposal that support services should be provided at times when Members are likely to be in the constituency, as well as when the House is sitting. (Paragraph 64)
18. We welcome the proposal that the PICT Service Desk should become a single point of contact for all services related to Parliamentary ICT, with PICT staff rather than Members managing the interface with contracted services. (Paragraph 65)

19. We recommend that PICT should continue to improve the speed, quality and range of support and training that can be provided by remote means to Members' constituencies across the country. (Paragraph 66)
20. We recommend that PICT should commence market investigation so that we and other relevant bodies can be presented before the end of the year with a range of costed options for the provision of regionally based support units. (Paragraph 67)
21. We recommend that PICT should conduct initial market testing of clearly specified options for managing local area networks in constituency offices and should return to us in due course with the results. (Paragraph 71)
22. We invite the Advisory Panel on Members' Allowances to consider whether to pursue the idea of differentiated service levels for constituency office ICT support and to investigate how Members might be charged for this. (Paragraph 73)
23. PICT cannot be expected to support the wide range of software that Members choose to install on their centrally provided computers, but it makes eminent sense for them to work more closely with the principal suppliers of software to Members to identify and resolve support issues. (Paragraph 75)
24. We look forward to visiting the 'model' constituency office being set up by PICT, and invite other Members who are interested to do the same. (Paragraph 76)

### Customer service

25. Service levels need to be agreed for those cases where the Service Desk is unable to resolve a problem at initial contact: these should cover both callback times, and the way in which the issues raised are logged and processed. An issue should only be regarded as closed once resolution has been achieved to the customer's satisfaction. There must be clear and widely publicised steps of escalation that flow automatically if an issue remains unresolved beyond a specified period of time. Ultimately escalation should reach the Director of PICT. (Paragraph 83)
26. We recommend that PICT should continue to offer 'best endeavours' back office support in areas for which it is not responsible, where it can do so safely and within its existing resources; but where this is the case, the situation should be made absolutely clear to the customer, to avoid creating unrealistic expectations of support in future. (Paragraph 87)

### Providing IT equipment to Members

27. If it has not already begun, we recommend that work should commence at once on ensuring that there are no contractual obstacles to the speedy roll-out of ICT equipment to new Members after the next general election, whenever it may take place. (Paragraph 95)
28. Other planning issues should also be decoupled from the roll-out, and we recommend that PICT's proposals for a dedicated engineering team trained to understand Members' requirements, an agreed (and contractually enforceable)

service level on which we and the Advisory Panel on Members' Allowances should be consulted, and a more closely managed deployment schedule should be implemented as soon as possible. (Paragraph 96)

29. We recommend that PICT should investigate cases in which other public sector organisations have procured ICT equipment from a pool of suppliers rather than from a single supplier, should seek information on whether this procurement method was successful, and should return to us with a recommendation as to whether it might be applied in the parliamentary environment. (Paragraph 97)
30. The price of centrally provided equipment includes a substantial element for licensing, and for four years of maintenance and support. This is far more extensive than that normally included in the price of equipment available from other sources. (Paragraph 99)

### New services

31. We recommend that options should be brought to us before the end of 2007 for increasing the availability of audio-conferencing facilities at Westminster—both in Members' offices and in meeting rooms—and in the constituency. (Paragraph 106)
32. We recommend that the wireless network in Portcullis House should be made permanent. (Paragraph 109)
33. We look forward to the imminent extension of wireless networking to areas including the House of Commons Library and Committee Corridor. (Paragraph 110)
34. We recommend that PICT should continue to extend wireless networking across the Estate, and invite PICT to draw up costed proposals for consideration by the Finance and Services Committee. These proposals should include the provision of wireless access in meeting rooms in the Palace, Portcullis House and other outbuildings, in the Library in Derby Gate, and in larger shared offices where existing cabling is a limitation to the efficient use of space. We also welcome PICT's plans to test wireless networking in constituency offices, and we ask PICT to come forward with proposals to allow the wireless functionality of Members' centrally provided laptops to be used as widely as can be achieved with reasonable security. (Paragraph 112)
35. We welcome the addition of mobile computing devices to the catalogue of equipment available to Members, and encourage PICT to continue promoting their availability. (Paragraph 113)
36. As new technologies become available, we recommend that PICT should consider conducting further pilots involving a selection of Members wherever this is appropriate. We intend to keep the development of wireless and mobile computing under review. (Paragraph 114)
37. We recommend that options should be brought to us before the end of 2007 for new Web-based services hosted on the Parliamentary Intranet, including the facility to

manage allowances and to book Refreshment Department facilities and meeting rooms online. (Paragraph 115)

38. Electronic storage is inexpensive, and in our view increased provision would represent value for money and would be appreciated by Members. We recommend that Members' mailboxes and network drives should be increased in size: mailboxes to up to 500 MB. PICT should also ensure that Members and their staff are aware of best practice in the management of their mailboxes at the same time as mailbox size is increased. (Paragraph 117)
39. We recommend that Members should be provided on request with a second personal e-mail address on the Parliamentary Network. (Paragraph 119)

## Annex: Committee discussions

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### 17 October 2006: Opening discussion with Director of PICT

The Committee received a presentation from Joan Miller, the Director of PICT.<sup>85</sup>

Issues emerging in the course of the ensuing discussion included:

- The inadequate size of Members' parliamentary mailboxes.
- The possibility of allocating e-mail addresses for Members' staff to Members rather than to the individual Members' staff.
- The mobile computing project, whether devices could interact with external e-mail addresses, and whether Members' own telephone numbers could be transferred to the new service.
- The idea of an electronic room booking system. The current booking system worked well, and any new system would need to be stable if it were to succeed.
- Provision of service to constituency offices: there was general agreement that this was in no way comparable to the service provided at Westminster and that this discouraged Members from basing their staff away from Westminster.
- The resource implications of changing this situation.
- The need for clearer information about what PICT could provide to Members and what it could not.
- The idea of a 'regional office' model of constituency support.
- Failure by PICT engineers and contractors to keep appointments or to arrange them sufficiently in advance.
- The possible provision of instant messaging as a work tool to alleviate e-mail traffic.
- The need for a lessons-learned analysis of the Members' IT refresh, including the procurement process.

### 21 November 2006

The Committee held discussions as part of its inquiry into Parliamentary Information and Communication Technology.

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<sup>85</sup> Available in the House of Commons Library, and online at <http://www.parliament.uk/documents/upload/PI21AnnexPICT.pdf>

### ***Opening discussion with Mr John Milner and Professor Jim Norton, Specialist Advisers to the Committee***

The two advisers gave their initial impressions of the evidence received so far. The following were among the issues raised:

#### ***John Milner:***

- PICT was having to manage a difficult legacy in bringing together disparate staff from different parts of Parliament.
- PICT needed to carry out creative work, market research and communications to establish Members' service requirements.
- PICT needed to develop a proposed standard service offering to present to Members for their feedback. This could include pick-and-mix elements, but infinite variety was not cost-effective or supportable.

#### ***Jim Norton:***

- Better mechanisms were needed through which Members and PICT could communicate effectively with one another, perhaps including a users' group.
- The Committee should try to help PICT identify clear goals, with well-defined standards of service for Members on the Estate, in the constituency, on the move, and possibly in Government Departments as well. Some compromise would be bound to be necessary. A clear route map needed to be developed.
- There seemed to be some easy quick wins for PICT: providing public and private e-mail addresses for Members, and increasing server space available. The website currently lacked basic features, such as the ability to track visitors.
- It was not difficult to support a wide range of standard hardware. Members should be able to choose equipment from more than one supplier: the resulting competition would be a useful lever to ensure product quality.
- A wide range of software and operating systems would be much harder to support. PICT was struggling to support a very wide range of applications, which needed to be culled.
- The problem with providing a wide range of peripherals was the cost of the consumables (printer cartridges, etc).
- Some oil companies were now getting rid of central procurement altogether – but also of central support.
- Well-provided online help could reduce demands on telephone helpdesks. User-configured services (such as broadband provider Plusnet) could be more popular and successful than services which relied on others for support. The Intranet could be used to provide a wide-range of self-service options to customers.

### *Members:*

- Members had no choice over the IT equipment provided to them, yet the published figures made it appear to the world as if it were money they had spent themselves.
- Much dissatisfaction appeared to concern the provision of peripherals rather than computers: connecting a wider variety of printers to a central network ought to be of less concern than connecting computers themselves.
- Members' staff as well as Members needed to be an important part of communications with PICT.
- There needed to be benchmark figures for equipment cost and customer service.

The Committee suspended its formal meeting in order to hold informal discussions.

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### ***Informal discussion with Chris Montagnon, external member of the Joint Business Systems Board (JBSB)***

Mr Montagnon made the following points:

- There had been three central reasons for establishing PICT: the vulnerability caused by concentrating skills in a very small number of people; missed opportunities to share data and systems; and the recruiting and retention advantages of providing improved career opportunities for ICT staff. But bringing together these disparate groups of people was a tremendous challenge. Improvements were already beginning to be seen: for example, better record-keeping by the helpdesk would allow problems and opportunities to be identified more effectively.
- If PICT was to understand its customers better, forums would be needed where representatives of customer groups could meet with PICT. Such forums would establish and prioritise those systems and applications that would help all Members to be more effective and efficient. PICT would agree a schedule and budget for delivering these.
- Members might want to think about how to decide which applications they needed. A group of representational users might report to the Administration Committee.
- In companies such as Sainsbury's, with 500 remote locations, there was no flexibility as to the service provided. Everything was decided by the central IT service. At Imperial College, although it initially seemed that everyone could have what they wanted, in fact any proposed new applications had to be submitted to the centre to make sure they would work on the network and that the licensing situation was legal.
- New services such as wireless access sometimes took a little time to introduce because they needed to be tested to ensure they could not disrupt existing systems.
- Services such as a 24-hour helpdesk could be provided, but only at a cost.

- For his work at the JBSB, Mr Montagnon had no resources other than himself. His role was to challenge proposals: for example, for the new administrative finance system (HAIS), he had wanted to ensure that it was being customised as little as possible and that management had understood the importance of dedicating resources to changing ways of working as much as to the IT system itself.
- Although the JBSB concentrated on systems for the Administrations of the two Houses, the division between the Administration and Members was not straightforward. HAIS, for example, was used to pay Members' salaries and allowances.

### ***Informal discussion with Michael Fabricant MP, Alun Michael MP and Andrew Miller MP***

The Members invited made the following points:

#### ***Michael Fabricant:***

- A decision had been taken before Mr Fabricant was chairman of the Information Committee that IT equipment should be provided centrally. It would be better for Members to have a choice between either buying a centrally provided package or buying equipment themselves which would need to meet certain criteria if it was to be connected to the Parliamentary Network. Clearly PICT would not be required to support hardware bought by an individual Member.
- The standard of centrally provided support had improved immeasurably over the past few years, but was still variable. Better quality control was needed, and a full service at weekends.

#### ***Alun Michael:***

- It was important to look not only at how Members and their staff carried out their business, but also how they could carry out their business. All Members of the National Assembly for Wales used computers, because they had been available from the start. It was also important to consider services provided to the public: such as the facility to e-mail Members.
- The variety of equipment being used had brought the previous system at Westminster to meltdown. The principle of standardisation was not the problem, but the quality of delivery. The mobile computing project showed how choice could be made available within a standard.
- The IT service needed to be seen as a robust, dependable platform, with built-in security.
- PICT worked hard and the service had improved. But Members were difficult to satisfy and there was no obvious channel for identifying service needs.
- Members tended to stay stuck at their existing points of competence. Some Members were unaware of facilities already available to them, such as shared drives. Newer

Members had higher expectations of IT than longer-serving Members. Peer coaching might be helpful.

*Andrew Miller:*

- There were two key messages from the conversation held between PITCOM and EURIM and the corporate sector:
  - Services needed to match Members' working hours. Support for when Members were not at Westminster needed to be strengthened: this might mean 24/7 provision; it would certainly mean better weekend provision.
  - the demands Members placed on the system were like joining 650 small businesses to a corporate network. A standard package therefore made sense. Industry experts were horrified that a locked-down approach could not apply in Parliament. The diversity of systems and practices put the network at risk. Examples such as Reuters might be studied as a model.
- Conclusions to be drawn were that:
  - PICT needed to have a stronger dialogue with the political parties about their software, which was often used on centrally supplied parliamentary equipment. Casework management software had genuine parliamentary uses, but also party political potential. There were also data protection issues which were not always well understood.
  - PICT should take up the offer by Intellect, the UK trade association, to conduct a concept viability study.
- For PICT to provide leading-edge technology would strain the Parliamentary Network in a way that would be against the interests of the majority. Those Members who wanted to buy their own equipment should not have automatic access to the Parliamentary Network.
- The Intranet was not very user-friendly, and could be greatly improved.

Issues emerging in the ensuing discussion included:

- The Information Committee had looked at provision elsewhere, including the Scottish Parliament, the German Bundestag, Capitol Hill, and the private sector. Often countries able to start with a 'blank sheet of paper' took the lead: Estonia for example, with its paperless Cabinet.
- Structures within PICT might need to recognise the different needs of different customer groups.

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The Committee resumed its formal meeting.

## ***Concluding discussion with the Specialist Advisers to the Committee***

### ***Jim Norton:***

- The suggestion that Members could be responsible for hardware support and PICT for software and network support would be difficult to manage. For example, if a Member lost data from a hard drive, who would be responsible for seeking to recover it?
- Good business practice for bringing about IT change suggested that 20% of the resource needed to go on the IT itself, and 80% on the people using the systems.
- By improving the Intranet so it could be used for work functions, it might be possible to save administrative resource in the long run.
- Some training and information for users could be provided over the network itself.

### ***John Milner:***

- Imposing control on a system in the way that Imperial College did could save a little money, but new technology allowed for some flexibility. Coherence was more important than control: this was the approach being adopted at Cambridge.
- It was possible to have a small portfolio of PCs, peripherals and software which would provide email, calendar document access and management and this portfolio could include certain key applications (eg in support of casework) in a coherent fashion. In this context it should be possible to cater for work within the Estate and within the constituency with equal facility.
- This needed to be considered alongside PICT's back office work on applications that might also need to be accessed by Members, but were primarily aimed at administrators.

## **5 December 2006: Informal discussion with Richard Allan**

Richard Allan, Head of Government Affairs, Cisco Systems, and former Chairman of the House of Commons Information Committee gave a presentation to Members of the Administration Committee as part of the Committee's inquiry into Parliamentary Information and Communication Technology. The presentation concentrated on technologies used by staff at Cisco:

- Mobility — access to a virtual network via a software token; a trusted wireless system; PDAs; soft phones; instant messaging; desktop videos with telephony; and internal television. Telephony was often forgotten but a critical tool. Cisco employees took their phone number and extension with them wherever they went in the world – by using VoIP, calls could be routed internally to reduce the cost of calls. Instant messaging was used in a variety of situations: to avoid telephone tag when wanting to talk to someone; to ask questions privately of people on a conference call; and to set up meetings. Internal television could be used to access meetings and also to convey important messages from executives.

- Collaboration — audio and video conferencing using high quality screens and spatial stereo. Audio-conferencing had become a standard tool in the business world; Parliament had perhaps needed it less because of the expectation that people would generally be prepared to come to Westminster. ‘Videopresence’ was a better than HDTV solution which allowed people in two different rooms anywhere in the world to feel as if they were occupying two halves of the same table. ‘Virtual Margaret’ was a worker who had a desk in Cisco’s California office but who actually lived and worked in Texas. Her desk in California had been replaced by a screen.
- Security — backup via a background application; encryption to ensure stolen or lost equipment does not give up confidential information; and ‘clean’ equipment provided to travellers to avoid business secrets being stolen in transit.
- Management — web-based expenses, supplies and pensions systems; customised off the shelf HR and recruitment services; and on-line training. An advantage of providing training online was that you could ensure complete coverage.
- Flexibility — the real challenge for corporate networks which seek convergence of systems used by staff. Within Cisco, all systems had the same look and feel wherever you were.

A discussion followed, during which Richard Allan made the following comments:

- The common platform had been introduced at Westminster as an attempt to resolve the complete inconsistency of equipment and software being used by Members. The platform had been creaking and it had been vital to re-establish stability.
- Employees at Cisco expected to receive the same quality of service wherever they were based – including at home. Citrix had given Members a bad experience and led to an expectation of a poor quality constituency IT service.
- It had been recognised in the past that providing a service to constituency offices would prove a challenge. Users of the VPN should expect the same level of service as was provided in Westminster.
- Within Cisco, there were no restrictions on the applications staff could install on their machines as long as the security platform could support them and they did not disrupt the network. But Cisco would only rebuild machines to the standard build if things went wrong. It was not easy to empower technicians to say no to powerful clients. There was no reason why Members should not have flexibility in the applications they could install on their centrally provided computers.
- As in every organisation, there were different categories of user with different demands: some Members used standard tools; some used non-standard but supported tools; and some used non-standard, non-supported and non-approved tools.
- Where connections were slow, the challenge was to identify and remove the bottlenecks. But a central IT service could not be expected to improve the speed of a broadband connection itself.

- Members should not expect to be able to connect their own devices to the Parliamentary Network. The flip side of this was that PICT needed to get the contracts with its hardware providers right to ensure that the equipment being supplied met Members' needs. The House of Commons had an unusual capacity problem because of the electoral cycle: it might be necessary to pay a premium to ensure adequate service levels immediately after an election.
- Cisco had saved 40% on its real estate costs by investing in technologies to allow remote working, shared desk space, and shared printer systems. No-one at Cisco had a desktop computer, but rather a laptop which could automatically identify the nearest printer. It might be possible to save space in the House of Commons by providing wireless offices with shared desk spaces and printers, for example for groups of Members' staff; and by enabling people to work offsite. But this would require significant cultural change, which might be difficult to bring about as there were not the same competitive commercial pressures to react as in a business environment.
- If PICT was having difficulties in setting up a secure wireless network, this could only be a capacity issue. There were no technical or security difficulties – except the fabric of the buildings. A big team could set up a network quickly; a small team would be slower. Other government departments were also struggling with similar issues.
- The ICT set-up in the House of Commons combined 646 SMEs and one large corporation. Suppliers tended to be focused on either one or the other, but not both. In other words, the market did not easily provide for the kind of set-up found at the House of Commons. Quality suppliers of services to SMEs tended to be locally based; but the House of Commons was a national institution.
- A possible model to investigate as a comparator would be a retailer with a lot of branch shops.
- There were logical issues around the use of the Parliamentary Network for Members' party political work which could be explored. Why was it not appropriate for the House of Commons to provide shared server space for Members of a political party, but ok for an e-mail with an attachment to be sent over the network to 350 individual Members? Applications, casework software for example, could be used for both parliamentary and party political purposes: how should this be provided and monitored?
- Most Members found the governance structures for the House opaque. The Information Committee had been the place where pressure was put by Members on the House Service to achieve progress.
- A single ICT function made perfect sense, but there could be specialist groups within this, with one concentrating on Members' services.
- Members might have little clout with providers such as BT when moving office. Problems might be more easily sorted out centrally through PICT itself, if a special contact point was developed.
- It was an accepted wisdom that investment in ICT delivered productivity benefits. But ways needed to be identified of measuring productivity.

- It was important to move forward with consensus, rather than having a queue where the noisiest customer won – which would lead to junk. PICT needed to have the authority to ration and to authorise. Allowing Members to have non-standard equipment was much more of a problem than allowing them to have non-standard applications.
- A corporate extranet, as used by Cisco to allow other organisations access to sensitive information, might not be suitable as a model for interaction between a central parliamentary service and Members as individual business units, because Members would want transactional as well as informational services.

## 12 December 2006: Informal discussion with Andrew Hardie

Mr Hardie made the following points:

- For cultural and historical reasons, ICT provision at the UK Parliament was more complex than in many other parliaments.
- PICT was working hard to achieve a networked model of computers and storage, but this model was fifteen years old. It was difficult to get such a model to function remotely, especially internationally.
- There would be a cost to improving the system – most of the investment would need to be spent on the people providing the service rather than on the technology itself. However, with a simpler service provision model such as that offered by Web 2.0, it ought to be possible to reduce the overall number of people needed to provide service support.
- Most services could be provided over the Internet using Web 2.0 – which was a different, flexible, way of providing applications and information and storing data. About 80% of ICT needs could be met using this approach.
- Flexibility was a significant advantage of this approach. At the user end, all that was needed was a computer with a browser and an Internet connection, with no need for a standard build. This would reduce central maintenance and update costs significantly. The use of open source software could also reduce licensing and licence compliance costs.
- A problem with the networked system was that it required lots of different kinds of server, which were difficult to support. The server requirements for a Web 2.0 based system were much simpler.
- It was easier to solve speed problems caused by server overload in a Web 2.0 environment, but not problems caused by a slow broadband connection.
- It might be possible to run the system in parallel with the current parliamentary network in order to test the technology. 2–3 years remained before the next planned upgrade of Members' computers; this time could be used to plan and test new services. Online word processing software would be a sensible area with which to experiment, as there would be little interaction with existing systems.

- Innovation could not be outsourced. Any contractual arrangement that inhibited innovation, either internally or by other contractors, was undesirable.
- The current Parliamentary ICT system provided a number of different services in different ways to different people: the system was brittle by design, and was very hard to support as a result. A balance needed to be struck between providing only the lowest common denominator and always seeking to respond to the highest plea: it would help to reduce the number of different classes of user with different needs.

### 30 January 2007: Concluding discussion with Director of PICT

The Committee held a discussion with the Director of PICT as part of its inquiry into Parliamentary Information and Communication Technology.

The Director of PICT told the Committee that several main areas had been identified where improvements could be made:

- Service desk: improving the quality of the service provided. PICT aimed to provide a one-stop shop for all issues, including those currently dealt with by contractors, and were considering how best to provide a 24/7 service. There was a continuing programme of recruitment and training of staff. Whilst the time taken to answer calls to the service desk had been reduced following the improvement programme put in place in July 2005, the aim now was to improve the quality of the first-time response to Members' queries.
- Constituency support: although PICT was not funded to provide a full range of services to the constituency offices, PICT were investigating what services could be provided and what funding would be required. These included: enhanced remote control access by PICT engineers; online ICT training and mentoring for Members' staff (both of which were relatively low-cost); and possible regional response units (which would be high-cost). Other than resources, the main constraint in this area was the need for clarity over what could be provided during a dissolution of Parliament.
- New developments in technology: eg the availability of video conferencing and internet telephony for Members. Members could be informed of new developments through various means such as papers, workshops and exhibitions, taking into account the wide range of experience of ICT amongst Members.

Other common queries from Members which were being investigated by PICT included: standardisation versus customisation of the desktop environment; provision of web-based services; and provision of storage.

Issues raised during the ensuing discussion included:

- The need to define what PICT should provide for Members in terms of a service requirement rather than a technical specification.
- That further standardisation of the system would be unlikely to meet with support among Members.

- Whether a web-based service could replace the current VPN-based system for remote working.
- The service provided by the Service Desk, and the possibility of introducing a dedicated phone line for Members.
- The possibility of providing a DVD recording facility for Members, such as was available in the Bundestag and Congress.
- The possibility of providing a second private parliamentary email address for Members.
- Systems for ensuring that e-mails sent to Members' staff reached the office of the intended Member, for example where a member of staff had stopped working for one Member to work for another.
- The cost of the mobile computing devices available to Members.

The Director of PICT responded by stressing the need for a regular forum in which PICT could demonstrate technical solutions to Members and Members could explain their requirements to PICT. PICT needed to take time to understand better the daily and weekly working patterns of Members and their staff. PICT staff hoped to visit constituency offices to improve this understanding. It might be helpful to continue the work begun in the survey of 22 constituency offices conducted in November 2005.

Members had a variety of requirements, from the simple to the complex. PICT was looking at ways of offering a range of service options with a corresponding range of costs, from the basic (bronze) requirement to the highly advanced (platinum). Clear processes for problem escalation were well understood by service desk staff, but how these staff and technical teams interacted could be improved.

The difficulties experienced by staff involved in the establishment of PICT had largely passed. There were opportunities for cross-fertilisation created by being able to 'see the whole pot in one place'. For example, PICT had been able to draw on the experience of former Lords IT staff to offer online training to constituency offices. A main aim was to ensure that people within the Department talked across the management structure, and that silos were avoided.

On the specific issues raised, the cost of the mobile computing service provided to Members included back-office support and warranty elements as well as unlimited use for a fixed monthly charge. Replacing the VPN with a web-based system was possible but would need the technical base to be re-established.

The Director of Operations, PICT, told the Committee that the only obstacle to providing a second email address for Members was capacity: funding would need to be found for the provision of support for 646 new addresses on the system. E-mail addresses could be configured to ensure that Members retain control of emails sent to their staff. This could be offered to Members each time they requested a new email address for their office.

PICT looked forward to receiving guidance from the Committee on priorities.

## Formal minutes

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**Tuesday 24 April 2007**

Members present:

Mr Frank Doran, in the Chair

Mr Christopher Chope  
Mr Neil Gerrard

Mr Greg Knight  
Mr Andrew Robathan

### **Information and Communication Technology Services for Members**

The Committee considered this matter.

Draft Report (Information and Communication Technology Services for Members) proposed by the Chairman, brought up and read.

*Ordered*, That the draft Report be read a second time, paragraph by paragraph.

Paragraphs 1 to 3 read and agreed to.

Paragraph 4 read, amended, and agreed to.

Paragraphs 5 to 31 read and agreed to.

A paragraph—(*Mr Neil Gerrard*)—brought up, read the first and second time, and inserted (now paragraph 32).

Paragraphs 32 to 110 (now 33 to 111) read and agreed to.

Paragraph 111 (now 112) read, amended and agreed to.

Paragraph 112 (now 113) read and agreed to.

Paragraph 113 (now 114) read, amended and agreed to.

Paragraph 114 (now 115) read and agreed to.

Paragraph 115 (now 116) read, amended and agreed to.

Paragraph 116 (now 117) read, amended and agreed to.

Paragraphs 117 to 123 (now 118 to 124) read and agreed to.

Summary agreed to.

Annex amended and agreed to.

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

Several papers were ordered to be appended to the Report.

*Ordered,* That the Appendices to the Report be reported to the House.

Several papers were ordered to be reported to the House.

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

[Adjourned till Tuesday 8 May at 3.30 pm.]

# List of written evidence

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## Memoranda submitted by the House Service

1	PICT	Ev 1
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## Memoranda submitted by Members of Parliament

2	Mr James Arbuthnot	Ev 12
3	Mr Clive Betts	Ev 12
4	Lorely Burt	Ev 13
5	Mr Charles Clarke	Ev 13
6	Rosie Cooper	Ev 14
7	Mr Andrew Dismore	Ev 15
8	Mr Don Foster	Ev 15
9	Nick Harvey	Ev 15
10	John Hemming	Ev 16
11	Martin Horwood	Ev 15
12	Mr Michael Jack	Ev 15
13	Mr David Jones	Ev 17
14	Ms Sally Keeble	Ev 17
15	Robert Key	Ev 18
16	Ian Kirkbride on behalf of Miss Julie Kirkbride	Ev 19
17	Mrs Jacqui Lait	Ev 20
18	Peter Luff	Ev 21
19	Kerry McCarthy	Ev 21
20	Ann McKechin	Ev 21
21	Mrs Madeleine Moon	Ev 22
22	Julie Morgan	Ev 22
23	Alison Seabeck	Ev 23
24	Rebecca Blake on behalf of Jacqui Smith	Ev 23
25	Ms Gisela Stuart	Ev 23
26	Jo Swinson	Ev 24
27	Mr Andrew Turner	Ev 24
28	Steve Webb	Ev 25
29	Miss Ann Widdecombe	Ev 25
30	A Member who has asked to remain anonymous	Ev 26

## Memoranda submitted by Members' staff

31	Marion Anderson	Ev 26
32	Michele De Angeli	Ev 26
33	Penny Barber	Ev 28
34	Susan Bayford	Ev 28
35	Diana Blair	Ev 28
36	Shirley Buckley	Ev 28
37	Peter Carrington-Smith	Ev 28

38	Malcolm Clarke	Ev 29
39	Phil Cole	Ev 29
40	Sarah Coleby	Ev 29
41	Mandy Collis	Ev 29
42	Alison Cornell	Ev 29
43	Alexander Davies	Ev 30
44	Alistair Douglas	Ev 30
45	Ione Douglas	Ev 30
46	Alan Evans	Ev 30
47	Debbie Fenn	Ev 30
48	Jane Gibson	Ev 30
49	Jane Gordon-Cumming	Ev 31
50	Alex Haydon	Ev 31
51	Christine Heald	Ev 31
52	Lena Huskinson	Ev 31
53	Margaret Hwang	Ev 31
54	Thomas Lockton	Ev 31
55	Henry Matthews	Ev 32
56	Philippe Minchin	Ev 32
57	Heather Millican	Ev 33
58	Veronica Oakeshott	Ev 33
59	Rory Palmer	Ev 33
60	Keith Porteous Wood	Ev 33
61	Hazel Priest	Ev 33
62	Jonny Reynolds	Ev 34
63	Richard Robinson	Ev 34
64	Ben Rowe	Ev 34
65	Paul Scully	Ev 34
66	John Stewart	Ev 35
67	Roger Thistle	Ev 35
68	Sarah Vero	Ev 36
69	Charlotte Wallis	Ev 36
70	Vivienne Windle	Ev 36
71	Alexander Woodman	Ev 37
72	Eileen Wright	Ev 38
73	A Member's employee who has asked to remain anonymous	Ev 38

**Other memoranda**

74	Parliamentary Resources Unit	Ev 39
75	Richard Allan, Head of Government Affairs for Cisco Systems, UK and Ireland	Ev 42
76	Andrew Hardie, independent consultant	Ev 46
77	Colin Lobo, UK Enterprise Risk Services, Deloitte & Touche LLP	Ev 50
78	Head of UK Public Sector, InterSystems	Ev 51
79	Intellect	Ev 52

## List of unprinted written evidence

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Additional papers have been received from the following and have been reported to the House, but to save printing costs they have not been printed and copies have been placed in the House of Commons Library where they may be inspected by Members. Other copies are in the Parliamentary Archives, Houses of Parliament and are available to the public for inspection. Requests for inspection should be addressed to the Parliamentary Archives, Houses of Parliament, London SW1A 0PW (tel 020 7219 3074). Hours of inspection are from 9.30am to 5.00pm on Mondays to Fridays.

- 1 Memorandum from Northgate Information Solutions
- 2 Presentation by the Director of PICT to the Administration Committee (17 October 2006) (also available online at <http://www.parliament.uk/documents/upload/PI21AnnexPICT.pdf>)
- 3 Correspondence between Mrs Jacqui Lait MP, the Chairman of the Administration Committee and the Director of PCD

# Administration Committee Reports in this Parliament

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## Session 2005–06

First Report	Post-election services	HC 777 (HC 1027)
Second Report	Refreshment Department Services	HC 733 (HC 1146)
Third Report	House of Commons Accommodation	HC 1279 (HC 164*)
First Special Report	Publication of summary records of discussion and committee papers	HC 659

## Session 2006–07

First Report	Improving Facilities for Educational Visitors to Parliament	HC 434
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*The House of Commons paper number for a response to a Report is indicated in brackets, with an asterisk if the response was published in the following Session.*

# Written evidence

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## Memoranda from the Director of PICT

### Initial Submission (October 2006)

#### INTRODUCTION

1. PICT is the newly formed Parliamentary Information and Communications Technology service, jointly owned and managed by both Houses of Parliament, and delivering services to the Members of both Houses. It was formed at the beginning of 2006 by amalgamating a wide range of previously separate units, including the former Parliamentary Communications Directorate (PCD). The formation of PICT creates opportunities to improve service levels to Members and exploit new technologies: we can already point to some significant improvements in the last few months, of which the dramatic reduction in the average helpdesk queuing time (from nearly five minutes to less than one, despite a significant increase in the call load) is perhaps the most tangible. On the other hand the legacy which we are working to overcome is one of incompatible systems and approaches, under-investment in resilience and lack of overall strategic planning. At the same time, the demands on Parliamentary ICT services have grown inexorably.

2. Even in the last year the number of parliamentary network accounts has risen by around 13% (to almost 8,000); the number of remote access accounts (all types) has risen by 15% (to around 3,400); and the number of calls to the PICT helpdesk in September was 57% higher than calls to the PCD helpdesk in September 2005 (now almost 9,000 calls per month—daily totals fluctuate enormously).

- PICT manages 91 IT rooms including 5 data centres and 235 servers.
- Parliamentary Network availability in 2006 so far is 99.9%.
- Parliament received 1.5 million e-mails in September that is 18 million coming in each year, all filtered for spam and checked for viruses.
- We have 2.5 Terabytes of locally stored data (equates to 416 million one-line e-mails or 80,000 Oxford English Dictionaries).
- 25 Terabytes of data is securely stored off site.
- PICT supports 143 business information systems held on servers and several 100s of small applications on desk tops.

3. PICT is still developing as an organisation and is determined to succeed in its primary objective, which is to meet the needs of Parliament and parliamentarians. *It therefore welcomes this first opportunity to engage formally with the House of Commons Administration Committee and hear the Committee's views on priorities and strategies for the next few years.*

Members use and depend on PICT-supported ICT directly or indirectly throughout the day:

- The security pass system for Members and their staff.
- Overnight print production and electronic publication of parliamentary documents.
- E-mails, telephone systems, mobile PDAs, voicemail, telephone directory.
- PCs, printers, laptops.
- Remote access for constituency offices.
- Electronic point of sale and stock control systems in the restaurants.
- Electronic tabling of PQs, tracking of Bill amendments.
- Division bells.
- Hansard reporting and webcasting of chamber and committees.
- Library systems tracking legislation, PQs, EU documents, catalogue and loans, news and legal databases.
- Serjeant's systems managing accommodation, maintenance, facilities etc.
- Payroll and expenses.
- The public website.
- Service desk and IT training.

#### (a) BEST PRACTICE IN THE WORLD AT LARGE

4. There is no single best practice solution either to the supply of ICT services to Parliaments in general or to the specific issue of multiple locations. The following paragraphs look first at the technical configuration, then at the supply model, and finally at performance measurement and benchmarking.

5. Most organisations with multiple locations, complex data and high information security requirements impose a tightly managed technical environment where users are strictly limited as to the software they may use and security of access. Parliament currently operates a more flexible model, as agreed by the previous

Information Committee, which has some necessary elements of standardisation, but is less tightly managed, because this gives individual Members greater freedom and flexibility; it also allows Members themselves to influence rules on security and acceptable use.

6. The present pattern of provision is relatively recent. Until the 2001 election Parliament provided Members with a network and dial-up Citrix access, but Members were responsible for obtaining their own equipment and support. Standard PCs (plus laptop) and printers were issued only from 2001 and the first “refresh” of that equipment is now reaching completion. Remote connectivity has developed substantially with the introduction of the first Virtual Private Network (VPN) service in 2002/03.<sup>1</sup> This year (2006) has seen the introduction of Personal Digital Assistants (PDAs) for Members and the installation of a wireless network in Portcullis House atrium. Constituency offices continue to function with a wide variety of non-standard equipment and configurations.

7. The present more flexible model works successfully on the parliamentary estate because Westminster-based in-House service analysts on x2001, backed by in-House engineers, are trained to work with the mixed technical environment and can generally trouble-shoot problems, if necessary by visiting Members’ offices. Taking into account contract management overheads and risk sharing agreements, the outsourcing of routine support would typically be 30–50% more expensive and the service level would be more formally bounded by contract conditions and likely to be less flexible for users.

8. Comprehensive support at the same level for all constituency offices clearly raises different logistical and cost issues, whether in-sourced or out-sourced, and has to address the diversity of equipment and set-ups. Flexibility comes at a cost, as the additional costs incurred by the “refresh” project have demonstrated (see section f). Again, a more restricted (“locked down”) technical environment and stricter policies on access would reduce costs, with faults more quickly diagnosed and corrected, but might be unacceptable to many Members. On the other hand, 48% of Members surveyed in October 2005 said that they would welcome the opportunity to switch from third party to in-House support of their constituency offices, assuming that PCD/PICT could offer a good service. These issues are covered in greater detail in response to questions (d), (e) and (f).

9. As regards outsourcing more generally, both public and private sectors operate a variety of models, depending on the requirement. Single contract outsourcing in central and local government has enjoyed some success, but also some high profile failures. Issues to consider include the extra cost of the contract management overheads and the risk of inflexibility/heavy additional costs if the requirement changes during the contract period. Few organisations take the risk of losing in-House capability altogether. The industry trend (advised by Gartner<sup>2</sup> and others) is towards multi-sourcing, which avoids undue dependency on a single prime contractor. Our strategy for Parliament has been to pull together and strengthen the in-House capability (hence the creation of PICT), but then to consider outsourcing specific components of the service in terms of risk, quality and value for money. At present the following areas have significant outsourced elements:

- Telephone operator bureau and voicemail system.
- Telephone maintenance.
- Installation and warranty-covered support of desktop equipment.
- Network engineering support.
- Data backup, spam management.
- Electronic publishing and web hosting (including education website).
- Major application support (PIMS).
- Major application development (HAIS).

10. This mixed model of in-House provision and outsourcing has been established in Parliament in order to address the issues of providing flexibility of services for Members while at the same time using a range of “best of breed” external providers to deliver specialist services. This model means that the in-House provider must be able to manage effectively a wide range of external contracts: PICT created a new expert team in May 2006 specifically to achieve best practice in ICT procurement and contract management.

11. *We believe that the task of supporting Parliamentary ICT is best carried out by a mix of in-House and strategically outsourced components and that the support of core parliamentary functions (including the work of Members) is often best done by dedicated teams who can gain a better understanding of how Members work and are able to develop knowledge of the parliamentary environment.*

12. Because Parliamentary IT management was fragmented before the creation of PICT, there was no systematic approach to performance measurement and benchmarking. PICT has been developing a new user-oriented performance “dashboard” of key performance indicators. This is still work in progress—for example, the main service desk case logging software has just been upgraded to capture more useful information. Third quarter data will be available shortly and will be provided to the Committee.

<sup>1</sup> A voice and/or data network with protected access that offers the features and characteristics of a private network, even though the communications pass over the public network.

<sup>2</sup> Gartner is a research-based company recognised as a credible and independent commentator on the use of IT in organisations across the world.

13. PICT is also working to obtain a fuller understanding of the true costs of ownership of systems as a prelude to benchmarking. Two specific benchmarking exercises have been initiated recently, both with the involvement of Gartner: one looking at the overall costs of infrastructure and staffing at the higher level of analysis; the other looking in much greater detail at the service desk and desk-side engineering team.

14. *PICT is fully committed to achieving best practice in both performance measurement and benchmarking and would welcome the views of the Committee as to what measures it would wish to see in future.*

#### (b) DEPARTMENTAL STRUCTURE AND GOALS

15. PICT was established January 2006 as a fully joint service, but awaits legislation enabling staff to be moved to a jointly employed basis. It replaces the nine separate in-House units (including PCD) which previously provided ICT services to the Members, Departments and Offices of Parliament. The aim in creating PICT (backed by HC Commission and HL House Committee) was to create the basis for more strategic management of assets and staff, improved services, smarter procurement and contract management, improved programme and project management and better risk management. The overall aim of PICT is to achieve best practice in the delivery, support and implementation of ICT in Parliaments.

16. The Director of PICT (Joan Miller) was appointed jointly by the corporate officers (Clerks) of both Houses in September 2005 and sits on both Management Boards, working with the appropriate Member committees in each House. Both Houses have corporate strategic plans and PICT is charged with delivering the ICT elements in both plans. There are dedicated ring-fenced budgets for Member Services in each House, but PICT is able to negotiate single contracts and services providing better value for money for both Houses. The requirements of both Houses are in practice very similar and in many cases can be met most effectively through shared solutions. The option of separate solutions remains where this is more appropriate.

17. Early goals for PICT naturally reflected the change from nine separate IT teams to a single joint House service and the need for continuity of support during the transition. As far as possible normal services were maintained to Members and to departments of the House throughout the transition. Ongoing projects were also supported, while the reorganisation proceeded behind the scenes. Significant effort was put into risk assessment and elimination of single points of failure. High priority was given to resolving the difficulties with the VPN (see below).

18. The emphasis has now shifted to customer-oriented service improvement (see section (e) below) and realising the strategic benefits that can be obtained through technical consolidation, strong programme management and a “whole enterprise” view of information architecture. PICT will be drawing up a new strategy and business plan by January 2007 and *would welcome the Committee’s views on how the goals for Member services should be set.*

19. The content of the Parliamentary ICT strategy is influenced (but not necessarily determined) by broader trends in public sector best practice, such as the transition to “e-government” and, more recently, to “t-government” (transformational government), ie the improvement of public services in quality and efficiency, using electronic infrastructure to reconfigure services around citizen/customer needs.

20. A parliamentary example of this is that PICT is responsible for developing the technology platforms to support a radical upgrading of Parliament’s public website as called for by the House of Commons Modernisation Committee in *Connecting Parliament with the Public* (2004). Similarly, if the recommendations in the Modernisation Committee’s latest report (*The Legislative Process*) are agreed, PICT will work with the Clerk’s Department and House of Commons Library on new ways of exploiting ICT to support the legislative process.

#### (c) IT STABILITY V FLEXIBILITY

21. As explained above, the decision to provide a very flexible software mix on PCs or laptops (as opposed to a “locked down” environment) reflects the wishes of the previous Information Committee and the recommendations of the SSRB as approved by the House. The security controls (password management and login restrictions) used by PICT have also been determined for us by a joint committee of both Houses that took advice on national requirements for good practice in this area. PICT works within the guidelines established by the House, its committees, and the House of Commons Commission, including policies on the distinction between parliamentary and party use and on security, and these can sometimes limit the range of technical options available.

22. This flexible model allowed the former PCD to achieve a highly stable network at Westminster with a reasonable level of connectivity for constituency offices. The improvement in the main network connection has been maintained by PICT, and the resilience improved further with work carried out over the summer of 2006. However connectivity via the new VPN was somewhat degraded during the first half of this year, owing to an issue caused by our supplier and which has now been resolved (an illustration of our dependency on external contracts in a key area). Since July the VPN has been working well. The network remains vulnerable to mainly localised disruptive incidents, such as power outages, but to a lesser extent than in earlier years. There have also been occasional incidents when Members or their staff have inadvertently disrupted services to others, eg by introducing their own local wireless setup.

23. The model allows Members a degree of freedom which appears to meet most requirements. The downside of this is that the wide range of Member office environments makes support (including routine replacement and upgrading of equipment) more costly and problematic than it would otherwise be. Similarly, the extension of support services, which many Members said that they would welcome when surveyed, will be more difficult to provide as long as the present diversity remains.

24. Mixed provision of support also raises IT security issues because PICT cannot ensure that locally engaged engineers have appropriate levels of knowledge and security clearance. It is essential for the security of the network that machines connected directly to Westminster via the VPN are adequately protected and managed, whatever flexibility is allowed in other respects. The Administration Committee and the Joint Committee on Security have already approved measures to improve IT security and to promote a strong IT security culture: PICT is taking these forward.

25. *It is for Members to decide how much flexibility they require in their use of ICT. Looking at technical, logistical and security issues alone, greater standardisation and a more managed IT environment would bring benefits. The Committee's view on whether further standardisation is feasible and desirable would be very helpful to PICT in its future planning.*

#### (d) CONSTITUENCY PROVISION

26. The target recommended by the SSRB and set by the House that “the level and range of IT support offered to constituency offices should be improved to a level comparable with that offered on the Parliamentary Estate” is challenging if “comparable” is taken to mean “similar”. The two main issues are the speed and reliability of online connections, and the speed and quality of technical support. Some significant progress has been made. For example, measures have already been taken to provide training for Members’ constituency-based staff and to increase the resources available at Westminster to deal with remote fixes.

27. Gaps in the quality of service clearly remain. Neither the VPN, nor web-based services give Parliament the degree of control over connectivity that it has on the Westminster Estate. The decision by BT in 2005 to increase domestic ADSL bandwidth has helped, but future changes in bandwidth and internet traffic could impact on web-based connectivity. On the other hand, a network of private land lines connecting constituency offices to Westminster would be extremely expensive to install and rent.<sup>3</sup> While a business case may be made for significant new expenditure on constituency support, we assume that the Members Estimate Committee will expect costs to be contained within reasonable limits.

28. The consultant tasked with investigating constituency support reported at the end of January 2006 with a wide range of detailed recommendations based on 247 returned questionnaires and 22 visits to offices. Many of the recommendations concerned the nature and quality of service offered to constituencies from Westminster and the great majority of these have been taken up in the course of the fundamental reorganisation of service desk (helpdesk) staffing and processes and the subsequent Customer Service Improvement Initiative. This is covered further in section (e). The strategy to date has been to optimise the support that can be offered to constituencies from the centre on the grounds that other solutions to the local support requirement are likely to be both expensive and complex to implement.

29. Local IT support covers a range of services. Delivery, installation and repair of equipment can generally be covered by the procurement arrangements, supplemented by extended warranty. However, for most Members, support also needs to encompass the setting up and maintenance of small local networks, installation and training in the use of software and routine “health check” site visits to check on system set-up, apply any routine upgrades, check on file management, and back-up and check on the general serviceability of equipment (ie preventative maintenance and advice). These were the key areas where Members when surveyed felt that they needed local support.

30. It is probable that yet more advice and “remote fixing” can be provided from Westminster and the technologies to enable this are still developing, but full support as defined above will require at least occasional site visits and some new approaches to software support. We understand that most Members would prefer a single point of contact and a service which recognises and works with their specific requirements. Many of the Members surveyed last year wanted what they described as a “field-engineering force” managed directly or indirectly by Parliament.

31. Assuming that Members require IT support in their constituency offices as summarised above, and that at least some also value the ability to have non-standard set-ups, locally supported, the best way forward seems to be for PICT to offer a range of differentiated and clearly defined service levels. These could be branded—platinum, gold, silver etc—for maximum clarity about responsibility and sources of support. For example, “platinum” might provide a PICT-supported local area network (LAN) for PICT equipment only and connectivity guidance for any non-PICT equipment, with next day on-site technical support and regular “health checks”; by contrast a minimal “bronze” service would offer only connectivity for PICT provided laptops.

<sup>3</sup> There would be new costs each time that a constituency office changed location. A rough estimate suggests initial installation costs of around £2.2 million and annual rental charges of around £12.5 million.

32. Recruiting and managing a UK-wide force of PICT engineers specifically to support Members' offices is possible, but a more feasible alternative would be for PICT to manage a third-party contract or contracts with regionally-based suppliers, ensuring suitable levels of security clearance and quality control, with the PICT service desk, appropriately resourced, providing a single clearing house and "one-stop shop" for Members. A permanent new service with significant cost implications would need to be approved in due course by a resolution of the House.

33. In the interim, given appropriate approval and funding, a pilot enhanced service could be developed for a sub-set of constituency offices from January. Proposals for full implementation would then be brought back to the Committee in the spring.

34. *The Committee's views and recommendations on these issues would be of great assistance to PICT given that much depends on understanding Members' changing requirements, the acceptability of different models for support and the likely take-up of different options.*

#### (e) CUSTOMER SERVICE

35. The PICT Director of Operations, Matthew Taylor, has overall responsibility for Member services. Reporting to him are Members Computing Officers for each House and a Customer Services Manager who oversees the service desk, service engineers, customer services team and user training.

36. The PICT service desk currently operates between 8.30 am and 8.00 pm on weekdays when the House is sitting and between 9.00 am and 6.00 pm when it is not. Between these hours Members may either call the desk on x2001 or email with specific requests for service. In addition to this, the service desk is staffed from 11.00 am to 3.00 pm at weekends. Issues referred to the service desk are either resolved by the analyst taking the call or passed to a more specialised engineer who may visit a Member's office if necessary. Site visits may also be made to constituency offices to deal with PICT-provided equipment, if problems cannot be resolved remotely.

37. PICT's service desk has been reorganised over the summer, with improved organisation, processes, software, training and staffing. Despite the continuing growth in calls to the service desk, this work has enabled a further marked reduction in the time that calls wait in the queue to be answered—from a weekly average of around four minutes to under one minute (and under 20 seconds for significant periods). Twenty seconds has been set as a sustainable short-term target and this is now within our sights.

38. Many of the other concerns raised by Members and their staff in the October 2005 constituency questionnaire have also been addressed.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, one of PICT's key objectives for 2006–07 has been to improve the level of services for Members and their staff. For example, we have run a series of customer services training sessions over the summer recess to ensure that our staff understand and are focussed on our customers' concerns; as set out elsewhere in this paper we launched new services for mobile devices and wireless connection; and we are developing a new training strategy to include floor walking and surgery services at Westminster, for implementation in March 2007; constituency support proposals are covered in the previous section; a constituency wireless network pilot is planned for January/February 2007.

39. A second phase of the customer service improvement initiative has recently begun. The emphasis is on improving the rate at which problems are resolved. This involves redesigning the service engineer (desktop support) function, and in its first two weeks has increased the work rate of field engineers by 10%. This initiative will also investigate how the customer services team can be organised to provide the prime point of contact for MPs and their staff, for implementation in January 2007. Current proposals are that the Members Computing Officers and customer services staff will be brought together into one team to provide this prime point of contact for all queries other than service desk queries.

40. There are several other areas where PICT is seeking to improve services to Members over the next year. We are currently examining the feasibility of extending PICT service desk and Westminster engineering support to a full 7 day a week, 24 hour a day support model. The opportunity arises from the creation of PICT because the business case depends on bringing together the support arrangements for the network, individual users and critical applications such as those which support overnight publication of House documents.

<sup>4</sup> The main recommendations arising from the Members survey were:

1. Improvement in helpdesk services, including reduced wait times and optimise service response and process at the first point of contact at the helpdesk.
2. Service engineer customer service at Westminster was generally felt to be satisfactory, but improvements in wireless network access and mobile connection support was requested.
3. PICT should assess the options for increased hours of support to reflect the hours worked by MPs and constituency offices.
4. Improvement in training support, with floor walking support for MPs. WWP courses were felt to be good but needed more publicity.
5. Improved services to constituency offices, with more localised technical support and training and local area network management, and if feasible, wireless networks for more flexible constituency office use.
6. PICT to develop and increase the role of the Customer Services team to be the prime point of contact with MPs and office staff on all IT matters, apart from the day to date operation and use of the Service Desk.

41. We also plan to extend and improve the user training which is offered to both Members and their staff. We would like to look at this alongside the training offered to Members' staff by the Department of Finance and Administration and to develop a more flexible range of training offerings. This again would respond to the findings of the constituency support survey. While we accept (another point from the survey) that Members' constituency staff do not see themselves as technicians, a better level of awareness would reduce the need to make calls to the service desk and promote better housekeeping of IT equipment which in turn will reduce the number of service failures.

42. *We would welcome the Committee's views on the priorities for further improvements to customer service.*

(f) NEW EQUIPMENT ROLL-OUT

43. There has been a full "lessons learned" exercise on the Members' equipment refresh project 2005–06. Given that Members newly elected in 2005 had been provided on arrival at Westminster with new Dell equipment, Windows XP and Office 2003, the aim of this project was to provide the remaining 520 returned Members with the same updated equipment and software. This was a complex logistical undertaking. One of the conclusions of the "lessons learned" exercise is that, although the contract offered excellent value for money in terms of equipment unit costs, we underestimated the complexities of installation, and therefore the project was initially under-resourced.

44. In particular the third-party engineers engaged to carry out installations frequently encountered complex non-standard set-ups in Members' offices, with customised and locally loaded software needing to be transferred to new PCs, and as a consequence time-consuming "scripts", including complex data transfer, had to be devised. At the same time some Members assumed that the contract provided for a higher level of service than was actually the case. There were also problems in obtaining full survey information in advance on such matters as space constraints, availability of power supplies and the layout of network ports and in a few cases this meant that it took two or three visits to complete one installation.

45. *When the time comes for a further refresh, we believe that, however the contract is structured, there should be a dedicated engineering team trained to understand Members' requirements and that the level of service should be specifically agreed in advance by the responsible committee on behalf of Members. Consideration should also be given to a more closely managed deployment schedule:* difficulty in contacting all the Members concerned and arranging convenient times for installation has meant that the 2005–06 refresh has taken longer than planned and that Members who have not responded (20 as of 5 October) will be updated by regular PICT staff after project close.

(g) FUTURE EQUIPMENT

46. PICT is keeping pace with technological change in many ways. An interim wireless solution has just been put in place for the atrium area of Portcullis House. This new service, which will be publicised more widely in the next week or two, will allow Members full access to the parliamentary network using their laptops in the atrium area. We are planning a fuller solution to this requirement by April 2007, which will extend wireless coverage to other suitable areas of the parliamentary estate, including internet access for Members who have XP on their own laptops.

47. We have also addressed the particular requirement previously identified by the Administration Committee<sup>5</sup> for temporary wireless access to the parliamentary network in selected temporary Member accommodation in the period following an election, and this is now ready to put in place whenever an election is called. This would involve temporary surface cables and antennae in committee rooms and is therefore a tactical solution which would be installed during a dissolution and removed once all Members have moved into their offices. A more permanent solution would involve further detailed planning as a range of options could involve buildings and furniture disturbance. If the Modernisation Committee proposals are approved this year, detailed planning will commence immediately.

48. This year also sees the implementation of mobile computing for Members. The PDA (personal digital assistant) pilot has been completed successfully with 50 Members from both Houses and the business case has been approved for full implementation. This means that any Member who wishes can now request and receive a PDA and approximately 50 PDAs have been provided over the summer recess period. A further 450 devices for both Houses will be available for delivery by the end of the year. PDAs allow Members mobile access to most network functionality, including emails, calendar, tasks, word-processing, spreadsheets, internet access and, of course, mobile telephone calls. A possible development for the future would be to offer access to parliamentary web pages (including Hansard) in small screen format.

49. We are currently appraising possible solutions to the problem of poor mobile phone reception in some parts of Portcullis House. This will also affect PDAs—but we expect to resolve the problem by September 2007.

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<sup>5</sup> *Post-election services.*

50. The redesign of the intranet is intended to improve search and navigation for all users, but it also provides the opportunity to re-group pages dedicated to Members' services in a virtual "Members' Portal", where via the web we would bring together access to all Member services from a single page.

51. This would tie in with plans to develop and improve Members' access to financial and other transactional information. This could include, for example, some self-service functionality in Agresso through a web front end, for submission and review of Members' expense claims. A feasibility study is due to begin in April 2007. A separate strand of activity will look at the feasibility of offering other services to Members via the parliamentary intranet, eg Refreshment Department bookings and payments. *The Committee's views on priorities in this area would be very helpful.*

52. The Committee asked about plans for the annunciator system following analogue switch-off. PICT works in this area in collaboration with the Parliamentary Estates Directorate. Provisional plans have been made for a phased changeover starting in 2010. The exact nature and phasing of the changeover is yet to be determined and full consideration will be given to the relationship between the annunciator system and other systems, such as the intranet.

53. *Information and Communication Technologies are developing rapidly. It would be a high risk for Parliament to rush into adopting every new offering that appears on the market, particularly given the continuing requirement for secure and resilient systems. On the other hand we recognise that Parliament should not and does not wish to lag behind in using technology to manage information and communicate. The creation of PICT provides an opportunity to develop our infrastructure strategically and provide services that respond dynamically to the needs of Parliament.*

54. *We would also like to take this opportunity to consult the Administration Committee about how it would like to be involved in decisions about new developments—whether it would wish to hold regular meetings with PICT management on service levels and priorities, or whether it would prefer to review issues and progress on an annual or half-yearly basis.*

#### **Further submission: response to evidence submitted to the ICT inquiry (January 2007)**

##### **A. SUMMARY**

1. There were several core themes arising from the evidence to the Administration Committee's inquiry into Members ICT. The evidence to the inquiry recognises that a high level of ICT service and support is required to support the efficient working practice of Members, and that their Parliamentary work is conducted in a mobile and time critical manner which increasingly relies on the effective working of ICT outside, as well as inside, the Parliamentary estate.

2. Until now, ICT has been funded to provide a high concentration of service on the Parliamentary estate. Members are supplied with PCs, printers and Microsoft email and Office services which connect to the parliamentary network. PICT employs IT engineers to maintain and mend equipment and provide services on the Parliamentary estate and trainers directly support Members at Westminster.

3. Since 2001, a range of network connection services to the Parliamentary network have also been provided to Members in their constituency offices and from their homes, and since 2006 from a mobile device. The current level of funding for country-wide ICT provision is however limited and does not cover support for privately procured equipment, nor does it cover wider constituency office network or software services. The maintenance and support for ICT services outside of Westminster has been largely provided remotely through the telephone Service Desk (extension 2001) and through 3rd party sub contractors. Some of these 3rd party services (for instance BT and Demon) required direct involvement by Members or their staff to invoke the service and to register faults.

4. There is evidence that the ICT support provided at Westminster has improved over recent years, but it is also clear from the evidence to the inquiry that this does not adequately support Members in their wider role outside of Westminster and the level of support to constituency offices is confusing and inadequate for the high level of dependency that Members have on these services.

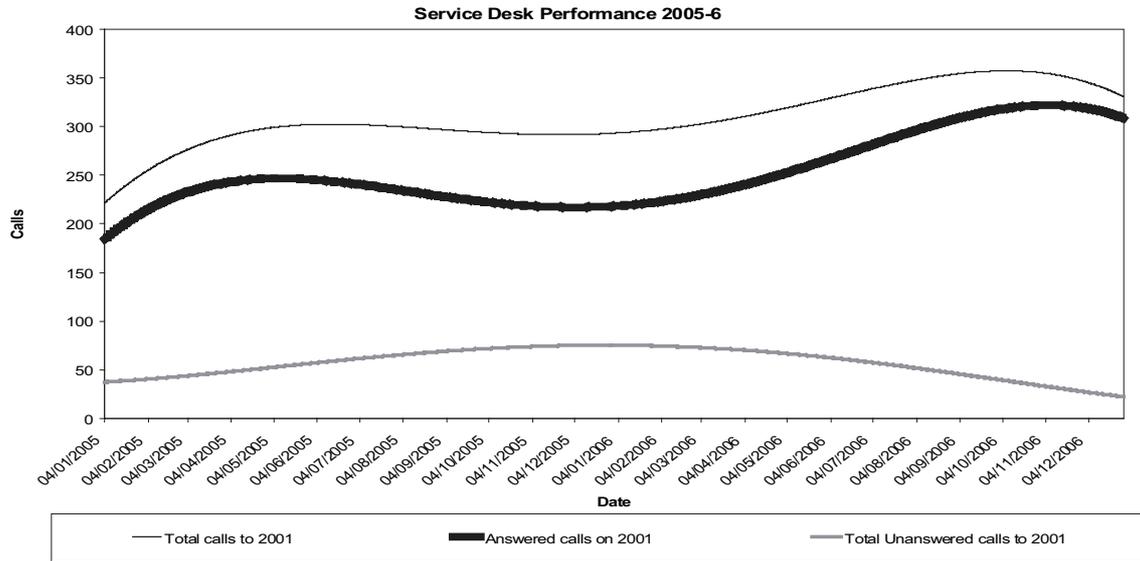
5. Four key themes arising from the Inquiry have been addressed by PICT in their response to the Administration Committee on 30 January 2007. These are:

- the requirement to continue to improve the quality of ICT service currently provided to Members;
- the discussion on the reconciliation of the advice of several experts to provide a more standard fixed desktop software environment versus the requirement to provide a flexible desktop services that is tailored to individual Member's requirements;
- the requirement to increase the level of ICT support to constituency offices; and
- the development of new ICT services to support Members' work.

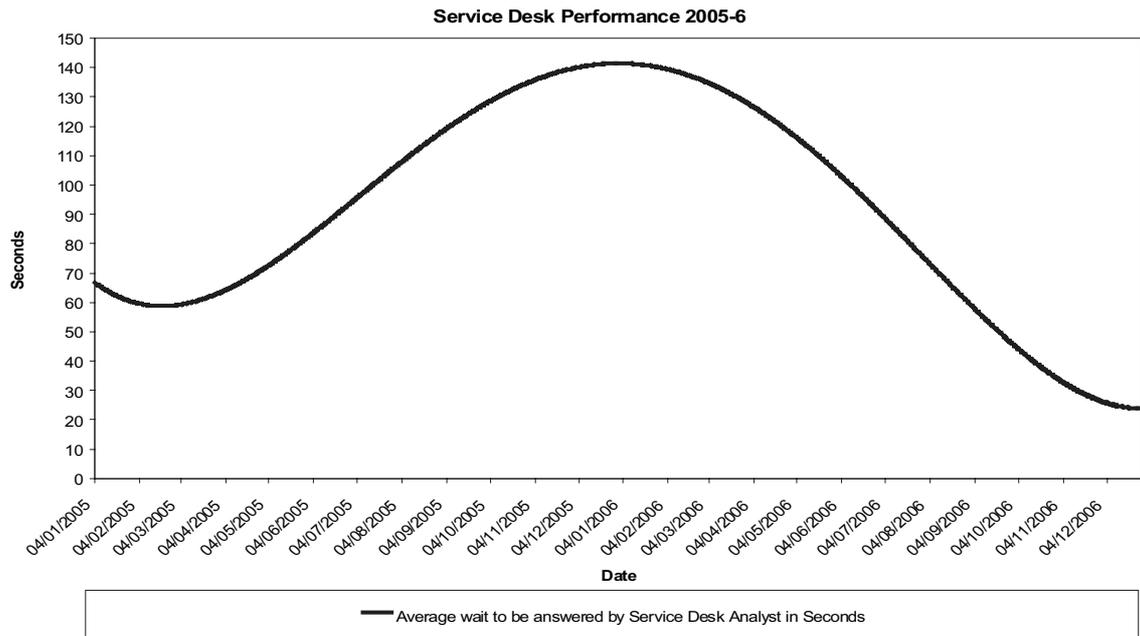
6. PICT has read the evidence to the Inquiry and analysed in further detail the four core themes described in the sections below. This analysis describes the situation of funded service today, the actions that PICT has taken to improve services during 2006 and the actions planned to improve service further during 2007. The analysis under each theme also describes options for consideration for further improvements.

B. THEME 1: CONTINUE TO IMPROVE SERVICES CURRENTLY PROVIDED BY PICT

7. Since June 2006, PICT has been working on improvements at the Service Desk. Against the background of a year on year increase in the total number of calls to the Service Desk, a greater proportion of those calls are answered and the number of calls now lost are the same or less than comparable national benchmark figures.



8. The time to respond to telephone calls has also improved to meet national benchmark standards, with most calls now being answered in less than 30 seconds.



9. PICT plans for future improvements to Members’ services include:

- Provide Members with a one-stop-shop for all IT services, with a single point of contact to provide a co-ordinated service and which will provide management for 3rd party contract services as well as PICT directly provided services
- Extension of service desk and network support hours to provide 24 hrs x 7 days a week cover.
- Continue the improvement in service desk response, with ongoing training and improved and joined up customer record keeping.

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### C. THEME 2: RANGE OF EQUIPMENT AND STANDARDISED DESKTOP PROVIDED TO MEMBERS

10. The current services and range of equipment that PICT is authorised to provide to Members are outlined in Annex 1. This list reflects resolutions of the House on Members' allowances and decisions of the House of Commons Commission or Members Estimate Committee. The Annex also identifies the services which PICT is not authorised or funded to provide.

11. The additional services which PICT plans to provide in 2007 are outlined in Annex 2. These services include additional hardware items in the catalogue, as well as additional network services and security backup services. In particular, PICT plans to develop additional wireless network services around the Palace of Westminster.

12. Current IT training is delivered through a 3rd party training organisation that provides Members and their staff with IT training courses, but from 2007 PICT's training service will be increased to provide improved remote desktop software support (system shadowing) from Westminster and e-training services will be available remotely to a desktop, using a virtual classroom. The 3rd party training contracts will be reviewed after evaluation of these developments.

13. The question of a standard desktop has been raised during the Inquiry, and PICT seeks Members' advice on this issue. Members are individual customers rather than a single customer group, and are sometimes compared to individual small businesses. However, the service provided by Parliament must be consistent and impartially available for all Members and so does require some level of standardisation. The current position is that PICT is authorised to provide a standard set of hardware and software, but apart from that there is little standardisation of the desktop environment. The advantage of this situation is that it provides Members with high degrees of flexibility, but the disadvantage is that flexibility makes the desktop more difficult to support, more difficult to introduce general improvements, and it is more difficult to diagnose problems if there is a fault.

14. Some options which PICT is considering:

- PICT intends to identify and work more closely with the top five software suppliers to Members to encourage joint working and support. This approach is intended to cover all the main suppliers of casework management software.
- Our development plan includes deploying more web based services, which will allow flexible access and help to accommodate a more standardised desktop with the support advantages that have already been described.
- For those Members seeking to work independently from the Parliamentary Network we have piloted the provision of direct ADSL to their Westminster office for those who wish to receive it at their own expense.
- We will be revisiting logging in processes and password management as well as the desire for private and generic emails accounts. This will include measures to safeguard the privacy of Members' communications when staff transfer employment from one Member to another.

15. During 2007, PICT will investigate the feasibility of increasing Members' file storage space, along with archiving procedures.

### D. THEME 3: IMPROVE CONSTITUENCY SUPPORT WITH NEW SERVICES (WITH THE IMPLICATION OF ADDITIONAL COST FOR THESE SERVICES)

16. Services provided to Members at Westminster are reported for the most part as being effective for provision and support of equipment and software that PICT is funded to provide. PICT acknowledges that support for constituencies is less effective than the services provided at Westminster. The increased reliance on electronic communications and systems to support the core work of Members, and the increased workloads in constituencies have resulted in a substantial increase in the number of requests for constituency support and for increased levels of service to match Westminster levels of service. This must be considered alongside the levels of resources required to support the geographically diverse nature of customers. PICT is not currently funded to provide services in that geographic dimension. In our initial investigations we have assessed a number of options and their potential costs for Members to consider.

17. The options include:

- 24x7 hours support services for service desk, servers, network (see theme 1 above).
- Account management to provide a single point of contact for services to constituency offices. This would involve PICT managing the interface with 3rd party contracted services to provide a cohesive managed service for procurement, installation and maintenance of equipment.
- Further web-based services—such as virtual “drop-in surgeries” and extended remote command of the PC software.
- A managed LAN (local area network) in constituency offices and a higher specification of network connection to Westminster.
- Regional support units (probably 3rd party contracts).

18. The cost of the 24x7 service, account management and virtual “drop-in surgeries” for constituency support are included in current plans and will be introduced at no additional revenue cost.

19. Indicative costs for offering LAN support and network based improvements (which will require clearer specification and market testing) have been estimated to be in the region of £6.1 million to implement and £6.3 million to run per annum thereafter. If instead of the options above, new dedicated lines to connect constituency offices to the Parliamentary network are introduced, there is an estimated indicative cost of £7.4 million implementation and £9.9 million per annum running costs. This assumes full take up and is based on the highest specification of equipment and 3rd party support available. They should therefore be seen as an upper limit for this type of improvement. In the event that PICT is authorised to take these options further a full business case would be drawn up and costings put to the Members Estimate Committee/House of Commons Commission.

20. Indicative costs for Regional support units would be subject to market investigation and are likely to be provided through 3rd party contracts.

21. One fundamental constraint for providing increased ICT services from Parliament to constituency offices will be clarity of service level arrangements at Dissolution. Members’ are reminded that all of PICT’s services are funded for Parliamentary use only. The overlap between parliamentary, political and private use of ICT is an issue that already exists and as ICT systems generally become more integrated, is likely to intensify as an issue for the future.

#### E. THEME 4: DEVELOPING THE RIGHT LEVEL OF ENGAGEMENT TO PROVIDE A MEMBER STEER ON FUTURE IT SERVICES

22. ICT is a fast moving subject and new services and products are constantly being introduced. In this environment, PICT seeks guidance on how to develop the relationship with Members and the Administration Committee in order to identify the new products that will best support Members in their work. This range of services could include:

- The provision of webcam services for video links from Westminster to constituency offices to provide Internet video links.
- Web services (Members’ portal, website framework, blogs, forum, communicating with the public).
- Range of channels for delivering electronic documents (Personal Digital Assistant , text alerts, voice alerts, group communications).
- Mobility of services—eg login from anywhere.
- “Electronic Committee” options.

23. As requested, PICT will add additional items to the catalogue which Members can choose to purchase if they wish. If widespread demand is seen for a particular item or revision to list of items available on loan, then this will be brought to the attention of the MEC, via the Administration Committee and APMA. If appropriate it will be submitted to SSRB as part of their deliberations via formal evidence.

#### Annex 1

##### SERVICES THAT PICT IS CURRENTLY AUTHORISED AND FUNDED TO PROVIDE

The catalogue of ICT services offered to Members reflects resolutions of the House on Members’ allowances and decisions of the House of Commons Commission or Members Estimate Committee concerning central services such as user training. The catalogue of services are set out on the Intranet. An outline of these services is given below.

(\* = new services provided since June 2006)

##### HARDWARE

- Loaned PCs and laptops (up to 5) and printers (up to 2). Since July 2006 there has been additional flexibility to the mix of laptops and PCs that can be selected.
- Option to buy PCs, printers, remote access tokens from the Parliamentary catalogue.
- Installation of new Parliamentary hardware, data transfer and disposal of old equipment.
- Saturday installation of equipment for Home addresses (not Westminster), from November 2006.
- PDAs, connection and support from July 2006.
- Free telephones and call charges in Westminster.

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#### NETWORK CONNECTION, SECURITY AND BACKUP SERVICES

- Remote access via VPN, Web (SSL VPN using a token) or Citrix.
- Upgrade of broadband connections for home and business users to 2, 4 or 8Mb. This is supplier driven and reflects improvements being offered across the broadband market, commenced October 2006.
- Wireless access in Portcullis House atrium since September 2006.
- Anti-virus and Anti-spam and secure access to the Internet (\* new and more resilient links to the Internet from Westminster, December 2006).
- File storage space on the U and S drive with secure backup service, new data storage system introduced and data migrated to new service in December 2006.
- 3rd party data recovery service for failed hard drives from November 2006.

#### SOFTWARE

- MS Office Professional and email services (XP, W2003).

#### SUPPORT AND TRAINING

- Service desk support, 8.30–20.00 Monday to Friday in sitting period, 9.00–18.00 Monday to Friday in recess period, 11.00–15.00 weekends. \* New processes at the Service Desk have improved call response times at service desk from July 2006 and a dedicated remote access team was established to deal with Member remote access queries from October 2006.
- 4 year Warranty hardware support provided via Dell.
- On-site PICT engineering support Westminster user.
- New user training at Westminster.
- Members' staff receive newsletters with hints and tips normally once per term.
- Drop-in surgeries in the eLibrary for themed and general technical support.
- 3rd party (WWP) software training for Members.

#### PICT IS NOT CURRENTLY FUNDED TO SUPPORT

There are a wide variety of assumptions about services that PICT might provide, but which currently PICT is not funded to provide. These assumptions relate primarily to equipment bought privately by Members and to the extended services that might be required by Members in the constituency. Some of the common services that cause confusion are outlined below:

- Remote local network support (LAN) for constituencies.
- Routine onsite support to locations outside Westminster (other than Warranty calls).
- Support to Members' own equipment.
- Members' own software installation and support.
- Software applications other than MS Professional and MS Exchange.

**Annex 2**

#### IMPROVEMENTS TO SERVICES SCHEDULED FOR 2007

##### HARDWARE

- Speakers to be added to catalogue.
- Web camera to be added to catalogue.
- Skype type phone to be added to catalogue.

##### NETWORK CONNECTION, SECURITY AND BACKUP SERVICES

- Improvements to Mobile phone reception in Portcullis House.
- Extended wireless access to other shared areas eg Libraries, and Internet access for Members own non-standard equipment.

##### SUPPORT AND TRAINING

- New user online induction service—avoids need to travel and attend classroom based induction, introduced January 2007.

- Commenced MS Office application e-training and support January 2007.
- Further improvements to service desk quality of response.
- Dell and PICT Service Desk warranty calls integrated through 2001, with a review of all 3rd party support contracts to achieve a “single point of contact” service.
- Improved remote desktop software support (system shadowing) from Westminster.
- e-learning services provided remotely with a virtual classroom.

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**Memoranda from Members of Parliament (October 2006, unless otherwise stated)**

MR JAMES ARBUTHNOT (November 2006)

1. Information Technology is, world-wide, always a problem. People expect more from it than the underlying technology can provide. To some extent that reflects the reliance we all now place on it. But we do, and we need quick and competent support from those whom we ask to provide it.

2. PICT does not provide quick and competent support, and PCD before it did not do so either. It is not a good organisation. And it is a monopoly organisation. While there are shining individual exceptions to the string of whinges I set out below, they are exceptions:

- PCD/PICT was one of the last organisations in the House of Commons to deal with complaints by e-mail, an odd reflection on an IT support organisation.
- Complaints and requests for information are slow to be dealt with, whether by e-mail or otherwise.
- It took Alex Peterson, the Defence Committee media officer, a fortnight to be issued with a mobile, a ridiculous thing to happen in the media world.
- It seems the provision of equipment is decided on the basis of taking what PICT decides rather than what the customer wants. As an exception to this, the mobile computing trial was well handled, although PICT had insufficient clout to iron out a software glitch (the failure to indicate on e-mail icons that an e-mail has been replied to or forwarded).
- The Dell computers and printers issued to us all are sub-standard. The laptops are too heavy (Dell doesn't make a lighter one), the printers are often failing and the memory provided in the computers is inadequate. It seems all to have been dictated by price.
- In my office we use a case management system called CMITS, as do over 100 MPs. The impression we have gained is that PICT have been inefficient and obstructive in dealing with the suppliers of CMITS. One example is the obstacles put in the way of the concept of scanned documents and paperless correspondence being sent over the e-mail system. This concept needs to be embraced, not blocked.
- The approach to wireless technology has been old-fashioned, slow and obstructive.
- I understand that the way the system has been designed makes it impossible to have remote access from home to documents on servers in the House of Commons.

3. Resources, no doubt, are highly constrained. The results show in the quality of service we receive. Probably we pay very badly. Perhaps another trouble is that those who in the end make the decisions about IT are not knowledgeable about it and have no interest or understanding of the money it needs. More importantly, they have no vision of where IT could help, or of where it could take us (the good and the bad parts of that).

4. But on a positive note, when at long last the spam protection was introduced, it did work. In that, though in little else, there has been a dramatic improvement.

MR CLIVE BETTS

1. I am writing in response to the review which is being conducted into members' ICT services. I enclose some notes which have been done for me by Peter Carrington-Smith, my constituency assistant who deals with computers and IT matters. His notes indicate some of the problems we have with the current arrangements which I am sure other MPs also experience. (*See Ev 28 below for Peter Carrington-Smith's response.*)

2. There is a further problem. I have suggested I be given two e-mail addresses: one which would be public and would receive all my general correspondence and which my staff could filter first, and the second which would be a private address on which I would receive specific confidential correspondence. This would mirror the arrangements we have in the office for correspondence delivered by post. I am told other MPs have had similar requests denied because of the problem of capacity on the system. I have to say I do not understand this as there would not be any more e-mails generated but, simply, more ways of dealing with them would be available to myself and other MPs.

LORELY BURT

Service very good.

Ms DAWN BUTLER (November 2006)

1. PDAs—regardless of the network should be able to connect to the server via WIFI or using push technology. As the decision has been made to use a windows based system all compatible phones should be accepted and Members should be able to access their emails/calendars etc.
2. Failing number 1 PDAs should be offered to members at cost price not inflated prices (average price £200).
3. Labour MPs—Labour Ministers—should be separate categories on emails. Members should have the option to opt in.
4. Remote access needs serious improvements in speed and connectability. Spell check should also be available when sending emails remotely.
5. There seems to be a high turnaround and this results in PICT staff being very inexperienced.
6. Please refer to Modernisation Committee in regards to other IT issues.

MR CHARLES CLARKE

1. I think that the central point that I want to make is the need for a greater flexibility in the equipment which we use. This can sometimes appear to be in contradiction with both security and the boundaries which Parliament rightly needs to enforce in ensuring that Parliamentary resources are used only for Parliamentary duties but I do believe that it is important if usage of parliamentary ICT support is to be maximised.
2. I can perhaps best illustrate the point by reference to my own experience over recent months.
3. As Home Secretary the IT system I used was principally the Home Office's own system. The software used for such basic functions as diary management, e-mailing and address book contact management was the government Home Office system. Security was obviously a particular concern with Home Office matters and this is reflected in their systems. I was able to divert my parliamentary e-mail address to my Home Office PC and this did help but otherwise there seemed to me to be little common ground between the governmental and parliamentary systems. This was also true, by the way, at the Department for Education and Skills.
4. During this period I also had a PC at home where I did a great deal of both Government and Parliamentary work, mainly over the weekends but also at other times. This was and is an independent system with my own home e-mail address and different software for diary management, e-mailing and address book contact management. Security considerations meant quite reasonably that I could not work on certain aspects of Government work from that PC. We changed the PC when at the beginning of this year the Parliamentary authorities installed a new Commons issue PC including connection by BT Broadband wireless rather than hard-wire, which I very much welcomed. By the way the Parliamentary service through this change was excellent.
5. Throughout this period I did little or no PC work in my Parliamentary office. However the various software incompatibilities (or so it seemed to me) meant that I could not access my diary, or update my address books in ways which ran across both of my systems.
6. When I left the Government, I decided to change my arrangements by working from my Parliamentary office in London and so moved my PC from my constituency to my office in Parliament. This highlighted again the software incompatibilities, so that for example on my laptop I work off Outlook Express, while in Parliament it's Outlook, on my laptop it's Microsoft Works while in Parliament it's Excel or Outlook Contact management. I can access my diary in my Parliamentary office but not on my laptop.
7. Very irritatingly I cannot use my laptop in Parliament at all. The wireless connection simply does not function in Parliament (though I can use it in Schiphol Airport or the Conference Hotel in Manchester for example) and the dial-up to my server does not seem to function from any 219 number. (*Update (April 2007): I have subsequently been told that I could dial-up via a 219- fax number in my office, though not a phone number.*)
8. The consequence of this is a constant juggling between my two systems so that diary, addresses, word-processing and so on have to be constantly e-mailed between my two systems.
9. I should add that it is perfectly possible that I have not fully understood how to maximise my current arrangements and I am not doing some things that I could do better. The PICT support service has been polite and helpful but, as I have understood what they have said to me, they simply cannot solve some of the problems I have.
10. So even on the basis of the experience I have described, I believe that there is a case for more flexibility, for example by having a wireless system in Parliament, allowing Outlook Express or Microsoft Works to operate on the Parliamentary system. No doubt the PICT experts can devise improvements in the current system.

11. I have solved my own problems by setting up a workstation in London outside the Parliamentary estate and putting in place the necessary connections between the two. But I cannot believe that this is an effective way of operating.

12. All the work which I have so far described has been Parliamentary or Governmental.

13. However, the flexibility which I have described becomes particularly important at the time of a General Election, when MPs can no longer have access to the Parliamentary system.

14. Disentangling the e-mail, address, word-processing and spreadsheet (less so diary) material as between "Parliamentary" and "political" is very difficult, and it is often necessary at the time of an election to create a whole new series of systems to deal with the election period. This problem may not be soluble, and I do fully respect the principle that sitting MPs should not secure Party advantage versus their opponents by reference to their incumbency, but I would urge you to consider whether there is any way in which the type of more flexible approach which I am suggesting could also be extended to cover election periods.

15. I hope that these observations are helpful and constructive, as they are intended to be. I am conscious that my own ICT expertise is limited and so I may well have missed solutions which will appear obvious to those more expert than I am, and I am of course happy to discuss the situation further if that helps.

ROSIE COOPER

1. I am writing in relation to Administration Committee's inquiry into computer and ICT services provided for Members. I have a very poor overall opinion of the services provided by ICT based on my personal experiences and those of my staff. There have been a number of occasions when we have been let down when it comes to resolving technological problems.

2. On occasions my Constituency Office has been brought to a standstill for weeks due to the failings of PICT and the companies with whom they have contracts. As a Member who does not have a staffed Parliamentary Office being electronically cut-off from the constituency has grave consequences. As I have commented to PICT if I was a business I could probably sue for loss of business. As you fully understand as MPs our failings are counted in the loss of votes at election time.

3. The first instance was the failure to inform me that the broadband connection was to be switched off because it was still registered in the name of my predecessor whose office I now occupy. This was just the start of the problems. It took nearly two weeks for the problem to be resolved. My concerns are not just about the initial error but the subsequent customer service failures that followed.

4. I think it is clear from this experience that the contractual relationship Parliament has with Demon and subsequently BT is not to our benefit. There are no special arrangements in place to resolve problems with any urgency. It was abundantly evident that PICT had no leverage with either company required to solve this problem. Given our reliance on electronic communication and our roles as representatives of the people this is wholly unacceptable.

5. I would not like to calculate the number of hours my constituency manager spent on the phone to Demon trying to resolve this issue. The responsibility for resolving the problems lay in departments that were not "customer-facing". This meant we went through a protracted process but could not deal directly with the people who could solve the problem. At no point were we able to speak to any senior people within Demon. Systemic failures are annoying enough without people breaking promises as well. There were occasions when we were promised people would return our calls but failed to do so.

6. Therefore, as a customer it appears that the PICT team whilst working hard to get a quick resolution have no leverage given I am sure this is not an inconsequential contract. If I decide to seek resolution myself then the customer service failings mean I am prevented from doing so. If this is how Parliament and its members are treated by these companies then I dread to think how other customers are being treated.

7. In September the constituency office lost connection to the VPN. The member of staff called the PICT helpdesk to sort out the problem. We were advised to turn off the router by the PICT staff at which point it ceased to function. After a discussion with the PICT team we were connected to Demon and informed that a BT engineer would be sent the next day to replace the router. It was not until Wednesday 27 September that the engineer arrived at the office. By this time the constituency office had got the router working again otherwise my constituents would have once again been without any service from my office and my staff would not have been able to carry out their jobs.

8. I have also experienced problems with the computer equipment purchased through Dell, which has meant swapping my laptop on several occasions as well as a staff members' computer in the constituency office. Once again I would not like to estimate the amount of time my staff have had to waste because of computer equipment failing. We have had PICT engineers travel up to the constituency in an attempt to resolve the problems without real success. One example is the virus software would work for a month then would prevent the user from logging on. This required my member of staff spend at least one hour at a time on the telephone to PICT in an effort to resolve the problems. After months of this problem returning and not being resolved I demanded new computer equipment from PICT. But this has meant a member of staff spending valuable time on the telephone to PICT rather than dealing with constituency work. It seems there

is a failure in the process to identify a recurring problem. As a high street customer the product would have been returned to the shop and replaced. PICT does not appear to work in this way but instead persists with failing equipment.

9. From my personal experiences I believe there are fundamental questions that need to be asked as to whether Parliament is getting what it is paying for and if it offers value for money. There are serious failings in the infrastructure of the service, customer service and the quality of the equipment. It is evident there needs to be serious consideration in the tools PICT has at its disposal to effectively and efficiently deal with these problems.

10. I firmly believe there are clear systemic, process, and customer service problems that need to be tackled to ensure Parliament is receiving the level of service we need in order to serve our constituents. It is unviable for MPs staff to spend a large proportion of their time having to resolve these problems. PICT needs to take greater responsibility in cases were there obvious problems. They are the ICT specialists after all and it shouldn't really be the responsibility of an MP and their staff to solve the problem.

MR ANDREW DISMORE

We could do with another printer. Also a printer that does colour copy and fax combined like the old ones did.

*Update:* Also printers that are reliable. The Dell machine we have is continually breaking down even after replacement

MR DON FOSTER

1. In light of the Administration Committee conducting an inquiry into computer and ICT services, I'd like to take the opportunity to share some of my views and experiences with you.

2. I was delighted to receive several new computers in June of this year as part of the Refresh Project. However, since having these computers installed in my constituency office, my staff and I have experienced a number of problems which I have outlined below.

3. When my new computers were installed, it was necessary to network them via a local server so as to enable my staff and me to deal with my casework load more effectively. The networking work was undertaken by a local company, Computer Village. The software we use to conduct my casework, Casework Manager, is provided by yet another company, EARS.

4. We had numerous difficulties which began after about a week; at various times we were unable to access our Casework software, send files to any of our printers, access the parliamentary intranet and on several occasions were not able to logon to some machines whatsoever. As I'm sure you can imagine, this had a most disruptive effect on the workings of my constituency office and at times threatened to undermine my ability to serve my constituents.

5. Although all my employees are proficient computer users, they do not possess the necessary expertise required to solve these problems on their own. As a first point of call they contacted PCD but were subsequently advised to contact Computer Village. Computer Village visited my office and apparently "fixed" the problem, only for my staff to return to work the following day to find the same difficulties had reoccurred. Computer Village then referred us back to PCD, who referred us back to Computer Village who in turn suggested we contact EARS. This constant referral, with no one organisation willing to take responsibility, went on for at least 6 weeks until the difficulties were eventually overcome.

6. It would have been so much easier, and saved so much time, if a computer engineer from PCD could have visited my constituency office. I think it would also be extremely useful if PCD were able to take responsibility for all of the computer systems within a Member's office. This would presumably prevent other Members wasting so much time acting as "go betweens".

NICK HARVEY

1. The mobile computing services being offered are a big disappointment, not least the choice of network which is of limited use in many rural areas.

2. On a second but important point, I have lobbied without success for MPs to be offered a private inbox as well as our published e-mail addresses. It is bonkers that we employ staff to answer our phones and handle our correspondence, but our inboxes are clogged with every bit of nonsense anyone in the world chooses to send.

JOHN HEMMING (July 2006)

1. At the moment I am trying to get an ADSL link for my office as I cannot use the Parliamentary Network for email. I am told that there should be a report going to the next administration committee to establish this which would be useful for a number of Members. I hope this comes to pass.

2. There are some good things about the provision of services, but it is very inflexible and there are a lot of problems.

MARTIN HORWOOD (November 2006)

1. Thanks for the opportunity to respond to your inquiry.

2. My career has been spent in the national offices of a variety of charities of varying sizes and, for a few years immediately before my election last year, in a private sector marketing agency. ICT support was supplied in a variety of ways both in-house and contracted out.

3. I have to say that although individuals are often friendly, helpful and professional, the PICT service overall seems to me one of the poorest I have received in a professional environment and not very well tailored to the parliamentary pattern of work.

4. Some problems may be partly the result of having to operate systems in an ultra-secure environment but others just seem clumsy. Why for instance, do I have to log on first with a "PCD 2001" code, then Ctrl+Alt+Delete and then with my username and personal password? As everyone uses it and it hasn't changed in years, the first is hardly secure. The second is redundant as the screen tells you what to type. The third would therefore suffice.

5. Basic customer care processes also seem to be poor, with calls and problems having to be chased up for resolution, sometimes over weeks. If they are being systematically logged, it must be too easy to regard the call as resolved when it has only been responded to or when a few calls have been made. Only last week I responded to a call back from PICT only to find the job had been marked "closed" because they had left me a message!

6. My constituency office had months of problems when I was first elected and felt very neglected compared to the efficient provision for me in Westminster the day I arrived. Support for remote locations should be very good in an organisation like ours which has 600+ remote offices but their impression then was that PICT was much better geared up to support staff and offices in Westminster.

7. Having said all this, there are clear signs of improvement in the service and technical performance of the network. My constituency office in particular would say that the service now is generally good.

*Update (January 2007):*

8. Just to add a concrete and recent example for your ICT inquiry. I reported to PICT for the umpteenth time a few days ago my problems synchronising my PICT-provided PDA with the main server to update my diary, email etc. The software encountered repeated problems every time I changed my password.

9. I was helpfully told they thought they might have a fix and that I should arrange to bring the PDA over to Millbank. Today, as there was a risk of a vote at any time on the Sustainable Communities Bill I rang 2001 to see if someone could collect it if they were passing. I didn't have a reference number but suggested they might find the job by my name as I had reported it myself. They brought up a record for me but it had no recent mention of the PDA or any offer to fix it. Only the mention of the same problem reported several months ago. Anyway, it was duly collected, ActiveSync reinstalled and the PDA returned to me.

10. The Sync software still isn't working. No doubt the job is once again down as resolved.

11. I can't really speak for PICT's technical ability. The best ICT support I have ever had in previous jobs still had occasional difficulties resolving technical problems. What makes PICT pretty unique is its apparent inability to log and monitor jobs effectively so that it can't tell whether they've really been sorted out or not.

MR MICHAEL JACK (November 2006)

*Note: Mr Jack was Chairman of the House of Commons Information Committee from September to December 2003.*

1. I was flattered to be invited to contribute to your Committee's inquiry into Information Technology but have to say that I do not see myself as an expert in this field. When I was Chair of the Information Committee, I was about to embark on work which would have paralleled some of the very important areas you are to enquire into it.

2. It was my intention, as point (a) in your Request for Evidence indicates, to try and establish some form of benchmarking arrangement with other major users of IT to ensure that we were getting the best possible service in Parliament. To that end, it had been my intention to see if it might have been possible for the

Committee to have visited other parliaments to see how they handle their IT needs. One of the problems we seem to face in the House is that service provision is handed down from on high. This in my judgement was witnessed by the way in which the roll-out of the new equipment took place. There was no user consultation about the types of equipment that it was hoped to purchase. We were simply advised that Dell had been chosen and this was the range of “kit” available. For example, when I pointed out that one of the printers selected would not fit under the shelves in Portcullis House, shocked looks went over the official’s face but no action followed thereafter to try and correct the problem.

3. One of the major drawbacks is that there appears to be little discussion between PCD and users of the system about what would make life easier for us. For instance, I have a penchant for voice recognition systems. This could well help to improve the productivity of Members whose keyboard skills like mine are not particularly good. However, it is not until now that we have had a piece of software in the shape of the Windows XP Programme which I understand has built into it a voice recognition system. If this technology exists it might have been useful to have run some form of trial to see whether in fact Members’ productivity via the IT system could have been improved by the use of this innovative form of technology. One of the problems which does concern me is the dependence we all have on the helpdesk for the resolution of problems. Whilst individuals on the desk are remarkable for their ability to get us out of difficulties, problem-solving can become a challenge, especially when local IT practitioners come up against some of the security barriers which are built in to our system and which can prevent an easy solution to what appears to be a straight-forward problem.

4. One problem you might care to consider is trying to influence the Chairmen’s panel on where IT equipment can be used. Given the plethora of hand-held devices which enable Members almost anywhere in the Palace of Westminster to be connected with the outside world, it does now seem somewhat archaic that laptop computers and similar devices are essentially out of order when it comes to use in the Standing Committees.

5. Sometime ago I achieved a breakthrough in this respect by getting the House to agree that Members could take laptop computers into Select Committees. However, we have never fully exploited this potential partly because committee rooms such as those in Portcullis House are not wired up to enable Members to fully utilise the system in the context of Select Committee inquiries. Equally the same situation is true in our committee rooms. However, with the advent of wireless technology this could soon be remedied thus enabling Members to have access to the wealth of data on the internet thus improving their ability to cross-question and hold Ministers to account. Given that the House now provides the opportunity for Members to have hand-held devices which can connect to their parliamentary emails and the intranet, the old restrictions in Standing Committees does seem to be somewhat out of date.

6. I would certainly not advocate the use of laptop computers in the Chamber of the House as our procedures there do not lend themselves to the use of IT equipment

7. I hope these few thoughts are of assistance to your committee.

MR DAVID JONES

I would find a wireless network invaluable and wonder if one could be established.

MS SALLY KEEBLE

1. Thank you. I imagine you are being inundated with responses—so here are just a few points:

- The computer service needs to gear up—we got our new laptop upgrades too late—we need computers and upgrades faster.
- We could also do with some better software. I bought at considerable expense a casework management system—apparently the MSPs get the same software installed routinely for their offices.
- The mobile computing service is not very good. The synchronisation works well in my Westminster or Northampton offices, but does not seem to work when I am travelling around. This is very irritating, since a mobile unit needs to work when you are mobile. It may be that the technology is just not up to scratch yet to achieve this.
- The help line needs to improve—it is very hard when you are working at evenings or weekends out of hours and cannot get through. It is also incredibly irritating when you phone up on a Monday morning and find that all the specialists are busy! I do wonder whether the people who work on the helpline have had any induction into MPs’ work.
- It seems sometimes as if there is a bit of a one-size fits all service. I’m not clear that the computer services have worked out the different way that different people on the parliamentary estate and in the constituency offices work, and therefore the different requirements we have of the computer

service. MPs need easy access from four points—Westminster office, London home, constituency office and constituency home. I've lost track of who provided the access in my London or constituency homes—and what to do if it breaks down. I also think it is important that our two offices should be properly connected so that they can operate effectively as one office.

- There keep on being rumours that we may have to pay separately for our internet access from our constituency offices—that would be a disaster.

2. Having said this, the service is transformed from what it was in 1997 when you bought and serviced your own computers. It's just that comparing it with, for example my husband's, who works for a large accountancy firm, ours is pretty basic. The staff who provide the help line service are usually very helpful when you get through to them—it is a question of service design and training which I think is the problem.

3. Probably like a lot of colleagues, I rely on my computer a lot and find it incredibly frustrating when things go wrong.

*Update (March 2007):* One point I should have included before, but did not, is that the space we have on the system is too small—it means our inboxes get full too quickly. All it takes is a couple of PR firms to email around pictures and sometimes that is about enough to do it!

ROBERT KEY

*Note: Mr Key was Chairman of the House of Commons Information Committee from January 2004 to May 2005.*

1. I will answer the questions as best I can.

*(a) Best practice in the world at large: How are ICT services provided in other organisations, both commercial and public sector? How are such services provided in organisations with distributed systems and multiple locations?*

2. In other organisations and business units with which I have been associated, ICT services in both the commercial and public sector have always been centrally designed and centrally administered with centrally selected hardware and software. I am glad that the House of Commons has now moved to this position from the chaotic situation of a few years ago when Members could purchase any kit they liked— with disastrous consequences.

*(b) Departmental structure and goals: How is PICT (the new joint service for both Houses) working, and how does it manage demand from different user groups? How are service levels being set? What strategy exists for providing Members' IT requirements?*

3. Since the Information Committee was disbanded after the last General Election in 2005, I am not able to comment on the setting of service levels nor on strategies. However, I fear that PICT and its staff are not regarded by either themselves or the more “traditional” service providers in the House such as the Library and the Serjeant-at-Arms Department as “part of the team”.

*(c) IT stability v flexibility: Has the right balance been struck between (1) stability/quality of service and (2) flexibility for Members to arrange their ICT provision to suit their individual working patterns?*

4. Yes.

*(d) Constituency provision: How is progress being made towards meeting the target set by the House that “the level and range of IT support offered to constituency offices should be improved to a level comparable with that offered on the Parliamentary Estate”? When will the VPN be of a standard comparable with the network standard at Westminster?*

5. Constituency provision is still unsatisfactory. The installation of the latest generation of computers and associated equipment was managed very badly indeed. Different contractors turned up at different times to address different faults and errors in the installation of the generic equipment provided by PICT. There were endless delays. There were extremely expensive visits involving staff from PICT at the House of Commons travelling down to Salisbury to find out what was going on. The service offered by the VPN is still not satisfactory. There is far too much “down time”. I have always maintained that it would be far more efficient to allow on-site maintenance work in the constituency offices to be undertaken by a properly qualified local engineer—such as I have been using for years in Salisbury.

*(e) Customer service: What human IT support do Members need and at what hours? How successfully does current customer service meet Members' needs?*

6. Customer Service is getting good—when you can get it at all. The response to a telephone call to “2001” is much better than it was. However, I really do not think it is unreasonable to ask that Members of Parliament should have a different number to staff. Our needs are different. The time at which we can sit at our desks and do emails is limited. The time we can hang onto the telephone as we crawl up the queue is simply not reasonable. This is particularly true when our office staff are based in our constituency and we are often on our own in our offices at Westminster.

*(f) New equipment roll-out: What lessons have been learnt from the roll-out of new IT equipment to Members following the 2005 election?*

7. The roll-out of new equipment to my offices in Salisbury was many months delayed and when it happened it took some weeks to settle down. I hope lessons have been learnt

*(g) Future equipment and service need: What progress is being made on the mobile computing project and on wireless networking within the Estate? How will Members benefit from the redesign of the Intranet? What provision will need to be made when the current (analogue) annunciators become redundant?*

8. I cannot comment on mobile computing. However, I am quite astonished that it is still not possible to use mobile phones reliably within Portcullis House and other areas of the Parliamentary Estate.

9. Thank you so much for giving me the opportunity to comment.

*Ian Kirkbride, on behalf of MISS JULIE KIRKBRIDE*

*(a) Best practice in the world at large: How are ICT services provided in other organisations, both commercial and public sector? How are such services provided in organisations with distributed systems and multiple locations?*

1. PDVN services are generally well provided compared to others I've seen. They have a good and straightforward provision of services to remote systems. The Contivity client is easy to use and importantly does not have the restriction of a static IP. This provides huge flexibility—hopefully not at the cost of too much insecurity. Services at the Commons are good but the network can slow at peak times. It has got better. External Internet access is quite slow compared with what a home user would expect. Perhaps due to the proxy, security, filtering.

*(b) Departmental structure and goals: How is PICT (the new joint service for both Houses) working, and how does it manage demand from different user groups? How are service levels being set? What strategy exists for providing Members' IT requirements?*

2. Don't know.

*(c) IT stability v flexibility: Has the right balance been struck between (1) stability/quality of service and (2) flexibility for Members to arrange their ICT provision to suit their individual working patterns?*

3. Not quite. While stability and consistency of equipment is important the equipment choices remain somewhat limited. A little more choice would be better. There is also a good argument for allowing a Member to choose all laptops so they can be taken home etc. Having a desktop makes sense at the Commons but you just don't have the flexibility to take it away when needed. A secretary with home broadband, can work efficiently from home at weekends, or recess or if a child is ill.

*(d) Constituency provision: How is progress being made towards meeting the target set by the House that “the level and range of IT support offered to constituency offices should be improved to a level comparable with that offered on the Parliamentary Estate”? When will the VPN be of a standard comparable with the network standard at Westminster?*

4. We've generally found PDVN support to be good. Where problems arise it is usually because things are difficult to diagnose at a distance but the ability to take remote control of the machine usually helps.

5. Two things would help . . .

6. A default local administrator account (on this Computer) (not in the Parliament domain) on each machine. This lets you get to grips with problems better at the local level. It also allows network transfers between non-parliamentary machines for large files, backup etc. It adds a level of flexibility that is very useful. You have to ask for a default admin account it is not done automatically on provision.

7. Some way to see that you are getting the proper updates on remote machines. Am I getting Windows updates? Am I getting anti-virus updates? Am I getting anti-popup updates? Am I getting Cybergatekeeper updates? You can search for these things and look at the logs—but who does—but an icon, or a downloading popup would give a better level of confidence. At the moment I think I get AV every time I login provided I'm connected to the internet whether I'm connected to Parliament or not. I think I have to do anti-poppups by hand. I think I get Firewall updates when I connect to Parliament. I do not know if I get Windows updates automatically when I connect to Parliament. I do not do manual Windows updates since I don't know what a locked-down Parliamentary laptop will allow to install. Could this be made clearer to users—maybe in a visual way?

8. The VPN is not bad and sometimes Parliament is slower! VPN speeds have improved in the last six months after the big search for the problem. We have found VPN into Parliament followed by Citrix-LAN is very efficient. The biggest headache is the number of times the VPN connection is lost. Not huge but probably at least once a day. We suspect it is happening at the Parliament end. This could be improved.

*(e) Customer service: What human IT support do Members need and at what hours? How successfully does current customer service meet Members' needs?*

9. Pretty acceptable now. Normal business hours seem reasonable. Sometimes you have to wait for a more technical person to get back to you. That can tie you down when you need to be elsewhere. A specific time callback would be nice even if it is a few hours away or the next day.

*(f) New equipment roll-out: What lessons have been learnt from the roll-out of new IT equipment to Members following the 2005 election?*

10. There needs to be a communal "wish list/check list" for items provided in the future. In the last resupply we got caught out that the new all-singing all-dancing printer couldn't do multiple envelope feeds but the old one could. Hence we had to keep the old one. Maybe we should have spotted it but for that kind of printer we should be able to expect batch envelopes as standard. It's a must for constituency mail!

11. Do we have the Windows cab files. We don't see them? It hasn't happened yet when we've loaded a program but we keep expecting the "insert your Windows installation disk" to appear. Without cab files that could cause problems.

*(g) Future equipment and service need: What progress is being made on the mobile computing project and on wireless networking within the Estate? How will Members benefit from the redesign of the Intranet? What provision will need to be made when the current (analogue) annunciators become redundant?*

12. Don't know.

13. The new Dell laptops which we will presumably have for the next 4–5 years run 802.11b.g. The b and g technologies have problems passing through stone and brick so I see that as a problem for a wireless Westminster unless there are very many local access points. I'm told the n technology goes a long way towards improving this problem but that would mean plug-in cards for all the laptops. Pity.

MRS JACQUI LAIT (July 2006)

1. Following on from the email dated 13 July, asking members to submit their comments for the forthcoming enquiry on the parliamentary IT provision, I wanted to supply the following information.

2. As you will remember, correspondence passed between us late last year, and I enclose copies of this, and other letters to PCD, for your reference.<sup>6</sup> On the point (f) on new equipment roll-out, many lessons must be learnt on the unnecessary duplication of work, and the lack of knowledge by engineers and especially those who visited my constituency office and had to be talked through the installation manual.

3. On the point (g) on future equipment, I understand that PCD were trialling I-mate K-Jam and that it would tie in with the parliamentary system. I think this is a good idea and would like to be kept informed on the outcome. You will be aware that each party's whips office also uses blackberrys and pagers for contacting members and it would be helpful if discussions could take place so that these could synchronise with the parliamentary system.

4. My Inbox/Delete Box needs to be deleted roughly every 300 items. This is ludicrous. I should be able to store thousands in my delete box. When are we to get a server upgrade?

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<sup>6</sup> Copies have been deposited in the House of Commons Library.

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PETER LUFF

1. I stand by the comments I made in my submission to the Administration Committee last November.<sup>7</sup> It is my strong belief that MPs should be free to buy the computer equipment of their choice, provided of course that it complies with the specifications laid down by the Parliamentary authorities. However, as I suspect that this is a battle that I will not win, I would like to focus my comments on the printers with which we have been provided.

2. Even if it is necessary for technical reasons to limit Members' choice of computers, it surely cannot be necessary to apply the same restriction to printers. Our printing requirements are so different that it is absolutely essential that we are free to choose our own printers. We must be able to choose the machines that suit our own particular needs.

3. To make matters worse, I think that the quality of the DELL printers is inadequate. My printer is unable to cope with large volumes of correspondence, and stages a mutiny every time I attempt to feed it more than a single envelope. As a result, I will be forced to dip into my allowance to buy a machine that is actually fit for purpose, which will leave my DELL printer redundant. I think that most people would agree that this is an inefficient way to spend taxpayers' money.

*Update (February 2007):*

4. I am finding the very limited size of the parliamentary mailbox increasingly frustrating. As constituents and others send me larger and larger attachments, the ridiculously small size of our mailbox is becoming a real problem.

5. I understand that the box is only in the order of 200 megabytes. My hotmail account, for which I pay a measly sum each year, has ten times that capacity.

6. The size of the box poses a particular problem when working remotely, as for some reason I don't seem to get warnings when the mailbox is approaching its limit. The material I send and then delete the original, gets lost.

7. We really do need bigger mailboxes.

KERRY MCCARTHY

1. I have an intern who has to work in the library on Thursdays because my office is full on that day—he has complained that the internet connection on the computers there, and in the PCH library, are very slow, and the PCs have crashed a number of times, causing him to lose work.

2. I've also had real problems with remote access on my laptop, to the extent I've stopped using it now and got myself a 3G datacard.

ANN MCKECHIN

I would wish to draw to the Committee's attention the issue of maintenance of IT equipment outside the Estate and the method by which this is organised. When equipment failures have occurred within the Estate I have found these are normally resolved quickly and I can easily speak to the person who is taking direct charge of the problem. However during the summer recess my constituency office lost all email/internet access. It also effectively turned off the networking between the office computers. We duly contacted PICT on the Tuesday and advised them that the problem was either with the phone line or the router box—the complaint was then passed on by PICT to Demon, the internet provider who in turn then passed it on to BT. By chance we were provided with the contact details of the staff member at Demon dealing with the problem although this is not normal PICT practice—my staff member pointed out that BT was a very large organisation and that as there were two possible sources for the problem, it should be reported to the two different divisions of BT. However despite this, three BT engineers turned up without notice at my office eventually on the Friday morning. I had to leave while they were still examining the line and returned to be told that they couldn't find a reason and had simply left without offering any further help. Back again to PICT then DEMON who had to report this again to BT's Broadband division and told that the earliest someone could arrive (from about no more than two miles away) with a router box was the following Tuesday. No one at PICT or Demon could or would reveal who was dealing with the problem at BT despite the fact that it was my problem! The replacement of a standard router box took all of 15 minutes but my office was effectively hamstrung for over a week. This is frankly a poor level of service and I see no reason why as a PICT customer I cannot be fully informed of who is dealing with a repair regardless of which organisation they are working for—the principle of customer service and a firm focus in problem solving rather than passing the buck was largely forgotten. I hope we can aim for a better service as I don't think our experience was an isolated incident.

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<sup>7</sup> Previously published with the Committee's First Report of Session 2005–06 on Post-Election Services, HC 777, Ev 6.

MRS MADELEINE MOON

Time is tight so I hope you will accept bullet points:

- Constituency computers work extremely slowly and saving to the S drive is painfully slow though improved of late.
- The printer we have, Dell 1600 frequently breaks down and is expensive to buy toner.

JULIE MORGAN

1. Thank you for the invitation to contribute my views in the consultation over services to Members. I want to raise the following issues which I will take in order:

1. ICT Services.
2. Increased Telephone costs.
3. Standard advice texts.

#### *ICT Services*

2. Over the last year my constituency office has experienced an unprecedented volume of complex constituent casework. In May of this year the premises next door to my constituency office became vacant and accordingly I decided that it was opportune to rent this additional office space for a dedicated casework office and advertise for interns to work in my constituency office, releasing time for my senior caseworker to spend on more complex cases.

3. There was a need to move quickly to deal with the casework and I instructed my office manager to arrange to have the premises furnished and equipped as quickly as possible. I authorised the purchase of two new computers for interns to work on but on reviewing the PCD catalogue he was dismayed to find that it could take up to 28 days for the equipment to be delivered and installed. He then took the decision, as the interns were already in place and working, to purchase two brand new computers from Dell and these were delivered within days.

4. These steps happened to coincide with the renewal of computer resources in my office and my Office Manager, unaware that this might cause any problem, asked the PICT contracted engineer to connect up the two new Dell computers purchased for my interns and to configure them to access VPN. My Office Manager was present whilst this work was undertaken and overheard several conversations between the engineer PICT during this connection and configuration.

5. Unfortunately on 9 June one of the new machines installed by PICT—the lead machine—under the refresh developed a hardware fault which led to a system crash. A new component part had to be installed on this machine under warranty by Dell. This problem was not fully resolved until 16 June 2006 when network facilities were restored. However, VPN access for the two new computers purchased direct from me by Dell was denied. On enquiry, Jane Quirk, Customer Services Manager at PICT advised that the computers should not have been connected to the Parliamentary network in the first place as the computers were not purchased from PICT and that access would not be reinstated. I gather PICT then contacted the engineer's employer with the end result that he was rebuked for connecting up the two machines. I thought this unfair as all parties had acted in good faith, nobody was aware of PICT's rule that only computers bought through them will be given access—so far as I am aware there is no mention of this in the PICT catalogue—and PICT had actually collaborated with the engineer in the connection process.

6. Lack of access to the Parliamentary network from the two new computers has been a source of significant difficulty and frustration to my staff and interns in my constituency office. I now understand that if I had purchased the two additional computers from PICT there would have been no problem connecting them up to the Parliamentary network so clearly capacity is not an issue (and so far as PICT is concerned that is the solution open to me, purchase two further computers from them). I therefore cannot see any logical reason why new equipment which I have purchased from the same supplier as used by PICT, ie Dell, for the better discharge of my parliamentary duties cannot likewise be connected. I can understand the need to protect the network from attack by viruses and trojans etc but new computers connected up by PICT accredited engineers surely protect against that danger. For my part I would be prepared to meet the cost of a PICT accredited engineer to verify the system but I have to say I do not think that was necessary on this occasion because the work was done to PICT standards by an approved engineer.

7. I would be grateful if you could investigate this case with a view to securing access for my two “offending” computers, both purchased from my IEP budget. As you will appreciate the IEP budget is not large and when you are attempting to run a relatively large office to meet the demands of constituents it is essential that money is used wisely and I do not think it would be a reasonable use of these funds to replace the existing Dell computers with two new ones purchased from PICT. Access to the Parliamentary network will improve the services I can give my constituents from my constituency office. I would also welcome a review by your Committee of the need for this apparently draconian rule. As I say I appreciate the need to keep the Parliamentary network safe and secure but within this objective I think there is scope for some flexibility.

*Increased Telephone Costs*

8. Most people appear to have a mobile phone these days and require my office to respond to mobile telephone numbers with consequent higher telephone charges. I think the allowance built into the IEP for telephone expenses needs urgent review and upward revision to take account of this change in lifestyle of our constituents.

*Standard Advice Texts*

9. The casework brought to us by our constituents seems to present increasing complexity. An obvious example is in the field of tax credits. A caseworker cannot make relevant and effective representations without at least a basic understanding of how tax credits work and are calculated. The Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG) and the Legal Action Group publish a number of excellent handbooks and guides in the field of welfare benefits, child support, council tax valuation and enforcement, housing and council tax benefit, council housing disrepair, homelessness and immigration. New editions are brought out annually bringing the works up to date. CPAG are also the consultant editor to a Social Security Legislation series in 4 Volumes published by Thompsons. This series is used by the Tribunal Service and is updated annually. It affords excellent value as statutory provisions are annotated with helpful explanations including meanings and relevant cases decided by Social Security Commissioners are detailed.

10. It is hard to make the IEP budget stretch to all these resources and I wondered whether there is any scope for the House to bulk purchase the range of basic texts, securing a bulk discount from the relevant publishers, and provide these as of right free of charge (outside the IEP) to Members who wish to avail themselves of the facility for their constituency offices. I would be happy to provide further details and publishers of the relevant titles if this was helpful.

ALISON SEABECK

1. Thank you for your email. As a previous staff member in the House of Commons and now an MP, I would say that we are probably one main computer and printer short of what we could comfortably use. I have worked for a London MP whose constituency office was based in the Commons and now have both a constituency office and London office myself.

2. I am having to give my laptop to my second staff member to use in London and therefore I am without a connection I can use in my Plymouth home or when travelling to my constituency. In the constituency I have to hot desk with my staff and then have real problems accessing my account. This problem still has to be resolved.

3. In terms of the back up service—on the whole this is good but my recent experience was that it was slow. My Adviser was without a computer for five days. What might be helpful is being offered a laptop whilst work is being undertaken rather like a car is often offered if you are having your car serviced. It would at least enable word processing to continue if nothing else is possible.

4. Training is good but my difficulty is getting a staff member up from Plymouth to London in order to do the basic training before being given an email address. This man has trained people to use computers and therefore is very computer literate. He has caring commitments which make a day in London virtually impossible. Not sure we are set up to deal with this type of circumstance.

*Rebecca Blake, on behalf of JACQUI SMITH*

Thank you, for what is for me a good service. The only thing I would like to contribute is that I would rather have to log in only once to access the Parliamentary internet instead of twice.

MS GISELA STUART

1. The PDVN helpline is usually very good, but when the equipment was swapped over, the failure of PDVN staff to understand how our broadband connections worked was a source of major frustration [why did it take three months of frustration before I talked to Demon who told me that the boxes were no longer functioning and we needed new ones?]

2. Also it seems that the new printers use toner cartridges at a fairly speedy rate and unlike the previous arrangements we can no longer shop around for low prices.

JO SWINSON

The mobile computing devices are brilliant! The PCD helpdesk on 2001 are also excellent. The constituency VPN link is sometimes quite noticeably slow, however.

MR ANDREW TURNER (November 2006)

1. PICT is responsible for IT support for Members. Unfortunately the service that PICT has provided for us has rarely been of an acceptable standard, particularly in respect of services supplied to my constituency office. I have six workstations there (two laptop; four desktop—all PICT supplied) operating on a Local Area Network with two network printers, and in addition to standard issue software we use the CMITS case management system. This submission sets out the observations of my staff and me on the problems we have encountered with the service supplied.

2. There is a fundamental lack of communication within PICT. For example if a computer problem is referred by a helpdesk operative to an engineer there frequently appears to be no communication between the two. As a result any findings of the first technician are not relayed to the second. My staff and I often have to explain, again and again, what the problem is and even more frustratingly try to explain what the helpdesk have done to attempt to fix the problem. The process could be much more efficient and less time consuming with better communication.

3. On one occasion I was so frustrated by the poor quality of service and the number of outstanding problems that I instructed my staff to ask PICT to print out for me their record of all contacts we had had with them. When an engineer visited my constituency office he showed me the information on computer, which demonstrated not only that a print-out would have served no useful purpose, but also that it is well-nigh impossible to track an enquiry through PICT's customer management system and identify how a problem had been solved or what changes had been made to that customer's set-up.

4. Complaints made about PICT do not appear to be logged or recorded in any meaningful way, suggesting that the managers may hold a distorted and unrealistic perception of the quality of service and level of satisfaction experienced.

5. Solutions to problems which are suggested by PICT are often inappropriate. Often suggestions are irrelevant or do not solve the reported problem. For example, one engineer explained why our Outlook offline folders would not open by suggesting that they had not been set up properly, even though it was PICT who set them up originally.

6. Central IT provision is too prescriptive. It would be far more practical to give Members a list of more options from which to choose, instead of simply being handed generic equipment. For instance it may be appropriate to give the option of smaller, cheaper local printers rather than high capacity network printers. This would make PICT more adaptable to Member's needs. There is no option for fax provision or for high-throughput duplex scanning facilities.

7. Although some engineers are very good, the majority of helpdesk operators seem to be under-trained and inexperienced, and my perception is of rapid staff turnover. Furthermore there is not the "can do" attitude on the help desk that one might assume from a service with such a name—although I understand that the name has recently been changed to the "service desk"! Indeed, too frequently the most effective method of solving a problem is to take a top down approach, explaining the difficulty to the most senior member of staff available. This surely cannot be the most effective means of running an IT service?

8. There also seems to be no desire to collaborate with other suppliers to solve a problem collectively. For example PICT eventually decided that a problematic printer was faulty. On two separate occasions Dell engineers came to the constituency office to investigate the problem. The printer was then replaced, however the problem still continued. PICT and the Dell engineers seem to be working against each other instead of together to solve the problem. This attitude has also been painfully apparent with the supplier of my case management software CMITS, which I know is also used by a number of other Members of all parties. CMITS staff have had to spend considerable time solving PICT problems in the knowledge that they cannot otherwise make CMITS work properly. On one occasion almost an entire day set aside for training was wasted with the CMITS trainer sorting out problems that PICT should have taken responsibility for.

9. It should be possible for a refresh installation to be carried out over the weekend where requested by a Member. This approach would enable PICT to carry out the basic installation of computers when they are not being used, minimising disruption. The refresh installation in my constituency office took two days to complete and prevented any work from being completed during at this time.

10. PICT organized the delivery of refresh computer equipment to my constituency office. It was agreed that delivery was to be effected the day before installation, but the equipment was then delivered a week early. My constituency office was not large enough to accommodate these boxes and if it were not for the charity of a neighbour, who allowed us to use their storage space, we would have had to store the boxes in my office which would have posed a considerable health and safety risk and prevented effective access. There seems to be little understanding within PICT of the difficulties which can arise as the result of them not taking proper notice of such arrangements.

11. Most recently (2 November), BT Demon Internet amended the broadband access provided to my constituency office. No notice was given that this would happen; the connection went down; PICT blamed BT Demon Internet; PICT failed to call back when agreed or to keep records of calls made to them; and almost a day's working time was lost. The problem was eventually solved when by the boyfriend of an employee, unfamiliar with the PICT setup, suggested a course of action which worked.

12. I suggest that:

- PICT should provide an equivalent level of service to constituency as to Westminster offices;
- PICT should accept responsibility for local networks, casework management systems, etc, established in Members' constituency offices;
- Every contact between a Member's office should be logged and the record should be accessible (on a read-only basis) by both PICT and the Member;
- PICT should nominate a relationship manager for each Member who, while not undertaking all interactions with his office, ensures by regular review that records are properly kept after every call and promises implemented and who is the first, named port of call for escalation of any problem;
- PICT managers should be given regular and accurate management reports of the number of complaints by (as well as other contacts with) Members' offices, which should not shelter behind an unduly restrictive definition of a complaint; and
- PICT should offer an a la carte menu of hardware options.

13. Or better still,

- PICT should regard themselves as commissioners of services on behalf of Members, not suppliers; or
- Members should be able to opt out of PICT support and resources reallocated to enable the purchase of constituency support elsewhere.

STEVE WEBB

1. I am grateful to you for the work that you are doing on Parliamentary IT, and hope that you might be able to include one issue that I believe may be of general relevance. I apologise that your deadline for submissions was earlier this week.

2. Like many colleagues, I regularly work on trains etc. and like to be able to view my e-mails "offline". My understanding is that with the Parliamentary e-mail set up, I cannot do this—I can only see my Outlook e-mails when I am connected. Although there is technology to be "online" from a train etc., it is very unreliable and you keep being disconnected.

3. For this reason, I use my own e-mail setup instead of the Parliamentary one, as this allows me to use Outlook Express offline.

4. In my constituency office, I use the broadband setup to connect wirelessly to the internet and can send and retrieve e-mails straightforwardly. But at Westminster all the internet connections are via the cabled network which, because of security restrictions, I cannot use this to send/receive my POP3 e-mails.

5. If there was any way of having a standard broadband connection at Westminster—or if the proposed WiFi connection had lower security thresholds to allow sending and receiving of POP3 e-mails—that would make life a lot easier!

MISS ANN WIDDECOMBE (July 2006)

1. I am writing in response to the email I recently received regarding your committee's ICT inquiry.

2. As I am sure you are aware I am less than satisfied with the general service provided by PICT. I was never satisfied with PCD when they installed computers in my office several years ago and, while the latest installations have gone more smoothly, I was still left surprised by their inadequacies. I find it difficult to understand quite how the 158 staff in the PICT Service can fail to offer a more helpful, efficient and generally trustworthy service. If Parliament were a company it would not have the technological finesse to compete with the Third World.

3. Whenever a member of my staff or I telephone the PICT Service we can expect to wait 15 to 20 minutes before finally having the opportunity to speak to someone. I dread to think how many working hours are wasted each week by Members, Members' staff and House Staff being on hold.

4. One example which I think illustrates perfectly the ineptitude of the current service is the quality of the new equipment. As part of my package I opted for the all-doing multifunction Dell 1600N Printer which, I was led to believe, does not just print but can send faxes and photocopy as well. However, after only a few weeks the fax facility was continually breaking and my staff were forever on hold to a PICT engineer who would dutifully take a look and wiggle a few bits and bobs around until it worked again for another couple of days. This problem, the engineer said, was not uncommon on the 1600N model—yet the Parliamentary estate and constituency offices everywhere must be filled with these faulty machines!

5. At other times the printer refuses to believe there is paper inside it, and again this is apparently a common feature of this model. However, the defining point was to discover the Dell 1600N was not designed for paper of the quality that Members are provided with as original House stationery. This is unbelievable! Why had no one had the foresight to consider these issues, to examine how effective these printers were before placing an order?

6. Another area of concern is the distribution of email addresses. When a member of staff left my office I explicitly asked that when that member of staff's email address was closed it would not be reissued as the new email address would receive emails destined for my office. Several months later it had been reissued to the same person. Fortunately the former employee in question didn't leave under difficult circumstances but she quite easily could have, and then to have access to emails destined for me would be unacceptable. An email address, once activated, should belong to the Member and not the individual and only the Member should be in a position to release it or allow its reissue.

7. I look forward to reading the committee's report.

#### A MEMBER WHO HAS ASKED TO REMAIN ANONYMOUS

##### *Constituency provision*

1. The ICT service provided to constituency is inadequate. The response times are slow and services have been unstable—some days staff find the systems too unstable to be used productively.

2. Constituency staff also find that the remote support from PICT to be less helpful than I have found it on the Parliamentary estate.

##### *Equipment and Service Needs*

3. Laptop PCs should be able to be used in different parts of the palace—have we got wireless connectivity? There should be desks set up in the House of Commons for hot desking using laptops so that when members are away from their offices in the more remote buildings like Norman Shaw North they could use a laptop for some time while waiting for a vote. There are IT screens in the Library but this means that files on the laptop hard disk are not available and also phones can not be used in the library so this limits working.

##### *Equipment Needs*

4. There should be a wider range of equipment available—more types of printer and other IT equipment.

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#### **Memoranda submitted by Members' staff (October 2006, unless otherwise stated)**

MARION ANDERSON (*Office of Mr Jim Murphy MP*)

1. As office Manager in the East Renfrewshire Constituency I am pleased with the way in which the IT equipment was provided this year.

2. My only comment is that there should be a greater deal of flexibility in the range of equipment provided ie. I would have liked a second laptop instead of a desk model.

MICHELE DE ANGELI (*Office of Mr Richard Benyon MP*)

##### *(a)—Best Practice in the world at large*

1. I do not have personal experience of the provision of ICT in large businesses but am able to comment on the ability of members of my family who work for global companies employing many more staff than Parliament but do not experience the type of issues faced by MP's and their staff. These companies enable their staff to work remotely from almost any location at speeds unrecognisable to anything proved by PICT. I would recommend the Administration Committee request large companies share their ICT knowledge with PICT.

##### *(b)—Departmental structure and goals*

2. My experience of PICT is there are definitely two levels of service. I work in the constituency for most of the week, but spend at least one day a week in the House. The difference in service and performance of the network provided by PICT is staggering. There seems to be a general "not important" attitude to constituency problems, where problems experienced in the House are dealt with almost immediately.

*(c)—IT stability v Flexibility*

3. There has been no balance struck at all. There is no flexibility in what is provided or when. There is no understanding of the needs of the MP or his staff and how they need to arrange their ICT provision. ie The provision of equipment is maximum of four PC's, two printers and a laptop. However, no networking is included at all. How you are meant to use two of the PCs without a printer is "not my problem" . . . "you can get someone in to network your machines if you like, but we don't do that". In addition, one of the printers provided is not network compatible so you cannot scan to any PC except the one it is primarily connected to. It has not been thought through from a business point of view.

*(d)—Constituency provision*

4. The constituency provision is considered, second class by PICT. Having our computers delivered on 2 June 2005 (six weeks after the MP was elected), it then took until the 15 July for the engineer to come and install them, at the same time breaking the printer and not networking them (see c). The system was only working fully in August—a full three months after the MP was elected. All this time we were without the means to do the job properly and despite a number of emails and phone calls, there seemed to be no recognition of the difficulties this caused. By contrast the PC was delivered and installed in the House on the same day just a short time after the election.

5. In addition an extra printer that was ordered for the constituency also took more than a month to arrive.

6. The VPN issue was highlighted by me to PICT within one month of receiving the equipment (Case 421660), in August 2005. This was never resolved and I was not kept updated. It was an email from me dated 31 March 2006 which instigated the "cached mode" change which has speeded up the VPN, but there is still an underlying problem which I believe is connected to the broadband speed. We did not get the fastest broadband at install, because given a choice we went for the middle option to save taxpayers money. I believe PICT should be changing every constituency that uses VPN to the fastest and biggest broadband line to speed up the transfer which is still slow particularly when there are a number of users on the system (ie Fridays). It is still unstable and drops frequently. There is also an issue to be discussed about why it took from summer 2005 to April 2006 to discover that there should have been a tick in the cached mode box and this would have saved hundreds of thousands of pounds in wasted time whilst constituency staff all over the UK tied to work but had to wait minutes between opening emails and doing anything. Not to mention the money PICT spent visiting constituencies and never sorting out the problem.

7. There is a bigger question to ask of PICT. Why did they not acknowledge my email of 31 March but act on it and then roll out the "cached mode" update claiming they had solved the problem? Whilst I am not looking for any recognition, I am concerned that there has been an attempt to cover up their inability to help the problem. If staff in PICT had not found this basic set up error, despite the time and money they spent on trying to solve the problem, questions must be asked of the quality of their technicians and management and their ability to give value for money.

8. VPN has a very long way to go before it reaches the network speeds and stability of the Parliamentary Estate.

9. PICT also needs to address constituency in house networking to make for a better working system.

*(e)—Customer service*

10. IT support needs improving. Whilst the wait for the call centre staff is not too bad, if you need to speak to a technician who will call you back, you can wait for hours. This is not acceptable when you are trying to work. An example is; I was fixing broadband and VPN in the MPs London flat and was told, according to the instructions, that I needed an engineer to talk me through it. I waited 2.5 hours for someone to call me. I was not in a position to do other work and wasted all this time. In the end I did it myself—correctly with help of the same IT company that had identified the cached mode problem for me. There needs to be more understanding of the working practices of MPs and their staff and address the provision accordingly.

*(f)—New Equipment roll-out*

11. Please see my answer to (d) regarding my experiences in 2005. Lessons need to be learnt.

12. PICT are aware of the number of MPs in the House of Commons even if they do not know who they will be before a General Election. It is not rocket science to have a number of PC's already built and ready to give out the day after election and book technicians in advance to cover areas. The locations could have

been fitted in once the General Election results were known. It could all have been achieved by the 31 May. In reality what happened was that all the machines were built after Polling day and therefore took a long time to arrive at their destinations and, only once they had arrived, were technicians booked.

13. Again as said above, networking for the constituencies should be included as a standard part of the install

*(g)—Future equipment and service need*

14. There should be wireless networking throughout the Parliamentary Estate to allow for the use of Parliamentary laptops to be used in any area but more importantly the constituency offices should be networked in house and the VPN issue should be resolved.

Notes:

1. The technical company which identified the cached mode issue for me is called Prognosis, and whilst small, would be willing to consult with PICT on VPN, which is a large part of their business.

2. I have email evidence for all the examples mentioned above which is available on request.

PENNY BARBER (*Parliamentary Waterways Group*)

1. I work very part time—the odd hour or two totalling a maximum of a day a week. I use the system remotely via citrix.

2. It's a nightmare and has got worse over the last couple of years. Slow to access, slow to use. Attachments are the biggest problem—I can't send them or save them to my computer, however long I wait. I've discussed this with the help desk several times and they say that's just how it is.

3. What really annoys me is that when I bought a new lap top two years ago, I consulted with the help desk. I was told broadband access didn't work remotely. I've discussed this more recently and they told me it does work now but I can only have it if I buy a new computer but via you. I can't afford to do this and it does seem a waste. This was quite an expensive machine and works well. I really don't see why we can't come to some arrangement with the licence.

4. On the plus side, the help desk is very good at answering the phone and calling back and with queries.

SUSAN BAYFORD (*Office of Mr Mark Hoban MP*)

Just to let you know that I have always had excellent support from the PICT staff.

DIANA BLAIR (*Office of Mr Hugo Swire MP*)

Just recently we seem to have had endless interruptions to the supply of both the intranet and voicemail and I was wondering whether something could be done to prevent this.

SHIRLEY BUCKLEY (*Office of Mr Michael Meacher MP*)

I am reasonably happy with the service I receive through the helpline for instance (though I wish the hours of service were a bit longer) but hate the new equipment recently installed. I don't even use the Dell printer it's that slow, we have installed our own HP printer instead. I think the VPN service has improved over the last few months, but I still have problems accessing the service, particularly at peak times.

PETER CARRINGTON-SMITH (*Office of Mr Clive Betts MP*)

*Notes on problems with PDVN/PICT*

1. In the past there have been problems reading emails with attachments over 256k. The problem was that it took a very long time to retrieve the email/file from the server. To a degree this has improved with smaller files but now happens on a regular basis with attachments around the 1 megabyte mark.

2. One major difficulty we have is that in the constituency office we have five computers—three running Windows XP and two running Windows 98SE. Two of the computers are what we call House of Commons machines while the other three are stand alone machines—all have broadband internet connections.

3. The problem is that the three stand alone machines cannot access PDVN and we have to log onto one of the HOC machines to read emails and download attachments and information which under ideal circumstances we would simply copy and paste etc. As more of our work is becoming email based it can be quite tedious to have to wait until a machine is free to send an email with the time taken for one user logging off and the other logging on—this is not an efficient use of our time!

4. Under ideal circumstances, the MP should be able to log onto PDVN and have access to all the cases that his/her staff are dealing with. To that end, we would like to use a system such as CFL's Caseworker on all the machines especially now that it appears Caseworker has the ability to "Network" in a fashion on the "S" drive, but this cannot happen until all our computers have access to PDVN.

5. We realise that there has to be security and a level of control over the number of users accessing the Parliamentary domain but has anyone calculated what it would cost to give each MP access to PDVN for a further two existing machines—approx. 1,300 in all?

MALCOLM CLARKE (*Office of Barbara Keeley MP*)

One problem which we feel needs addressing is that PICT do not give advice on or support networking in Constituency offices. This is a major deficiency in the services they offer.

PHIL COLE (*Office of Caroline Flint MP*)

1. First, the support from PICT is great.
2. Second, the Dell hardware supplied in the latest round is below par.
3. In particular, the Dell laser printers are very slow. If you are printing letter after letter, as many staff are, the delay while it thinks about printing is very frustrating.
4. Also, whoever agreed a contract which required that we order only Dell printer cartridges did no one any favours. Why should we have printers which for their lifetime have to have toner from one manufacturer only. This is anti-competitive and ridiculous. You may find, as we did, that by simply opening your printer to identify what the cartridge is, triggers the warning "32 unsupported printer cartridge" followed by the printer refusing to print. This is not acceptable.
5. I don't believe parliament can be receiving value for money from this contract, unless the Dell toner is supplied at substantially below their market price.

SARAH COLEBY (*Office of Anne Milton MP*)

1. Most of the services are great and I have few comments.
2. Just one specific area where I consider there is room for improvement:
3. While I acknowledge that PICT has a massive task to manage the IT systems for the whole Parliamentary estate and (in cases like mine, where I often work offsite) beyond, there are now well over 100 MPs who use the CMITS database system for constituency work. Every time PICT make a change to their system, this can have a knock-on effect on CMITS. One of those using CMITS informs ITOS (the company that produced and maintains CMITS) that something peculiar is happening, they then have to contact PICT to find out what they have done, produce a patch and email it to all users to install.
4. Surely it cannot be beyond PICT to set in place a protocol that they send a courtesy email to ITOS each time they make a change on the system, so that they can in turn pre-empt any problems.
5. As an end user of CMITS, all day Monday to Friday, I find it extremely frustrating—the problems that result often mean you have to close the programme and sometimes the whole computer and then reboot. This may happen several times in succession and is a seriously irritating interruption.
6. If PICT could introduce such a protocol, it would be really helpful.

MANDY COLLIS (*Office of Mr Mike Hancock MP*)

I am very happy with the services provided.

ALISON CORNELL (*Office of Laura Moffatt MP*) (November 2006)

1. I would simply say that I have found the PICT team extremely helpful on almost all occasions when I have requested their help. I think they probably take a lot of flack for people's frustration when computers fail but my advice is always—if you don't know what's wrong, just ring 2001, don't fiddle because you often make it worse, you don't learn how to put it right simply, and the inevitable final call is in frustration and often takes longer.
2. My husband works for HMRC and I can assure you that their service is nothing like as user friendly.

ALEXANDER DAVIES (*Office of Mr Dan Rogerson MP*)

One initial thought is that the space given for our Outlook (Exchange) mailboxes is far too small. I am *constantly* receiving notices that my mailbox is over its size limit, and archiving material to remedy the problem. I cannot, at present, however keep even 14 days' worth of material on the server, so that it is available wherever I log in on the Estate.

ALISTAIR DOUGLAS (*Office of Mr Dominic Grieve MP*)

1. One slightly irritable thing is the fact that the inbox becomes very full very quickly. Surely extra storage can be provided for the inbox. (I am aware that the emails can be stored elsewhere).

2. Furthermore I used to use Mozilla firefox as my default internet browser but for reasons unbeknown to me that is no longer possible. It is a better web browser than internet explorer and it would be good if we were able to utilise it.

3. Finally I understand that the remote access system is not always as good as it could be.

IONE DOUGLAS (*Office of Dr Liam Fox MP*)

The only problem with 2001 is the time it takes to get through. It is hard to imagine that all their "available specialists" being busy at 8.30 in the morning or 6.30 at night. The message is quite infuriating and worthy of BT at its worst. If you are going to have specialists, it might be sensible to have a few more so that they had sufficient time to spend on an enquiry. Not everyone is quite as quick as they are at understanding computer problems. This is not, I hasten to say, universal as the majority of the specialists are most efficient and very patient.

ALAN EVANS (*Office of Sarah McCarthy-Fry MP*)

I think, on the whole, the service is pretty good. Its a bit annoying sometimes when you can't access the Intranet—It's been off most of this week. However the alternative usually meets my needs, though not absolutely.

DEBBIE FENN (*Office of Jim Fitzpatrick MP*)

1. The services provided by the House are very helpful.

2. At present, many of us receive Gallery News email service, of which you may have heard. It is a great service that provides reports and updates throughout the day from Lobby Correspondent, Rob Gibson. One of its most important features is its interactive aspect. Rob puts out his own reports and also press releases, statements and comments from MPs and organisations. We can then give our view. This provides a very useful forum that runs throughout the day. I wondered if Gallery News might be something the House would consider supporting in an official capacity, to ensure the future of this valuable service.

JANE GIBSON (*Office of Mr Philip Dunne MP*)

On the whole I am happy with the services provided by PICT—two comments though:

(a) It would be helpful if there were clearer guidelines on what is or is not best practice. Many times I have been told by one of the helpdesk staff to do something one way, and then another time another operative will tell me an alternative best practice—eg on simple things like having folders within Outlook—one told me to set up subfolders in my Inbox—another later said that was the root of problems which then occurred on my system.

(b) Logging calls—when I worked at Savills, each call to the help desk was given a reference number, similar to the PICT practice—what would ensue would be an email to me with that reference number and the nature of the problem and status of the call—whether closed, pending further call etc., this might be helpful for those of us who may need to call on the same day about different things and not always write the reference number down.

JANE GORDON-CUMMING (*Office of Mr Quentin Davies MP*)

1. Our new computer equipment has been installed. One very disappointing feature was the limited range of combined printers/photocopier/fax machines on offer.
2. We now have a large, cumbersome Dell Laser MFP 1815dn—with one paper tray and no colour printing facility. It takes up an inordinate amount of space—anything larger on offer (with the additional paper tray and colour print—very useful facilities) simply would not fit in our extremely limited office space, which must be a common phenomenon in most offices on the Parliamentary estate. It is also extremely noisy. There must be more suitable choices on the market.
3. How much input did the Committee receive before choosing the new computer equipment?

ALEX HAYDON (*Office of Mr Edward Leigh MP*)

Only improvement I can think of is to please get more staff so we don't have to wait so long to get through to PICT!

CHRISTINE HEALD (*Office of Mr Oliver Heald MP*)

I am not sure if this is covered by the Enquiry, but I do not think that existing provision is adequate for the level of work—and therefore numbers of staff—needed in both Parliamentary and constituency offices. E-mail, in particular, has led to an explosion of work. We find that we have to buy extra computer equipment and printers from IEP each year. I hope that the current provision can be reviewed.

LENA HUSKINSON (*Office of Jim Knight MP*)

1. I consider that the roll-out of new computer equipment was slow compared with the original time scale given, but that may be because I share an office in a rural constituency. I also feel that although the new Dell computers are very good compared with the old stock that was removed; the Dell Fax/Photocopier/scanner/Printer 1600N is certainly not fit for purpose when it comes to office efficiency. I can only compare this with the old HP G85 we used to have which was far superior to the current machine we have to use because it was the only one offered. It is slow, difficult to feed with headed paper when you need to keep the tray filled with copy paper in case any faxes come in and useless when you need to copy paperwork that may be written in blue ink or coloured in any way—I have to ask a favour from another office to use their copier on a regular basis. Perhaps a stand alone small copier should have been supplied along with the computer stock. In other words the office efficiency rating has declined as a result of lack of forethought by whoever chose to purchase this model. A complaint has been put into the Helpdesk and it was clear from comments made that there have been many similar complaints.
2. I also feel that not enough IT training is available to constituency staff as we are unable to take advantage of the regular courses on the Parliamentary Estate. Surely some sort of on-line courses could be offered to staff that come from non clerical working backgrounds. That way time could be set aside within a working week for training to take place.

MARGARET HWANG (*Office of Dawn Primarolo MP*)

1. Generally speaking the equipment refresh has been very welcome and seems to have worked well.
  2. The centralisation of IT support has worked very well in my experience, although after a four month absence due to illness, I noticed on my return that queries are being dealt with using a “call-centre” approach with a set script of questions. With no disrespect to the staff intended, it is a subtle deterioration in the service I was used to before.
  3. If possible, a single telephone contact number for MPs' staff to ring Dell would be helpful.
- Update (March 2007):* I would say that I no longer find PICT support excessively call-centre-like (2nd point); and now that PICT provide Dell consumables direct to MPs' offices there should be less need to contact Dell. If apart from consumables, there remains a need to contact Dell, a dedicated contact point for Dell would definitely be desirable.

THOMAS LOCKTON (*Office of Sir Alan Haselhurst MP*)

1. Regarding the computer services, the only complaint I could possibly have would be that I fail to see why it is not possible to use Mozilla Firefox as a browser as well as Microsoft Internet Explorer. Personally I find Firefox a far superior browser, although of course IE is perfectly useable.
2. Apart from that everything appears reasonable.

HENRY MATTHEWS *and others* (Office of Lynne Jones MP)

*PCD Support for Casework database (MP Case)*

1. PCD to provide (& provide support for) an “in-house” casework database system that all parties could use. We use MP Case and PCD will not help with any technical problems arising from the programme or networking issues.

*Recess*

2. There were quite a few IT problems over the summer recess with voicemail, access to the Intranet and the Post Room systems going down. We wonder if there is enough cover to keep service going properly during recess. Also we were very concerned that only 14 hours notice was given of the IT hardware works which required the floor of the offices to come up, resulting in this office’s staff being kept out of the office for 3.5 hours. This gives the impression that PICT/facilities believes no one is busy during recess, which is far from the case.

*Intranet Website*

3. The old website had a few large buttons which were the main ones needed—ie Hansard, Commons Library, PIMs, EDMs. With the new website, not all of these useful buttons are available so for some things that one uses all the time you now have to go through 2 or 3 links to get to (eg, Commons Daily Debates = 3 links). As a result, people often don’t use the website at all but set up these things as favourites. We feel there needs to be some rationalisation here.

*PIMS*

4. It would be very useful if it were possible to do a search, eg on all PQs on rendition and then just email this to someone as a concise list.

5. We still experience instances of PQs not coming up. For example we may remember that a PQ of Lynne’s may contain a particular unusual word, but despite putting her name in and the word, it doesn’t come up. Conversely, if you put “energy” in the search term for PQs, of the first 10 answers, nos 2, 3, 4, 5, and 7 of a possible 48,442 have nothing whatsoever to do with energy.

*Hansard*

6. If you do an advanced search in Hansard, say on a PQ number, it often doesn’t work. eg PQ 94497, which is Lynne’s PQ to PM, won’t come up in Hansard search when 94497 is put in the PQ number box.

*Factiva*

7. We have had instances where we cannot find articles which we know are there. For example, when we put in “benefits”—plus search date of “today” and in “full article”—we do not get the article we’re looking for (BIGGER BILL FOR PENSIONS AND BENEFITS FROM SEPTEMBER RPI. *Financial Times*, 18 October 2006, By CHRIS GILES, 289 words.) However, when we put in “benefits” into the headline search we do get the article. This decreases our confidence in the full article search facility. (NB since checking this anomaly, this error appears not to be occurring. We will inform the library, of any specific search issues with Factiva if they happen in the future).

*Broadband*

8. Quicker broadband services to constituency offices would be helpful.

*Recycling*

9. Lack of any obvious recycling scheme for Dell printer toner cartridges.

PHILIPPE MINCHIN (Office of John Smith MP)

1. On the whole I am very pleased with the ICT services.

2. I would like to know, however, what becomes of the old IT equipment every time Parliament renews its IT stock. Is there a system in place whereby old IT equipment which is in good working order is donated to charities and organisations throughout the UK?

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HEATHER MILLICAN (*Office of Patrick Mercer MP*)

1. I think we receive excellent support from PICT help desk.
2. However I am really disappointed with the new printers. They are too big, too noisy and too slow. Also a completely unnecessary “box” pops up about toner supplies every time one sends anything to print. HP ones were much better and I can see no good reason for changing them.
3. Disappointed that the new software does not support the BBC ticker which I found really, really useful for monitoring breaking news.

VERONICA OAKESHOTT (*Office of Ms Sally Keeble MP*)

I think the service is excellent. The staff are friendly, patient and helpful.

RORY PALMER (*Office of Sir Peter Soulsby MP*)

1. For a large part of the current year the VPN connection to the Parliamentary network has been very poor. This has been of great frustration and has severely affected mine, and colleagues, work.
2. The unpredictable nature of the connection has been a cause of major problems; unpredictable in terms of speed of connection and whether it would be possible to connect at all.
3. This situation now appears to be resolved with the connection much improved.
4. I have also experienced difficulties trying to access Factiva by VPN and I am told this is because of a problem with the intranet. This sort of problem, like the VPN connectivity problems, are of great frustration to those of us who do not work on the parliamentary estate but who do need to have connection into the parliamentary network.

KEITH PORTEOUS WOOD (*Office of Dr Evan Harris MP*)

1. I appreciate your concern and efforts to help off-site Parliamentary workers.
2. I was disappointed that the Factiva press information system that replaced Lexis Nexis system cannot be accessed by ADSL and an RSA token system, unlike its predecessor. I hope that the remedial update will be given a high priority because this makes working very slow for those working away from Parliament on non-parliamentary machines.
3. I hope a setting can be arranged for those using the RSA token in a secure environment (their normal office as opposed to an internet cafe[acute], for example) so that the connection does not log off so quickly. It is currently around five minutes, which means that a new log in can be needed after being interrupted by a short phone call. Thirty minutes would seem much more reasonable.
4. Could priority be given to establishing a stable near-infallible search engine of parliamentary material please. The current advanced search is once more highly unreliable, after a year or so of stability. The problem is noted on the website itself and can lead to serious errors.
5. I have significant number of suggestions about the layout of the website and how the paper trail of amendments and bills could be significantly improved. It should be possible to work on such issues without ever needing paper from the House, but this is not the case.

HAZEL PRIEST (*Office of Jim Knight MP*)

1. We had to wait longer than a year after the general election to receive our computers and the original order is date the 23 May 2005. We kept being promised the new computers but they just did not turn up and we struggled on in the constituency unable to do our job properly. Whilst the computers are superior to the ones we previously had the printer is rubbish. It doesn't matter how many times you use it, it always has to warm up. The copy quality is rubbish and I often have to either copy documents on another printer for which there is a charge or I have to copy them on my cheapy printer at home. Please, please can we have a printer that is fit for purpose?
2. Whilst there are loads of wonderful courses for those in the house to pop into, we get nothing in the constituencies. Those employees who work in Parliament have superior access and for us to do a short course would involve a whole day when travel is included and few staff can afford the luxury of a whole day away from the office. All staff should be able to do the ECDL or equivalent which they can access through the net and take any exams locally.

JONNY REYNOLDS (*Office of James Purnell MP*)

1. I have worked for a member for three years now, and ICT services have really improved in that time.
2. One thing that is a problem however is internet access for non-PCD laptops within Parliament. There must surely be a way for private computers that meet the necessary security criteria (eg virus free etc) to be able to get internet access and possibly log into the network. Perhaps one solution might be a parliamentary wireless network with a passcode that would only be given out to staff?

RICHARD ROBINSON (*Office of Mr Andy Reed MP*)

1. Can I firstly state that I find the staff employed at PICT extremely helpful, courteous and patient & knowledgeable!
2. Moving on to the concerns I have (these are based on a constituency office point of view)—
  - When we had the new machines installed earlier this year, we experienced tremendous problems transferring data from the old machines to the new ones. Data was not mapped properly by the external engineer who installed the new equipment (and was to have supposed to have transferred all the old data from the previous machine). This resulted in a week's lost output as we were unable to fully utilise Outlook e mails on the new machines (which of course in the constituency—is a crucial link with the MP etc etc).
  - What I'd really like you to consider is PICT being able to offer more “on site” assistance in constituency offices. I understand there is a cost implication to this, but I do feel that some more complex IT problems could be sorted much quicker.
3. Plus on a related point to this—where constituency office have purchased part of their IT kit that is not supplied directly by PICT, there is definitely the need to be able to reach a full resolution through PICT. Currently where for example some non standard kit has been purchased, then PICT are not able to offer a full solution. In our office for example, where we have tremendous problems accessing e mails via VPN—PICT are unable to support us because a couple of items of hardware (router etc) were purchased from external suppliers.
  - Therefore if you would allow PICT to be able to visit on site and be able to support ICT services, irrespective of where kit is purchased from—that would be an enormous step forward. I do not believe this would lead to endless conflict on who is liable for what—it would just serve to allow a much quicker resolution to ICT problems that are not intractable—just currently not able to resolved because of convention and protocol.

BEN ROWE (*Office of Mr David Heathcoat-Amory MP*)

As well mannered and willing as the PCD staff are, they can at times be baffled by the most seemingly simple problem—it does seem as if they have a script to read from, as opposed to being absolute top of the range IT operatives. Further to this, the continual disruption to the Parliamentary Intranet is becoming beyond a joke—many members of staff are losing out on valuable resources due to the inability to get it fixed.

Update (March 2007): One thing I would like to stress was that this statement was provided at least four or five months ago—at a time when the Intranet had been down continually for three weeks, and many of us were unable to access the HoC Library website. Since that time access to the network has been more or less fine—and, on the occasion that it has been down, it has rarely been down for more than a couple of days. As for the PICT staff, they seem to have improved in that time.

PAUL SCULLY (*Office of Mr Andrew Pelling MP*)

1. Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to this. There are a few areas that I would briefly like to cover:

*Network*

2. I am based in Star Chamber Court, the quality of the network has been patchy at best over the summer months, occasionally resulting in closing the office for a few hours. We use the CMITS case-management software which is very dependant on the parliamentary network and errors frequently occur which can be traced back to the network capability. CMITS and Outlook are vital to our operation as we try to run a paperless office as best as we can. This is fine when the network is up and running but it leaves us at the mercy of the system. I am not sure what resilience is built into the system to ensure that it doesn't trip over if a single unit or patch goes down.

*Wireless Network*

3. PICT supplied laptops had their wireless capabilities turned off by default. A wireless hotspot covering the Parliamentary Estate (certainly throughout PCH and the Palace) would be of great benefit, especially with the cramped working conditions. Similarly a secure-access extranet would be very helpful to encourage home-working rather than limiting this to PICT supplied PCs. I understand the need for security, though I would imagine that significant areas of the intranet and MPs own files could be made available under a system that would meet security standards.

*Dell Consumables*

4. This is still a mystery to many members of staff that I speak to. Since private companies are able to set up an online account with dell to order their toner etc. directly over the Internet, could we not do the same? Calling India rarely takes less than half an hour and I have only had one correct set of paperwork in amongst some six orders placed. This cannot be good for Dell and is certainly not for us. For future procurement needs, I would prefer to see a provider whose consumables are more widely available. Though Dell computers are extremely popular, their printers are somewhat less so and unless changes can be made to the purchase of consumables, we are hostages to fortune within the contract.

*CMITS*

5. I have touched on this before. Since the 2005 election, there has been a substantially increased take up of this product. The Scottish Parliament provide this as a matter of course for all of their members and I understand that it is being rolled out in other Parliaments abroad. Since it is becoming established as one of the leading case management software packages here in Parliament, can PICT deal directly with the provider to meet the requirements of the product and to ensure that the future development of the product meets the requirements of the Parliamentary network.

*JOHN STEWART (Office of Sir Robert Smith MP)*

1. Only two comments.

2. Quite a large number of the PICT helpdesk staff don't always seem to have a full grasp of the systems they are trying to help with. One example—when we had our “refresh” computers installed, the first guy I got knew exactly what needed to be done to get our constituency office up and running on VPN, but ran out of time to do the other two.

3. When I came to have the other two connected, I got a different person, and it quickly became obvious they were not following the same routine. I pointed this out, but was assured they were doing the right thing. No surprise when our connection didn't work. I knew what the problem was, but the person I was dealing with didn't seem to want to know or listen. It took ages for anyone to call back and try and sort the problem (we are talking over a week!). In the meantime, I had used my fairly limited IT knowledge to complete the connection myself.

4. Secondly, I am not happy with the switch from LexusNexus to Factiva—bring back LexusNexus!

*ROGER THISTLE (Office of Tom Brake MP)*

1. I am writing on behalf of Tom and his staff and from a remote constituency office location.

*Remote log on and speed*

2. The first thing to note is that logging on to, and using PDVN still remains consistently slower than working locally on our own network, and discourages us from using the system the way it was intended, ie “permanently on”. There has been some improvement in recent months, but there are still times when there is a significant pause, as we wait for the system to “catch up” in the middle of a letter.

*Passwords*

3. Is it still really necessary to have four password protocols to reach Parliament? (DOS; local; parliament; then parliament again for e-mail). This seems to be overkill!

### *Networking*

4. Trying to integrate our own equipment leaves us with several irritating bugs such as printing/choosing tray/stalling/errors and order of log on/off requirements

### *Printers*

5. Dell printers have been the biggest disappointment. We have a 1600 and 5100. We have no instruction book for them (paper or on-line), an irritating pop-up showing “Dell toner cartridge status” on every single print job and poor value for money because of consumables, not just toner but “drum replacement” as well, something not experienced with cheaper brands. The error messages on the machines are difficult to understand, the systems are not coordinated to ensure that when a paper tray is selected it always prints to the right tray, and it often defaults for no apparent reason. Conversely when printer memory is full the 1600 DOESN'T tell us through the print dialogue, but just stops working altogether. The printer has an irritating “beep” which repeats whenever the paper tray is empty, but far too loud and repetitive. Finally the scanner/photocopier top on the 1600 is very dangerous in that when the lid is lifted, the user is blinded by white light. The left hand window should be properly masked as soon as the lid is lifted, not afterwards when the damage is done. In general it has been difficult ordering consumables because Dell were only able to send them to “House of Commons Westminster” which is clearly ridiculous. One went missing as a result. We have no instructions on how to use the scanner.

### *Replacement PC*

6. A hard drive “went” on one of the new PCs this year. There was real difficulty contacting the appropriate engineer to fix the job. When he arrived he knew nothing of the Parliamentary system and was unable to restore the PC to PDVN use. Another visit was necessary.

### *Helpdesk*

7. The PDVN helpdesk has been patient and helpful throughout.

SARAH VERO (*Office of Dr Ian Gibson MP*)

Dell computers have provided consistently poor and delayed delivery of toners. They also sent our constituency office invoices and toners ordered by several other MPs offices and then took their time rectifying the matter. Would it be possible for the House to buy a bulk lot of toners and distribute them? Westminster staff could have the option to collect them manually and constituency staff would not have to deal with offshore call centres. Neither office would have to put up with late delivery and broken promises. (the Banner stationary toners are not genuine Dell toners but refills and do not work in my printer).

CHARLOTTE WALLIS (*Office of Mr Kenneth Clarke MP*)

I would like to comment on the poor quality of the Dell printer which has been supplied with the new IT equipment for our office use. We need to be able to print addresses on envelopes and the machine is much too sensitive for practical use in this way. It takes literally several minutes of patient handling to produce a printed envelope—and even then it is not always successful—and I am sure you will appreciate that this is simply not practical.

VIVIENNE WINDLE (*Office of Liz Blackman MP*)

1. Having used the service since 1998, it is increasingly clear that the 2001 helpdesk approach is no longer viable. When MPs have problems with their IT, they do not have time to hang on or wait for call backs, and it therefore falls to office staff to sort out troubleshooting problems. When it was a case of computers and telephones, it was fairly simple. The problems began when VPN was started, and people were recruited for PCD Helpdesk from Australia and South Africa on temporary contracts until the end of the project. The problem was that these people were helpful and knowledgeable, but when they left there were inevitably still problems, and it was harder to get help. Now more and more technical hardware is available to MPs and their staff, and this means that more support is needed when things go wrong. Although it is very easy to get hold of someone by ringing 2001, there is a wide range of specialisms, and delays in getting major problems sorted out are caused by waiting for someone who understands that particular device or software to ring back. We have to phone the same number for telephones, computers, video screens, VPN access from the constituencies, MPs laptops (repair and advice on use) and now the new handheld devices Members have been issued with. Problems which could be sorted out in a couple of hours now take days to resolve, because each time we phone 2001, we speak to a new person who is not the member of staff we need to speak to, and they are not allowed to leave a direct dial extension number for us to phone them back.

2. It is now time to split the duties of the PICT team and have specific numbers for specific problems, so we know that even if we have to wait a little longer for an answer, when we do get to speak to someone they will be someone who can definitely help.

3. The other comment we have to make (Westminster and constituency office staff) is that the handheld devices should not have been offered to MPs until specific advice on their use, and not just pdf versions of the instruction booklet, were available. There should have been some research into how MPs use their email before they were offered, so that MPs could make an informed decision as to whether they would be useful or not. Suggestions for additional items to purchase, such as additional chargers would have been useful, as MPs need to have duplicates of these in Westminster and in the constituency.

4. When anything new is offered to Members in the future, it might be an idea to consult with staff, particularly those who work for non-computer literate MPs, or MPs who have not enthusiastically joined ICT consultation exercises, panels and All Party Groups, to find out what would help and what would not. This would relieve the burden on the Help Desk as new technology is taken on and people start to have problems with them.

ALEXANDER WOODMAN (*Office of Stephen Williams MP*)

### *Introduction*

1. These comments are submitted on behalf of the constituency-based staff of Stephen Williams MP (Bristol West) and relate to the provision of equipment and services for constituency offices. The staff currently consists of two full-time staff and two part-time staff. All staff except one have worked in the office in June 2005, the other since December 2005.

2. As an office we rely heavily on the equipment and services provided by PICT for our communications and computing needs. Our main use of the services provided by PICT is for the efficient, effective and secure transfer of documents and information between the Westminster and constituency office. Further uses include access to data and research available on the Parliamentary network.

3. We focus in this submission primarily on the areas of the Committee's enquiry relating to constituency provision, customer service, new equipment roll-out, and future equipment and service need (points d, e, f and g of the Information Notice). Points below are organised under these general headings.

### *Constituency Provision*

4. We believe that the VPN is a useful tool for the tasks mentioned in paragraph 2. However, we feel it is seriously flawed in terms of speed. This is obviously dependent on the speed of a constituency office's internet connection. With up to four users using our 2Mbps ADSL connection, downloading/opening larger files from the shared "S" drive can become very slow.

5. This problem is even more acute when uploading/saving files to the "S" drive, due to the asymmetric nature of the connection—ie download speeds are significantly greater than upload speeds. Typically, we can upload files at a speed of approximately 0.3Mbps. For larger files, this is too slow.

6. Another speed-related problem is the use of e-mail, and the sending/receiving of e-mails with large attachments. As in the case of access to the "S" drive, the relatively slow speed of the connection, compared to speed of access on the Parliamentary Estate causes long delays when trying to send or receive large e-mails.

### *Customer Service*

7. We have experienced significant problems when reporting problems with equipment to PICT. On approximately 12 occasions we have reported problems to PICT and been advised that an engineer or technician will call back to assist in rectifying the problem. In each case, the call back has taken at least three days.

8. Given the reliance we have on ICT, we consider that a resolution time of three days for problems is unacceptably long. However, on one occasion, it took two weeks before we received a call.

### *New Equipment Roll-Out*

9. We found the provision of new equipment after the 2005 election to be prompt.

10. Despite this, it took over a month before engineers arrived to install the equipment. During this time, numerous appointments were made, but despite that the engineers did not arrive.

11. Within a few weeks of the election, as a new Member Stephen Williams received a significant number of letters and e-mails. Without adequate IT equipment, we experienced difficulties in ensuring the constituents' queries were responded to promptly, which potentially damaged his reputation.

*Future equipment and service need*

12. We believe that the equipment provided for Members' offices is adequate, however future improvements could nonetheless be made.

13. The cost of installing wiring for networking in our office to allow each PC to access the internet/VPN was £550. We believe that there is an opportunity to mitigate this cost for all Members in future by providing and installing wireless networking equipment.

EILEEN WRIGHT (*Office of Mr Patrick McLoughlin MP*)

As I work for two peers and a journalist as well as for a Member of Parliament, I did not think it right to have a Government provided computer and printer so my equipment belongs to me, personally. I have to say that I seem to have far less trouble with mine than the others around me have with theirs, but I must not shout too loudly! It is a Dell, but a different variety.

A MEMBER'S EMPLOYEE WHO HAS ASKED TO REMAIN ANONYMOUS

1. I work in the Constituency mainly handling diary issues, arranging and attending meetings and visits, providing briefing notes. I work online all the time and I have to say that I feel I have been badly let down. I have suffered from so much stress recently that I thought I would have to take time off work—all due to the inadequacy of the system. I have worked for 30 years and have never suffered stress through work, or stress-related problems at all. I have worked at senior project management level in the past ( I now choose to work within an interesting part-time environment).

2. The system is inadequate for remote working. I have spoken to the Help Desk about 20 times in the last two weeks. Sometimes I speak to someone who knows how to resolve the problem—sometimes not. Basic inadequacies, not being able to access programmes, printer not working etc. due to remote disconnection, server problems etc. Sometimes the Help Desk ring back or pass on the problem—sometimes not.

3. Due to Broadband not being connected when it should have been I have had lots of problems in the last few months—the VPN system is unsatisfactory. When trying to undertake research the computer just freezes and I have to “shut down” and re-start. Email is now a large part of working life and sometimes the system just collapses and I have to re-commence replying/writing to constituents or other agencies. It's a real pain and I think repeating one's work, not being able to rely on the system or resolve issues causes the stress.

4. A few years ago my MP arranged for the Help Desk Manager to meet with himself and me in Westminster. Things improved for a while but clearly I still have problems.

5. The arrangements for the new computers have been a headache too. We were notified in February of the new Dell computers. We completed forms and returned them as requested. In April we asked what was happening as we had been told that we would be provided with new computers in March/April. We were then told that our forms had been mislaid. We completed more forms. Again, the same thing happened. At the beginning of July, after asking about the computers, forms were filled in late one Friday evening and returned again. The next week I was asked to complete my form via email as again something had been mislaid. The computer arrived and was installed. I feel the whole operation has been disjointed. I now have one old computer, one new computer and another computer arrived a few weeks ago—which I don't need ! That was sent to our other office who had been waiting weeks for their computer to arrive !! But another one arrived there too, eventually. This week an engineer arrives to transfer data from the old computer to the new one and I hope to be able to be connected to Broadband—at last !! The old computer will be taken away. I don't think the Help Desk pass on messages re problems. As soon as Dell comes on board, things seem to happen quickly.

6. I have worked in the NHS and over 12 years ago I was involved in arranging GP computer systems linking with the Health Authorities across Yorkshire and Humberside. That worked better than this all those years ago. There was a real effort to meet users' needs from the outset and to resolve problems before they even happened. I wonder why that approach hasn't been used for us ?

7. Sorry to rattle on but you did ask !!!

8. I hope you have a clear picture of the discrepancies in my working life . . .

*Update (October 2006):* After complaining so many times that I have lost count, I was telephoned last week to say that an engineer would arrive this morning at 10.00 am to transfer data from my old machine to my new one. The engineer has just telephoned—an hour after he was supposed to arrive—to say that he doesn't know how to transfer this data and he is trying to find out how to do this. No indication of when the transfer will occur.

I have just informed my MP of this as I have work piling up that needs attention. If I don't hear anything this week, my MP has suggested that I go to Westminster next week so that he and I meet with the Manager of the Help Desk/IT Department again.

Am I the only person to have such problems?

*Further update (March 2007):* The issues stated above relate to the last nine years—things have improved since Broadband and the new Dell system. All computers are where they should be and we are all working well. I think that information would need to be stated to keep things in context and to be fair. I just hope that the improvement continues! Thankfully, I am no longer suffering the stress that I referred to previously.

#### **Memorandum from the Parliamentary Resources Unit (October 2006)**

1. The Parliamentary Resources Unit (PRU) assists over 150 subscribing Conservative and Democratic Unionist Party MPs and their staff in their Parliamentary duties. The PRU assist subscribing Members and their staff by supplying general briefing for the main debates in the House of Commons and the House of Lords; drafting standard replies to “write to your MP” campaigns and other general topical correspondence from constituents; and providing an individual “bespoke” research and correspondence service.

2. The PRU surveyed their Members over August and September to seek their views on the service provided by PICT. A large proportion of our Members responded to our survey providing us with constructive criticism of the service offered by PICT and way that it can be improved. The survey was carried out by both a questionnaire and one-to-one meetings with Members and their staff. The PRU response to the House Administration Committee’s inquiry aims to represent the views of our Members.

#### **GENERAL COMMENTS**

##### *Best practice in the world at large*

3. The service offered by PICT should be comparable with the service offered by the IT department of any large business with multiple locations, although we have identified a number of areas where the needs of Members would clearly differ from the needs of a business. Our response to this inquiry aims to demonstrate areas where PICT’s service can be improved, so as better to meet the specific needs of Members of Parliament.

4. The main area in which the service offered by PICT falls short of the ICT service provided in other organisations including both the commercial and public sector, is individual storage limits. The storage offered, for both the network drives (U and S drives) and the Parliament Outlook e-mail, is a problem for most Members and their staff.

5. Members and their staff often need to e-mail and save (on their network drive) photos and PDF files, which can take up a significant proportion of their storage space. We recommend that Members and Members’ staff are allocated at least gigabyte storage on both their network drive (U & S combined) and their e-mail. The cost of two gigabytes storage could be as little as 50 pence per user.

6. Our Members have also reported problems with the reliability of the U and S drives, with the drive often being lost and some users feeling the need to back-up data stored on the U and S drive in other areas, defeating the object of using the drives.

7. Most respondents to our survey criticised the remote access offered by PICT and the lack of wireless networking. Our Members believe that the remote access offered is not comparable with private commercial organisations and needs to be significantly improved (see “Constituency Provisions’ section). Most large modern commercial organisations provide wireless networking through their offices, something the Parliamentary estate does not offer. Although the issue of security is always debated when considering remote access and wireless networking, in our view the Parliamentary network does not need to be any more secure than any large London-based commercial organisation.

8. We also believe that PICT should allow all users to access the Parliamentary network on a standard broadband line, which would (in most cases) speed up access. This should be offered to Members and their staff by PICT as an alternative.

#### **IT STABILITY v FLEXIBILITY**

9. The service currently offered by PICT offers very little flexibility and it is our view that the balance between stability and flexibility needs to be reconsidered. The main area where Members lack flexibility is IT procurement. In our view, IT procurement needs be re-evaluated. There are three options we have considered to do this:

- (a) using the existing procurement methods but making them faster and cheaper;
- (b) allowing individual MPs to buy their own IT equipment and using PICT to install the relevant virus software and add it to the network; or
- (c) a mixture of both, using the existing procurement methods and also allowing Members to buy their own equipment when required.

10. We look at these three methods in more detail below and examine the advantages and disadvantages of each method.

(1) *Stability/quality of service*

11. *Existing procurement methods*—The service currently offered is useful for the IT illiterate, but tends to be slow and expensive. Some Members have had to wait over six weeks for computers to be delivered and then another week or more for them to be installed (Dell can deliver new computers in seven days).

12. Usually the advantage of purchasing from one supplier is economies of scale, but PICT prices suggest that they do not currently have a bulk-buy discount for IT equipment, which is something that needs to be addressed. The price of the equipment offered by PICT tends to be the market price at the beginning of the year, but by the end of the year market prices usually fall by over 25% and the price offered by PICT remains the same (the equipment offered is also the same).

13. *Allowing Members to buy their own equipment*—PICT could provide a minimum specification for Members and allow them to buy their own equipment. This could take less than seven days and could also be cheaper. The quality of service offered would then be the responsibility of the computer company and it would be relatively simple to add the necessary firewalls and anti-virus software on the computers before installing them on to the network.

14. We recommend that PICT allow MPs to buy their own equipment from Dell using a “sub-catalogue” of Dell items. This would provide flexibility for Members and their staff and allow PICT to “pre-approve” the minimum specifications for IT equipment. This would also mean that over the course of the year equipment prices could decrease in line with market prices.

15. *A mixture*—A mixture of allowing Members to buy their own equipment and the current PICT procurement methods would mean that PICT would only need to cater for those who need them the most, which would improve the quality of service offered to those people.

(2) *Flexibility for Members to arrange their ICT provisions to suit their individual working patterns*

16. *Existing procurement methods*—We believe that the existing procurement methods need to be more flexible and that PICT does not recognise the individual needs of Members. Currently, Members are offered a maximum of four PCs, two Printers and a laptop, but some offices may, for example, want more laptops, or no laptop at all and have five PCs instead. All equipment supplied is Dell, which also offers very little flexibility. In fact, the respondents to our survey were very critical of Dell printers and said that they preferred the Hewlett Packard printers and Hewlett Packard toner is cheaper. PICT should provide a choice of computers and printers, including options from other leading companies.

17. Some Members surveyed have also said that PICT does not network all the computers together so they can print from more than one computer. In our opinion, all printers should be connected to the network and not individual computers. This would mean that offices will need more network points, which would be relatively easy to install, and more phone points.

18. *Allowing Members to buy their own equipment*—This would provide the flexibility for each Member to buy according to their (and their office’s) needs and working patterns. This would also allow Members to buy additional equipment (more than five computers) or use existing personal and constituency IT equipment and add it to the network.

19. *A mixture*—We recognise that not all Members and offices would want to buy their own IT equipment, but the option to buy equipment and add it to the network would provide the flexibility that is needed and desired by Members and their staff.

## CONSTITUENCY PROVISION

20. Remote working is an area where many Members and Members’ staff have problems. The most frequent problems are with using the VPN. Members and their staff have also complained about the speed of remote access. The majority of respondents to our survey would like to be able to access their own desktop remotely—a feature available with Windows 2003 if their main computer is switched on.

21. We recommend that PICT re-evaluate constituency access to the network and update the current system to allow access to users’ own desktop in Parliament. PICT should make it clear that they will only be able to access their computer if they leave it on and users should only switch off the monitor. This should avoid Members and their staff asking PICT to switch their computer on for them when they are working from home.

## NEW EQUIPMENT ROLLOUT

22. The main criticism in the way that the rollout of new equipment after the last Election was handled was the time taken. At Elections, although the result cannot be predicted, the total number of computers and printers required can be foreseen—especially when PICT are only offering a choice of four PCs, one laptop and two printers. However, after the last Election, many Members felt that not enough equipment was bought in advance, which led to delays in supplying and installing new IT equipment. This problem was exacerbated when Members could not use their own computers and laptop on the Parliamentary network.

23. We recommend that if PICT is going to continue to supply and install IT equipment purchased from only one company then, at future Elections, it should pre-order the equipment and have it built and ready to install on the day of the Election.

24. Other criticisms of the roll-out of new IT equipment following the last Election included data being lost when being transferred from old computers to new computers, a feeling of lack of communication between Dell and PICT, delays in installation after new equipment had arrived and a lot of problems with constituency installations.

25. We recommend that, again if PICT is going to remain responsible for supplying and installing IT equipment, they should ensure that Dell is aware of the needs of Members and Members' staff following an Election. PICT should ensure that Dell is aware that they will need enough qualified technicians to install 1,500 to 2,000 new machines over the period of a month.

#### FUTURE EQUIPMENT AND SERVICE NEED

26. To ensure that the service offered by PICT is comparable with the service offered by the IT department of any large business, PICT will need to ensure that Members and their staff benefit from technological developments. Unfortunately, usually Parliament is slow to adopt new technologies, for example the Catering Department still do not use chip and pin technology. We have looked at the following four areas where significant technological improvements will need to be made.

- (a) Mobile Devices.
- (b) Wireless Networking.
- (c) Intranet.
- (d) VOIP.

##### (a) *Mobile Devices*

27. Most Members and Members' staff that responded to our survey desired a mobile device that synchronised with their Parliamentary Outlook e-mails, calendar and contacts. The security implications of having remote mobile access to Outlook are the same as using a BlackBerry and some devices can be wiped remotely by a system administrator in case the device was lost. We recommend that Members should be allowed to use their IT budget to purchase personal mobile digital assistants and PICT allow them to be connected to the network.

28. There are several possible mobile devices that are currently available, but we would recommend that PICT issues one device that is compatible with the Parliamentary network. The most suitable device would be the iMate Kjam, we also recommend that PICT re-evaluate the most suitable device every six months as there will be technological developments and offer Members the newer model. The Kjam uses a Windows Mobile operating system enabling users easily to use Word, Excel and Powerpoint documents on the move as well as syncing with Outlook e-mails, contacts and calendar and connecting to the internet. The KJam can be wiped remotely by a system administrator and it can also be easily connected to a wireless network.

##### (b) *Wireless Networking*

29. In our view, wireless networking is an area where the service offered by PICT is not comparable with the IT department of any large business with multiple locations. Most respondents to our survey desired a wireless network on the Parliamentary estate and some even wanted a wireless network within their own office to link computers. Wireless networking can be done with a negligible security risk and careful siting of access points would further minimise any risk of leaks outside the Parliamentary estate. The iMate KJam (see No. 1 "Mobile Devices") is compatible with wireless access, which would allow users to go on the internet and download e-mails on their mobile device from anywhere on the Parliamentary estate without going online.

30. We recommend that an encrypted wireless network is installed across all public areas and all private areas across the Parliamentary estate, enabling laptop users to access the network from other offices and in the coffee bars and cafeterias. The strategy we recommend would be first to install it across all public areas, such as the committee rooms, bars, cafeterias and coffee bars. The private areas, including Members' offices, should have wireless networks installed after the public areas, as the public areas currently offer no internet access.

31. We also recommend that PICT only allow people with laptops and mobile devices purchased or approved by PICT to access the encrypted wireless network and that initially PICT only offer wireless internet access, followed by access to the full network. This will further mitigate any risks.

(c) *Intranet*

32. The intranet provides some very useful services, but is not very interactive and needs to be updated. The intranet should allow Members and Members' staff to book rooms, book restaurants, access Fees Office details, request passes and book tours online. Moving towards an interactive system can save time and money in other departments. We recommend that the House Administration Committee investigates booking systems and department functions that can be electronic.

33. We also recommend that debates from all Chambers should be stored for instant replay with a sophisticated search facility and streamed live (including debates from Westminster Hall).

(d) *VOIP*

34. Voice over IP (VOIP) technology has a lot of benefits, including being able to link phones and voicemails with computers and easily having functions, such as video call. VOIP can be made secure and both the private and public sector are looking into incorporating it into their IT system. PICT should look at the possibilities of using VOIP on the Parliamentary network.

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**Memorandum from Richard Allan, Head of Government Affairs for Cisco Systems, UK and Ireland  
(October 2006)**

1. *Author Background:* Richard Allan was MP for Sheffield Hallam and member of Information Select Committee 1998 to 2005 and worked as an information technology professional in the National Health Service prior to that.

2. Since September 2005, he has worked for Cisco Systems, a major manufacturer of networking equipment, providing him with further recent experience of the way in which a large distributed organisation uses technology.

*Relevant Facts:* Cisco Systems supplies equipment that is used for many of the applications described in this submission. However, a number of other manufacturers also make similar technology. This submission will inevitably refer to Cisco's own solutions as it covers best practice within this company but it does not aim to promote any particular company's products.

3. *Scope of Submission:* This submission is largely addressed to questions a) and c) but also covers issues raised in questions d) and g) of the inquiry. It aims to respond concisely and in non-technical language avoiding detailed discussions of the technology. If more detailed information would be valuable to the Committee then we can follow up on technical points either with Committee members or with the House's technical staff.

4. *Additional Context:* The submission describes a number of solutions that I believe would be of benefit to Members that are not all currently deployed by the House authorities. In doing so, I make no explicit or implicit criticism of Parliament's technical team. Having observed the work of PCD at close hand over 8 years I believe them to be a team that does remarkably well in servicing the demands of such a complex and challenging organisation as Parliament.

5. The suggestions in this submission will be ones which I am confident that PCD will have considered and may already be implementing in some cases. Their advancement here is intended to be an encouragement towards the provision of better services and for the organisation to develop further its capabilities and offer to Members and staff.

6. I also understand that there have been organisational changes since I left Parliament of which I do not have first-hand knowledge. I am however familiar with the background to them and believe them to be a sensible response to today's challenges.

RESPONSE TO QUESTIONS

(a) *Best practice in the world at large: How are ICT services provided in other organisations, both commercial and public sector? How are such services provided in organisations with distributed systems and multiple locations?*

7. Cisco Systems was founded in 1984 by a small group of computer scientists from Stanford University. Since the company's inception, Cisco engineers have been leaders in the development of Internet Protocol (IP)-based networking technologies. Today, it has more than 47,000 employees worldwide who are supplied with computer equipment by the company and connected to a corporate network.

8. Cisco is also a supplier of technology to public and private sector organisations globally, including many in the UK, and so has a great deal of expertise in best practice deployments of IT. If the Committee would like to explore best practice examples in more detail then this could most effectively be done in a presentation session. Cisco is able to offer such a presentation and/or technology demonstration on request.

9. The following sections describe corporate uses of technology within Cisco that may be of relevance to the way in which the House of Commons could work.

#### A. *Intranet Usage*

10. The redesign of the Intranet is also touched on in question g) of the inquiry.

11. Within Cisco, the intranet is very extensively used for transactions as well as the provision of information. This means that activities such as the booking of travel, entering of financial claims, logging of technical support queries and so on are all carried out via websites as the primary means of communication.

12. The key to this strategy has been the deployment in most cases of best-of-breed external systems that are customised to varying degrees for Cisco's use, rather the creation of entirely new systems internally. The intranet is used to provide controlled access and a Cisco-branded interface to systems such as those of the external pension provider and the car fleet manager.

13. The financial system is especially important allowing all claims to be logged electronically and then approved online according to the authorisation rules established. All purchasing is also done electronically using an interface to online catalogues. And travel booking is handled by a web interface to the Amex-run travel office freeing up their staff to deal only with urgent issues on the phone or in person.

14. Similar systems would, I believe, be of benefit to Members and staff and could be implemented cost-effectively if the customised-off-the-shelf approach is followed.

#### B. *Personal Communications Services*

15. The most significant difference I have found between Parliament's use of its network and Cisco's has been in the provision of personal communications services. The Parliamentary network supports email as an inter-personal communications tool for Members and staff. Cisco also offers email but additionally uses its network to deliver instant messenger, advanced voice services and video communications.

##### (i) *Voice Services*

16. One of the major differences between practice in the commercial sector and Parliament is in the use of voice services. Cisco Systems employees carry out a large part of their business using voice services. Audio-conferencing and voicemail in particular are in daily use as internal and external communications tools.

17. Voicemail usage is far more advanced than simple answerphone functionality. For example, senior managers will use distribution lists to send messages to dozens of people in their teams as a preferred method for certain types of communication. This is an attractive alternative to email where voice is the more effective medium.

18. Properly used this could be of great benefit to Parliament. For example, the leadership of a political party might use voicemail to communicate urgent information to a large number of Members and staff quickly and efficiently.

19. It is likely that list distribution functionality is already present in Parliament's voicemail system. The challenge may be one of developing new working methods rather than one of the tools not being available. If there is to be more take-up of voicemail then consideration may have to be given to ease-of-use issues as well as those of training and work culture.

20. Audio-conferencing is now in widespread use across the technology sector as a core business application. It offers significant efficiency and cost benefits over traditional meetings as well as permitting groups to work together that would simply be unable to do so without this technology.

21. The costs of using it have reduced as it has become a feature of the voice systems over IP that most businesses are now deploying. These new systems also make it easy to use so that the overheads in setting up and running a meeting are very low.

22. In the Parliamentary context, it could be used for regular meetings between a Member and their Westminster and constituency staff, sitting on speaker phones at each end, as well as applications such as a Member bringing together a group of policy advisors from across the country to discuss an issue before the House.

23. Another key feature of IP-based telephony systems that may be of interest to Parliament is that of extension mobility. Wherever I go in a Cisco office anywhere in the world I can log in to a telephone and have my own normal telephone number and local functionality. This allows a much more flexible use of workspaces between staff.

24. A common telephony system could be implemented between the Parliamentary estate and other points of use such as Members' homes and constituency offices that would allow a person to simply login wherever they find themselves and be accessible on a single number. This approach of linking an HQ and multiple branches into a single IP-based phone system is very common now and can deliver a very rapid return on investment as well as offering these enhanced services.

(ii) *Instant Messenger*

25. Cisco uses an Instant Messenger tool which is essentially a corporate version of popular products such as the MSN/Yahoo/AOL messengers in common use by anyone under the age of 25. This is a very important part of the set of communications products.

26. Most email users feel overwhelmed by the quantity of mail they receive. This can often be for the most trivial purposes. For example, arranging a meeting can generate a dozen emails as different dates and times are proposed and rejected or agreed. The same meeting can be fixed with a few instant messages in real-time relieving the email inbox of those messages.

27. There are also occasions when a user sends an email with a time-critical query but has no idea how long a response will take. Instant Messengers have the great virtue of showing "presence" information, ie whether a person is online or not. This means that you can look at your list of contacts and see if someone is there for whom you have an urgent query.

28. The service is also very typically used for setting up phone calls—you see if someone is online and send a message to ask if it is OK to call. They can then respond instantly to say when they are free for the call and what the best number is for you to use. This is a great time-saving measure.

(iii) *Video Services*

29. Increasingly, video is being used as a business communications tool. In Cisco this operates at a number of levels. There are portable video-conferencing units in many meeting rooms that can be setup and connected to another such unit anywhere on the network in a few minutes. There are also at-desk facilities with small webcam-type devices. And at the top end a facility called Telepresence has been developed that allows groups in two locations to meet around a virtual conference table.

30. Key to their successful use is the choice of the appropriate solution for a particular meeting. Their ease-of-use is also essential if they are to be accepted by users. The solutions landscape has certainly changed significantly since the early attempts to introduce video-conferencing into Parliament which involved units that could only be used in certain locations with advance booking and no certainty that they would work.

31. Given the nature of Parliamentary business, video should play a large part in this and it would be worth how considering recent developments could be exploited. For example, a video-conferencing link would allow a Minister to "join" a number of local MPs on visits to schools in geographically distant constituencies on a single day when this would not be possible in person. And MPs could hold more short meetings with experts from across this country and abroad, not as a substitute for travel that is necessary for interpersonal contact, but as a supplement to it.

32. A further element in the use of video that may be of interest is the deployment of internal IPTV—that is internal video content delivered over the network. This is used within Cisco to communicate important internal messages as well as for training purposes and to allow people who are not in the office on a particular day to participate in meetings.

33. Parliament is already using a form of IPTV externally with the webcasting of committee meetings and this could be developed further as the technology is increasingly effective for these purposes. But it may also want to consider investigating other ways to use video to generate and distribute additional content for both internal and public consumption.

C. *Network Capabilities*

(i) *Virtual Private Network (VPN)*

34. This is also relevant to question d).

35. Cisco employees are issued with laptops and use a VPN connection when working remotely. This connectivity is very robust with a number of points of connection provided around the globe. The security is generally provided by a software token on the PC which generates a unique key when a password is entered that is used to authenticate the connection.

36. The Cisco VPN system is designed to support a large community of users who mostly spend much of their time offsite. It has to be reliable and offer equivalent functionality to that available onsite to meet the business requirements.

37. Parliament is right to specify equivalent functionality offsite and onsite as its VPN objective. If this is not being achieved then the design and specification of the VPN solution being deployed should be revisited as there is no inherent technical reason why most users with standard UK ADSL broadband connections, now typically at 2MB or 8MB, should not be able to enjoy a good VPN service.

*(ii) Wireless Networking*

38. This is also relevant to question g) on the House's plans for wireless.

39. Cisco Systems has rolled out wireless networking as standard in its offices. This includes two networks—one for Cisco corporate users only, and a public network for guests. This project has been very successful with wireless now the default method of connectivity for most users.

40. Cisco Systems believes firmly that the technology is sufficiently mature for wireless networks to be deployed securely, including for the transport of sensitive information. It is used within Cisco Systems to carry exactly the same level of confidential data as the wired networks. Secure deployments require careful consideration to be given to the network design and configuration but are now common across many enterprises.

*(iii) Backup Facilities*

41. Users within Cisco store most of their documents locally on their PCs, as do Parliamentary users. There are common network-based data storage facilities that are used for holding structured data for group use but the default for document creation is to use local rather than network drives.

42. Software is deployed across the network however to ensure that all this locally-held material is backed up centrally so that it can be restored to a PC in a timely fashion if necessary. This takes the form of an incremental backup that runs in the background on the laptop computers.

43. Such a system of automatic backup to secure storage facilities is preferable to leaving users responsible for their own backups to devices like CD-R disks. My experience of Parliamentary users was that hardly any of them ever carried out any form of backup, with all the consequent risks of permanent data loss. A centralised backup server also presents a lower risk of data security breach if managed correctly than the presence of backed up files on CDs.

*(c) IT stability v flexibility: Has the right balance been struck between (1) stability/quality of service and (2) flexibility for Members to arrange their ICT provision to suit their individual working patterns?*

44. Before 2001 there was no common computing platform for Members and their staff. The change to central provision has created much greater coverage and consistency in the use of IT by Members. It is likely that major problems in terms of support and security would have resulted from a continuation of the previous regime of individual purchase of computers by Members.

45. However, it is also the case that any large group of users of a corporate network will have diverse specific requirements. There will therefore be an inherent demand for the installation of multiple software packages in addition to the basic supplied package.

46. As I understand it, the current situation with Parliamentary computers is that users are not allowed administrator access and therefore cannot install their own applications. This has the effect of limiting the usefulness of the devices as well as being a source of frustration amongst the client group for the service. Security and stability are typically cited as the rationale for such restrictive usage policies.

47. An alternative strategy would be to allow users to install their own applications in addition to the supplied set. This would make the devices much more useful to their owners. It would also allow the community to innovate in the ways in which they work.

48. Stability concerns about the operating system can be overstated and on balance should not be a reason on their own to obstruct user choice. If a clear policy of user responsibility is adopted, i.e. if there is a major problem with user-installed software then the House of Commons only undertakes to restore the standard configuration plus any user data (see also backup proposals above), then this need not necessarily open the door to excessive and problematic support requests.

49. Security concerns can be dealt with by the use of security products both on client PCs and at network level that detect and deal with any rogue applications. Again the chances of this happening should not be overstated as most users will only use any additional freedom to install popular applications that do not present any particular security challenges.

50. PCD could model the pros and cons of allowing more flexibility in the use of PCs in the light of experience to date. Tools such as Windows automatic updates and modern security packages should be factored in with a view to allowing increased flexibility in line with user demand.

### Memorandum from Andrew Hardie (October 2006)

1. In the past 18 months the advent of several new Web technologies and techniques, loosely referred to as “Web 2.0”, has revolutionised the delivery of information services to users via fixed and mobile Web browsers and has the potential to replace many traditional desktop applications and techniques.

2. Web 2.0 has, in little over a year, transformed the way in which users interact with information via the Web in dramatic and positive ways. Many of the services that have been developed so far could either have direct application in the service of Parliament or guide the development of future services. Reliance on traditional desktop and server applications needs to be reconsidered in the light of these new developments, which continue to evolve at a remarkable pace.

3. If the UK Parliament is to have a modern, efficient information system for Members, staff and citizens (“*to maximise its internal efficiency and external effectiveness*”), which is able to keep pace with rapid change and compare favourably with the best offerings on the Web, the advent of Web 2.0 cannot be ignored. Although it is not a panacea, Web 2.0 can and should have a place in the Parliamentary information strategy.

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#### INTRODUCTION

4. In the past 18 months the advent of several new Web technologies and techniques, loosely referred to as “Web 2.0”, has revolutionised the delivery of information services to users via Web browsers and has the potential to replace many traditional desktop applications and techniques. The even more recent advent of Web 2.0 on mobile platforms is accelerating development and innovation further.

5. Instead of large complex proprietary applications and software suites installed on each PC, which can be hard to configure and maintain, the new lightweight portable Web-based services require only a Web browser with little or no local configuration and generally run equally well on Windows, Mac, Linux and (with some restrictions) on mobile platforms such as PDAs and high-end mobile phones. Companies wanting to serve many millions of users need to be able to engage the widest possible audience.

6. Innovative new companies based on such Web-based services, like Flickr, MySpace and YouTube, have proliferated, gathering millions of users, and hundreds of millions of Dollars of value, in a matter of months. These sites, like so many others of the Web 2.0 generation, depend almost entirely on user-contributed content for their success. Encouraging users to contribute regularly requires appealing, easy to use interfaces.

7. Other sites, like Hi5, Bebo and Orkut, have gathered large numbers of users by creating interactive online communities. Here, users trade the effort expended in entering personal information in return for higher quality matching with potential friends, activity partners and “dates”. Users become “co-developers” of the sites.

8. It is important to note that none of these sites provides training or a help desk. How to use the site must be self-evident or intuitive; if not, the site will simply be a commercial failure. The competition for “eye-balls”, ie users, has become intense and that competition is reflected in the effort expended in creating high-quality interface design and rich functionality. Even the well-established Internet players, like Yahoo and Google, have had to respond to these new developments and update their traditional offerings.

9. The rush to gather users to impress advertisers and potential buyers alike has led to other companies, like Writely and Zimbra, with web-based alternatives to many of the traditional desktop applications, such as word processing, spreadsheets, databases, project management and calendaring. Email has, of course, long been available as a Web-based service, highly prized by people on the move.

10. In short, the innovation initiative is passing from the traditional creators of large software applications with long release cycles to the provision of Web-based services which can evolve rapidly because they do not have to rely on local client software updates for functionality or revenue stream.

11. Web 2.0 is changing both the Web and software business models very fast and many of the large traditional software companies are scrambling to catch up with the new leading edge.

#### WHAT IS “WEB 2.0”

12. Whilst opinion as to what exactly constitutes “Web 2.0” differs in some details, the following general principles are fundamental:

12.1. The emphasis has shifted from software programs (whether locally installed or on network servers) to Web-based service provision—the concept of “software as a service”, instead of as a boxed product.

12.2. The software providing these services is constantly evolving—some sites release new versions daily or even hourly—and it is never “signed-off” and finished in the traditional “product” sense; leading to the concept of the “permanent beta”.

12.3. New Web technologies, such as AJAX (Advanced JavaScript and XHTML), have dramatically improved the interactivity and responsiveness of the user-experience, making possible intuitive interaction with complex service offerings yet without the need for traditional user support (training, manuals, etc). Techniques that were traditionally the preserve of desktop applications, such as drag and drop or dynamic interaction, can now be used in Web browsers.

12.4. New developments in browser rendering technology, such as the new version of CSS (Cascading Style Sheets), have considerably enhanced the visual appearance and ergonomics of web-based applications.

12.5. The easier, better user interface brought about by these technologies has made possible the extraordinary success of Web sites fuelled by user-generated content. Sites have to be attractive and easy to use if they are to encourage the regular user participation on which they depend. Moreover, the competition between sites for new features means each new enhancement must be easily found and easy to use.

#### WHY DOES WEB 2.0 MATTER?

13. The consequences of the arrival of the Web 2.0 generation of services are:

13.1. Web 2.0 makes possible things that previously either could not be done in the Web environment or were so difficult to do or use as to be impractical. In other words, it opens up a whole new area of possibilities that were previously the sole preserve of desktop applications and which can be accessed from multiple locations using just a Web browser.

13.2. Web 2.0 dramatically “raises the bar” in terms of appearance and functionality, not just for the dot-com companies offering competing web-based services but for all organisations with Web sites. Sites without the new technologies and techniques are rapidly starting to look and feel old-fashioned or even obsolete. As a result, the cost of developing Web sites that are appealing and engaging—and keeping them so—is rising significantly. Compelling content was always a requirement for competing Web sites seeking to attract and retain users. Compelling interaction has become the new battleground.

13.3. Web-based services are developing far more rapidly than desktop-based applications because they provide a much faster and easier route to market than traditional software distribution models; no application updates on the client devices are required (except for occasional browser updates and security fixes, which can be automated) and new versions can be deployed virtually instantly.

13.4. Combining Web 2.0 with mobile devices will accelerate the development of location based services, mobile search and digital convergence. The device itself can become part of the search, by providing location information.

13.5. Web 2.0 has coincided with the appearance of “mashups”, the dynamic integration of data from multiple sources into a unified presentation. The use of the Google maps service is a good example—someone in the USA took the published crime figures for city districts and did a mashup with the Google service to produce a map showing crime density. (Technically, mashups are not strictly Web 2.0 but tend to get lumped into it because they emerged at about the same time.)

13.6. In system design terms, the emphasis shifts from applications and operating systems to information and the users’ interactions with it. This, in fact, should always have been at the heart of good system architecture and design.

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#### PUTTING IT IN THE PARLIAMENTARY CONTEXT

14. Parliaments are not like commercial organisations, for all sorts of reasons. Web 2.0 may be transforming commercial Web company activities and, more slowly, internal and external corporate Web servers but how could it be applied usefully in the specialised environment of the UK Parliament?

15. Consideration of this has to start with the question, “What do Members want?” As the song in that old Martini advert went, the answer surely is “Any time, any place, anywhere”. Members would like to access to all their data and all the available services all the time, wherever they are. That’s one problem. Another problem arises when different individual Members or groups of Members want something different or when what they want is in only available as a proprietary, platform dependent application installed on one PC in one location.

16. The provision of services to constituency offices, Members’ homes and Members on the move further complicates the traditional approach to service provision. Remoting the entire Parliamentary network has the benefit of largely keeping the same services and look and feel, in the hope that this will simplify training and support, but the VPN approach may be the right answer to the wrong question. VPNs can be problematic, especially when running across different network carriers and national boundaries. The Web-at-large doesn’t use VPNs. Where secure communication is required, eg for online banking and making credit card payments, HTTPS (a secure version of the standard Web protocol) is used instead. This is a standard feature in all modern Web browsers.

17. Add in the problem of Party-provided applications, local “spot-fix” and personal preference software and the complexity and difficulty multiplies further. Achieving it all is hard enough but supporting it is even harder. The system becomes “brittle”, ie easily broken, making it very hard to support.

#### THE USER SUPPORT ISSUE

18. There can never be enough support for a system that is brittle by design. Providing more support staff or improving the response time in call centres is fixing the wrong problem. The real problem is why so many people are calling the help desk. Zero-intervention should be the goal, not more nationwide flying PICT-ets.

19. Users and IT departments can both be their own worst enemy. IT departments usually think the answer to management and support problems is tighter central control of users, equipment and facilities and seek to solve the problem by technical and administrative means. But, the more complex and tightly “locked down” a system, the less flexible it is, the harder (and riskier) it becomes to upgrade and the more users look for ways to bypass its restrictions. Then, entrenched “them and us” positions emerge, with each side thinking that the other doesn’t understand and is being deliberately difficult. Eventually, powerful users will break the central stranglehold and the cycle begins again.

20. Users also have to realise that every special case they plead is an additional complexity and support issue for the IT department. At a recent PITCOM meeting about getting value for money in IT projects, the speaker forcefully made the point that many Government IT projects failed because Departments continued to over-specify their requirements, attempted to automate outdated business processes and, generally, regarded themselves as “special” so increasing costs unnecessarily and failing to capitalise on the benefits of COTS (Commercial Off-The-Shelf) products. The MOD, especially, has long struggled with this issue.

21. Much technical innovation is now happening in consumer, rather than business, markets—think graphics, mobiles, digital convergence, web services. This will, inevitably, lead to constant user pressure for more and better services. Flexible service provision is how the dot-com “Fast Companies” do this. From the 90-day projects of the dot-com boom, to the “tiger team” one week projects of today, speed of response and rollout is what characterises the successful players.

22. In the Parliamentary context, striking a balance between lowest common denominator and highest individual plea is always going to be difficult but must be tackled to arrive at system specifications and service definitions that can actually be implemented and supported. A useful guiding principle for both sides can be compatibility not commonality. Commonality of equipment and software configuration is hard to achieve and even harder to maintain. The Web is the most successful example ever of the principle of compatibility over commonality. If sites like Yahoo and Google, with tens of millions of users, required each one of those users to have a specific hardware and software configuration, and had to maintain an asset register of that configuration, they would cease to exist, buried under their own administrative burden. It requires a shift in thinking from hardware and software to thinking about information services.

#### THE DILEMMAS OF STORAGE

23. Discussion of information inevitably leads to the question of storage and, more importantly, information management. Again, there are wider issues here than those usually considered.

24. Storage is certainly now cheap, very cheap (eg a one terabyte redundant disk, gigabit network storage appliance, WiFi node and print server available in an IT supermarket for 999 Euros). But, storage cost alone isn’t the issue—managing, finding and retrieving the information in the storage is the real cost. Throwing more storage at the problem will not, alone, solve the information management issues.

25. Speed and reliability are, of course, fundamental requirements. If storage is not fast and demonstrably reliable, users will replicate needlessly “just in case”, so exacerbating the problem and creating an escalating demand for storage.

26. There are also hidden issues to do with information availability. Having reliable mass storage is of no use if the information cannot be found when needed or isn't in the store in the first place. Data stored on individual PCs is at risk; people are too busy or too lazy to make backups. Locally installed applications may be faster but also are a single point of failure—even if the data is replicated it is often inaccessible if the application itself is not available because the PC has a fault.

27. The Web 2.0 approach to provision of office type services, like that for Web-based email, is to have all the information stored on the provider's servers. A well-managed data centre can achieve very high reliability and availability standards (the goal being the “five nines”, ie 99.999% uptime), much higher than those of a desktop PC. Try to remember the last time Yahoo or Google was not working or lost your information and reflect on how many users they serve and how much data they manage, especially in their picture and video databases.

28. However, this does leave the problem of what to do when the information servers are inaccessible, due to network faults or Internet traffic overload, or when offline working is required (eg while travelling). However, very interesting new Web 2.0 techniques are emerging from some companies. Zimbra is trialling a two way sync of mail, calendar, contacts, and documents between offline stores and online Web database. If these ideas prove workable (there are others, like the Moxie rich text editor which uses Dojo Storage, and there will, certainly, be many more), they will go a long way towards making the Web 2.0 approach a more comprehensive solution.

#### SUGGESTIONS

29. Obviously, without a detailed study of the various user needs, current situation and legacy migration issues, suggestions made here can be only in broad terms. However, there are several areas where the use of Web 2.0 techniques could be of use in devising a new approach to the provision of ICT services to Members.

30. The basis for the new approach could be to decide a core “de minimis” set of services, eg email, Vote Bundle, Hansard, annunciator, relevant Library services, and provide an integrated Web 2.0 environment (a “Parliamentarian's Web Desktop”) to access them both within the parliamentary estate and at the other locations where Members and their staff operate, including while on the move, using the secure Web protocol (HTTPS).

31. A feature of browsers that often goes un-noticed is their ability to work with data from different sources and access several different services simultaneously. Having multiple browser windows or tabs open at the same time allows user interaction with different information services at the same time.

32. If all or, at least, most of the Members' Parliamentary, Party and individual information service needs could be delivered via Web interfaces, the need for complex, fragile client software configurations would disappear, as would the dependence on the specific machine on which that software was installed. Failure of an individual PC would simply mean moving to another and logging in again.

33. What benefits would this approach bring? These could include:

33.1 It would provide the closest thing to “Any time, any place, anywhere” since the only requirement to use it would be a Web browser and an internet connection, whether fixed or mobile.

33.2 It could be deployed in parallel with some or all the existing traditional applications, so providing an alternative access means.

33.3 Because no local software installation is required, availability of the services depends only on access control. If Internet connectivity and a browser are already available, no site visit is required. The services can be made available very quickly to large numbers of new users, eg following a General Election. All that is needed is a means of delivering the necessary logins, passwords and (when necessary) access tokens.

33.4 Similarly, denial of the services also depends only on access control. Removal of access to services, eg at Dissolution, can be achieved quickly. If the local data replication technique, described above, or other “information only” access mechanisms are implemented, the denial of service could still leave access to and download of all of the Member's information created up to the point of the Dissolution.

33.5 New features can be added quickly. “Current” and “Next release” and, even, “fallback” versions can all exist in parallel.

33.6 A Web 2.0 approach makes it easier (but still not easy) to deliver the services to mobile devices, as only a Web browser (eg Opera Mobile or Mini) is required, but the physical issues, of course, remain.

33.7 If only a Web browser is required, the issue of software licence compliance is reduced to the operating system and the browser only. If Linux is used, there is no licence compliance requirement at all.

33.8 The Web Desktop could be made the only form of access to be supported outside the Parliamentary Estate, so considerably simplifying the provision of remote support.

33.9 Because customisation and personalisation are easy in a Web environment, different versions of the system could be offered to suit the varying needs of Members and staff. Furthermore, individual users could adjust the system to suit their needs for the tasks they perform most.

34. As when the Web first appeared, it is difficult to convey in writing alone how Web 2.0 might work and look to those who haven't seen or used it. It is, perhaps, even harder to imagine how it might work in the specialised environment of the UK Parliament. A demonstrator project of the "Parliamentarians Web Desktop" would greatly assist informed debate and decisions about the use of Web 2.0 in future developments. Of course, being Web 2.0, it could be developed quickly, updated regularly and all done so at relatively low cost, compared to traditional enterprise-scale solutions.

#### CONCLUSIONS

35. Web 2.0 has, in little over a year, transformed the way in which users interact with information via the Web in dramatic and positive ways. Many of the services that have been developed so far could either have direct application in the service of Parliament or guide the development of services. Reliance on traditional applications needs to be reconsidered in the light of these developments, which continue to evolve at a remarkable pace.

36. Many of these new Web 2.0 developments could be employed to create a Web based system providing access to the main Parliamentary ICT services and provide facilities equivalent to those traditionally provided by local desktop applications, such as word processing. In time, techniques will probably emerge that would allow all services to be provided (or, at least, accessed) in this way.

37. If Parliament is to have a modern, efficient information system for Members, staff and citizens ("*to maximise its internal efficiency and external effectiveness*"), which is able to keep pace with rapid change and compare favourably with the best offerings on the Web, the advent of Web 2.0 cannot be ignored. Although it is not a panacea, Web 2.0 can and should have a place in the future Parliamentary information strategy.

#### NOTES

- This paper represents solely the author's views; not those of anyone in Parliament or the views of any third party.
- To aid clarity and succinct presentation, some technical simplifications have been made.
- This paper has concentrated on the provision of ICT services to Members but the use of Web 2.0 techniques are also applicable to Parliamentary Staff and, especially, to improving the "citizen-facing" information services, ie the parliament.uk Web site.
- It is not the intention of this paper to suggest that Web 2.0 techniques can be used to meet all of Members' ICT requirements now but rather to challenge the thinking that desktop applications are the only way to do it and promote a more flexible approach, to which Web 2.0 is well-suited.
- The issues of security have been largely left to one side so as to allow the paper to concentrate on the key information issues. Security is, of course, a very important issue in the parliamentary context but there may be different ways of looking at the problem than a single sign-on to everything. (A discussion of the relative security merits of VPNs and HTTPS is outside the scope of this paper but, suffice it to say, HTTPS is much easier to deploy and manage since it is built into all Web browsers by default). A Web 2.0 approach could allow different granularities of access, depending on location and device, ie context. Instead of speaking about identity in context it may be helpful to turn this around and look on context as being part of your identity in any given instance. Your identity for a particular task, transaction or need, at a particular time and, maybe, in a particular place is therefore a combination of personal ID data and the data about these contexts. (This is explored in more detail in the author's paper Chips or Mash? Composite Identity in Context prepared for the EURIM Personal Identity group, in June 2006)

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#### **Memorandum from Colin Lobo, UK Enterprise Risk Services, Deloitte & Touche LLP (October 2006)**

1. Following my attendance at the PITCOM committee session yesterday afternoon, we were invited to submit suggestions to you in relation to the review that is being undertaken of the IT service provision.
  - (i) It seems fairly evident that there is no defined requirement in terms of the users (both in Westminster and further afield). To reach the desired point, it is essential that a requirements capture is undertaken. This will then ultimately lead into a service portfolio that PICT can then provide and support.
  - (ii) There will need to be a clearly defined scope as to what PICT will support. Changes to such devices should not be permitted and anyone outside of PICT should not have the ability to make changes to the devices.

- (iii) With the facilities available today, it should be easy and feasible to “lock-down” the operating system configuration to only allow specific changes to be made. This will result in improved security, less likelihood of change (and subsequent support calls) and easier management of the devices by PICT.
- (iv) The data that is being processed will need to be assessed to determine its protective marking. Depending on this will influence the best method to store, manage and transmit the data from all potential locations. This will also help to drive out the resiliency/backup requirements.
- (v) Consideration must be given to external devices that can be connected into a PC/laptop and the implications that this could have to the device itself and potentially to the whole network.
- (vi) Unauthorised devices, if connected to the network, should fail when attempting to access any services or devices.
- (vii) Options should be available for various forms of remote access. This will need to cater for dial-up, broadband and wireless using shared infrastructure. It should also cater for mobile devices and for access to certain functions (such as email) from public devices. The systems must cater for the protective marking of the devices.
- (viii) This will all need to be supported with appropriate user awareness material so that they are aware of the implications that these changes will have and the benefit that they will derive from it.

2. This is a very brief summary of some of the salient points that I feel will need to be included as part of this review. There will be significant technical detail that will drive out the end solution, but the overall design must be known and agreed before the technical elements can be determined.

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#### **Memorandum from Head of UK Public Sector, InterSystems (November 2006)**

1. Concerning the use of ICT for Members of Parliament at the House of Commons (HoC), its use (as with many organisations) is in a continuous state of development/expansion/improvement and I have the following points to make both concerning the formal discussion within the meeting and informally thereafter:

- (i) Security Strategy—this needs to be formally owned by the HoC or similar and never outsourced.
- (ii) IT Strategy—this needs to be formally owned by the HoC or similar and never outsourced.
- (iii) Technology[en rule] many Government projects fail because the technology used is itself legacy (ie more than 20 years old) which cannot support modern requirements.
- (iv) We are in the web era—so it is vital to use modern web-era designed products and technologies.
- (v) The data used across the HoC can be complex, confidential and case-oriented and the HoC is a real-time business.
- (vi) After the meeting, I discussed with the Rt Hon Alun Michael MP an analogy for the use of ICT in the HoC along these lines . . .

“MPs are similar to doctors who hold surgeries in their local geographical area (constituencies) discussing sensitive case-files with their patients (constituents) and also work at the national organisation (HoC) on a larger canvas that improves the health and well-being of the nation”.

2. Carrying that analogy forward, InterSystems can assist the HoC in a manner of ways:

- (i) “Ensemble” integration technology is used by civil servants in the UK to manage complex data in real-time from a number of differing data-stores to give answers to today’s business problems. In Holland, it is used on a nationwide message-broking hub project (addressing the security needs) and delivered in only four months from award of contract.
- (ii) “Caché” is the underlying technology of choice (a post-relational database and rapid application environment) for the majority of medical installations in America and many of those of England—as well as the police forces in Belgium as they replace the old legacy systems of relational databases.

3. These technologies are modern and efficient to install, run and maintain—and also change as the business requirements develop over time: we put the customer in control.

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## Memorandum from Intellect (November 2006)

### BACKGROUND

1. Intellect is the UK trade association for the IT, telecoms and electronics industries. Its members account for over 80% of these markets and include blue-chip multinationals as well as early stage technology companies. These industries together generate around 10% of UK GDP and 15% of UK trade.

2. The following paper provides an overview of Intellect's Concept Viability service and its relevance to the Parliamentary Administration Committee's inquiry into "Information and Communication Technology".

3. Intellect welcomes the opportunity to provide input at this early stage and looks forward to a programme of continual engagement with relevant stakeholders.

### INTRODUCTION

4. On Tuesday 11 July the Parliamentary Administration Committee agreed the terms of reference for its inquiry into Information and Communication Technology. The inquiry will:

Examine the provision for and by the House of information and communication technology services and equipment, with particular reference to services and equipment for Members and their staff.

5. The inquiry is an excellent chance to review how Parliament can and should make better use of ICT, particularly to service the needs of MPs. However, the provision of ICT services and equipment for and by the House is a complex problem due to the security issues; range of existing legacy systems; varying requirements; and the unique nature of MPs' roles and responsibilities.

6. Furthermore, the rapid developments in the private sector and consumer-led innovations have begun driving the expectations of citizens and constituents. The Information Committee's report on "Digital Technology: Working for Parliament and the Public" highlighted the fact that ICT can play an important role in influencing perceptions and helping to meet public expectations. ICT provides an opportunity for Members to derive benefit from ICT in organising their work more efficiently and maintaining better communications with constituents.

### CONCEPT VIABILITY

7. Due to the complexity of the provision of ICT services and equipment for and by the House, Intellect recommends that a Concept Viability process be undertaken at the earliest stage possible.

8. One of the six actions agreed by the Cabinet in December 2002 was that "no government initiative (including legislation) dependent on new IT to be announced before analysis of risks and implementation options has been undertaken." This action was clearly designed to help senior public sector decision makers assess the key factors and risks involved in the delivery of their proposed IT-enabled programmes and projects.

9. The Office of Government Commerce recommends early involvement of suppliers. This allows suppliers to show the client how the market can meet their need, provides early visibility of key risks and issues, and gives suppliers the opportunity to manage expectations of what the market can and cannot contribute to the proposed programme. Intellect fully endorses this approach and offers a Concept Viability service to public sector clients to help them consult the market.

### WHAT IS CONCEPT VIABILITY?

10. Intellect Concept Viability is a service offered by the UK trade association, which allows public sector clients to take market soundings to test the practicability of their ideas at the earliest stage. Within the Gateway process this would be before Gate 1 (and may even be before Gate 0), and before any public commitment (political, financial or "go live" date) has been made. In essence, the earlier the concept is tested, the better; clients will gain greater understanding of the achievability of their ideas and high-risk proposals can be modified or abandoned before any substantial investment has been made.

11. This service is intended to assist the development of a more comprehensive assessment of projects at their earliest stages. To this end, the assessment should not be viewed in isolation, but rather as part of a wider consultation undertaken by the client (ie this will not replace work which the client undertakes on proof of concept or feasibility, but rather seek to inform it).

## HOW WILL CONCEPT VIABILITY WORK?

12. Clients with business needs that require either a large-scale commitment or demanding solution approach Intellect to test the viability of the concept. As the leading representative body for the ICT industry with approximately 800 member companies, Intellect is well placed to draw on the expertise clients need. Intellect is also technology-neutral, so will be able to draw on a range of companies providing fundamentally different solutions, thereby enhancing the variety of options and perspectives available to the client.

13. The Concept Viability process is flexible frequently follows the approach outlined below.

### STAGE 1

The client provides a short, written description of the business need to Intellect.

### STAGE 2

Intellect circulates this to a selection of companies who are invited to comment on the feasibility of the proposal. Consideration should be given as to whether this takes the form of an agreed list of companies who wish to participate in the process or whether there should be a panel of companies with relevant experience in the marketplace (in either case Intellect invites member companies to participate in this process).

The purpose of this initiative is to inform and contribute to, but not replace, the wider consultation that clients undertake with the supplier community.

### STAGE 3

Intellect facilitates the exchange of information between client and suppliers, through workshops where the client discusses their proposal with suppliers and by inviting suppliers to comment via written submissions.

### STAGE 4

Intellect collates the responses and prepares a “Concept Viability Assessment”, a report reiterating the requirement, highlighting risks and issues identified in the discussion and papers received, and, where appropriate, providing guidance on the budgetary provision needed to achieve a successful solution. The report also provides a valuable starting point for further detailed work on feasibility or proof of concept.

### STAGE 5

Intellect works with the client to ensure that this assessment is made available to all suppliers expressing an interest in bidding for the contract to ensure a level playing field. Intellect recommends that clients use the report in preparing a Prior Information Notice or OJEU advertisement.

## BENEFITS OF CONCEPT VIABILITY

14. Intellect’s Concept Viability service highlights where concepts are not technically feasible, are flawed or high-risk will be identified as such at an early stage, thereby informing the client of these pitfalls before investment has been made in the concept. Flaws in proposals can be highlighted without companies feeling that their position in the procurement is threatened. Where innovative solutions are required, emerging technologies can be discussed along with a frank dialogue of the risks incurred

15. The process is quick and provides useful insights into possible solutions, providing easy access to supplier expertise and helping to ensure that no initiative dependent on new ICT is announced before an analysis of the risks and options for implementation has taken place.

16. The process informs any subsequent work on feasibility or proof of concept, but is not intended to replace these activities.

17. The following Government programmes and projects have used the Intellect Concept Viability service:

- Department for Constitutional Affairs: HR Shared Services.
- Department for Education and Skills: Youth Opportunity Card.
- Learning & Skills Council: Re-tendering Project.
- NHS Wales: Service Orientated Approach to Healthcare.
- OGCbuying.solutions: Policy Consultancy.
- Scottish Executive: Shared Services.
- Suffolk County Council: Waste Management.

- Suffolk County Council: Transport Procurement.
- Training & Development Agency: Teaching Information Line.
- Cabinet Office: Project ISAAC.
- Cabinet Office e-Government Unit: Shared Services.
- Department for Constitutional Affairs: DISC Programme (two workshops: procurement and packaging strategies).
- Department for Education and Skills: Information Sharing Index.
- Department for Education and Skills: Managing Information Across Partners Programme.
- Department for Work and Pensions: Document and Output Management Programme.
- HM Debt Management Office: e-Bidding.
- HM Land Registry: e-Conveyancing.
- Home Office: ID Cards.
- Home Office: Refugee Integration Loan Scheme.
- Office of Government Commerce: Commercial Activities Re-competition (CAR) Project.
- Office for National Statistics: 2011 Census.

#### NEXT STEPS

18. Intellect looks forward to discussing Concept Viability and how it can be used in greater depth with the Administration Committee and relevant stakeholders in order to ensure that the House makes better use of ICT to service the needs of MPs, their staff and constituents.

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