



House of Commons
Administration Committee

**House of Commons
Accommodation:
Further Response to
the Committee's Third
Report of Session
2005–06**

**Second Special Report
of Session 2006–07**

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The Administration Committee

The Administration Committee is appointed by the House of Commons to consider the services provided for and by the House and to make recommendations thereon to the House of Commons Commission or to the Speaker.

Current membership

Mr Frank Doran MP (*Labour, Aberdeen North*) (Chairman)
Mr Bob Ainsworth MP (*Labour, Coventry North East*)
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Pete Wishart MP (*Scottish National, Perth & North Perthshire*)

The following members were also members of the committee during the inquiry:

The late Mr Eric Forth MP (*Conservative, Bromley & Chiselhurst*)
Mr Mark Harper MP (*Conservative, Forest of Dean*)
Peter Luff MP (*Conservative, Mid-Worcestershire*)

Powers

The powers of the committee are set out in House of Commons Standing Orders, principally in SO No 139. These are available on the Internet via www.parliament.uk

Publications

The Reports and evidence of the Committee are published by The Stationery Office by Order of the House. All publications of the Committee are on the Internet and can be accessed via www.parliament.uk/ac

Committee staff

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

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Second Special Report

We published our Third Report of Session 2005–06 on House of Commons Accommodation as HC 1279 on 6 July 2006. We published the initial response to this Report from the House of Commons Commission in Session 2006–07 as HC 164 on 18 December 2006. A further response was received from the Commission on 30 April 2007. It is set out below.

Response

Introduction

Committee Recommendation 1

We focus unapologetically in this Report on the rights and needs of Members of Parliament, in whose interests the House has appointed us to act. As we will show, the accommodation available for Members has improved dramatically in recent years with the expansion of the Parliamentary Estate into new and refurbished buildings to the north of Bridge Street. Many Members now have adequate office accommodation at Westminster—but some still do not. We examine why this is the case, and we assess the scope for improving both the extent and the quality of the accommodation available. We acknowledge that accommodation is a limited resource, and we suggest ways in which this resource could be used more efficiently. The numbers of staff of the House and Members’ staff have grown significantly in recent years: they also have a right to expect decent accommodation, and we consider the extent to which this accommodation can be provided at Westminster without infringing on the justified expectations of Members. (Paragraph 3)

1. Following the Committee’s Report, a major study of the current accommodation on the Estate has been undertaken in conjunction with property management consultants HOK. The study aimed to confirm the current capacity of the Estate and how this can be optimised; develop environmental and facilities standards against which accommodation can be rated; develop ICT systems to support tighter management of accommodation; and review the requirements of the various occupants of the Estate other than Members to be in particular areas. This follow-up response updates, where required, the original responses to the Committee to reflect the outcomes of the study.

Occupants and their accommodation needs

Committee Recommendations 3, 25, 26 & 27

The Select Committee on House of Commons (Services) in 1991 put forward minimum space standards for Members’ offices of 8–10 sq m per person in existing buildings and of 15–20 sq m per person in Portcullis House. HOK more recently has proposed a space standard for a Member’s office of 12.5 sq m per person. Both the Committee and HOK have also proposed space standards for Members’ staff. The space standards proposed to date are adequate in so far as they go and have largely been met, but sufficient space is only one criterion for adequate accommodation. (Paragraph 41)

An estate strategy is long overdue. We welcome the recognition by the House Administration that the Estate is an asset which needs to be managed strategically over a longer timescale than other parts of the House's corporate business. (Paragraph 118)

We recommend that the strategy should set standards for all occupants of accommodation on the Estate and that a programme should be devised for achieving these standards. Those who exercise control over accommodation in practice need to be held accountable for ensuring that these standards are met. (Paragraph 119)

The strategy will need to establish processes for achieving the efficient use of available accommodation and for dealing with anomalies in its allocation. All office accommodation should be rated to establish a reasonably objective measure of quality for the benefit of both those in occupancy and those responsible for allocation. (Paragraph 120)

2. The Commission has endorsed a new outline accommodation strategy. The main elements of this strategy are:

- As a priority, to address the substandard areas of Member accommodation identified by the Committee.
- To move towards the application of agreed space standards as opportunities arise and unless specific tasks demand otherwise.
- To develop information about costs of accommodation that will better inform decisions about requests for additional staff or the provision of new services.
- To identify additional office accommodation in the immediate area of the Estate to directly or indirectly provide suitable decant accommodation for Members and their staff and, if agreed by the House, provide additional space for education facilities.
- To make better use of areas currently used for storage.
- To keep under review the need for third-party occupants to be on the Estate.
- To periodically assess options for reducing the need for staff accommodation at Westminster (eg through outsourcing or greater homeworking).
- To seek sufficient leased accommodation in Westminster to meet anticipated medium-term business needs.

3. This outline will be developed into a properly programmed and costed strategy as part of the Estate Strategy currently being developed by the Estate Board. It is expected that this will be presented to the Commission later this year.

4. As the Committee's report (recommendation 3) noted, previous work has been undertaken to define appropriate space standards. The Commission has agreed to move, as opportunities allow, towards standards of 12.5m² for Members and Heads of Department and 7.5m² for all other occupants, unless specific tasks demand otherwise. HOK's analysis suggests that, if these standards were adhered to, there could, theoretically, be significant increases in estate occupation. However, there are a number of practical problems; for example, many of the buildings on the Estate are not easily re-configured and there is likely

to be significant resistance to developing the working practices necessary to achieve the higher occupancy densities. A particular opportunity will arise when Norman Shaw North is refurbished: using rooms in different configurations after refurbishment might create 60–70 additional desk spaces for Members' staff. There are some areas of staff accommodation (eg 7 Millbank) where progress can be made more quickly; however, consideration needs to be given to issues such as the additional pressure that would be placed on the infrastructure of the building and services such as catering.

Committee Recommendations 4 & 5

We believe that all Members if they wish should have sole use of an office located within the secure part of the Parliamentary Estate, whose space, quality, furnishing layout and IT services are up to modern standards. (Paragraph 41)

We recommend that no Member should be required to share an office with another Member if they do not wish to do so. (Paragraph 43)

5. These recommendations were agreed on the presumption that larger offices will be occupied in a way which achieves the new space standards ie by Members who are prepared to share them with their staff. Accommodation standards are being finalised and the Committee will be asked to endorse them in May 2007.

Committee Recommendation 6

We recommend that the Serjeant at Arms with the Government Accommodation Whip should explore Ministers' requirements for accommodation within the precincts of the House and should come back to us with proposals if it seems that these requirements at times of peak demand can be met more economically through innovative use of space. (Paragraph 56)

6. The Serjeant at Arms raised this issue in principle with the Government Accommodation Whip and Opposition Chief Whip in autumn 2006. Subsequently, discussions have taken place on an outline proposal for creating shared Ministers' Suites. The feasibility of these proposals is now being considered through the usual channels.

Committee Recommendations 8, 9, 28, 29 & 30

We and our predecessors have taken the consistent view that Members should have priority over office accommodation in the Palace above those staff of the House with no clear business need to be there. (Paragraph 64)

The House Service must recognise that it is in its own interests to occupy no more space than is needed to do its work. (Paragraph 66)

We recognise that any proposals for further construction or the acquisition of new buildings can only be justified once every effort has been made to use the existing Estate as efficiently as possible. (Paragraph 122)

We recommend that there is an urgent need for a complete and up-to-date central overview of who is based where on the Estate and the space that they occupy, available to both the Serjeant at Arms and the Accommodation Whips, to allow for properly informed joined-up

planning for future accommodation need, and for security and health and safety purposes. (Paragraph 121)

A new study is needed to prioritise occupancy within the existing Estate, to ensure that location, space, quality and layout of accommodation are matched to occupants' needs as closely as is possible within the constraints of the existing buildings. (Paragraph 122)

7. The recent HOK study identified a number of areas where accommodation is currently under utilised. It noted the requirement to enhance and refurbish the northern Estate, in particular Norman Shaw North and 1 Parliament Street, to improve accommodation for Members. To achieve this swiftly and efficiently will require the identification of suitable decant accommodation and detailed programming; both of these will form part of the Estate Strategy.

8. The study has also indicated that reconfiguring some of the existing accommodation for House staff in 7 Millbank could increase the capacity of that building. The resulting accommodation will need to remain suitable to support the work of the House and its committees. It is expected that this increased capacity will form part of the additional accommodation that is required to enable some House staff, who do not need face-to-face contact with Members, to be relocated from the Palace and northern outbuildings. Again, a detailed plan for this will be part of the Estate Strategy.

9. As the first part of this process, room G28 in Norman Shaw North will be re-designated as a Member's office from June. Plans are being drawn-up to move House staff from a number of rooms in the North Curtain/Speaker's Flat area of the Palace. This will require additional staff desks to be located in the Members' Library. Again, the rooms vacated will be re-designated as accommodation for Members and their staff. Detailed proposals will be brought to the Committee.

10. When suitable alternative accommodation is available, it is intended to remove House staff from a room on the first floor of Portcullis House, which will enable the creation of an additional meeting room in that building. It is proposed that, as a consequence, Conference Room D on the fifth floor of 1 Parliament Street will then be re-designated as a good-standard office for a Member.

11. When the contract for the telephone operator bureau is next re-let (possibly in 2009), consideration will be given to relocating this outside the Palace, or, possibly, off the Estate entirely.

Committee Recommendation 12

We recommend that the Lobby Briefing Room should be made available for booking as a meeting room by other occupants of the Estate, on the understanding that these bookings might have to be moved or cancelled at short notice if the room were required for Lobby briefings. (Paragraph 76)

12. Agreed. Discussions have been held with the Press Gallery Lobby Committee and the Administration Committee will be asked to consider a detailed proposal in May.

Committee Recommendation 14

It is important to continue to explore opportunities to bring into use space which is currently classed as unusable. We recommend that all space currently classed as unusable should be systematically analysed to identify whether it might be brought into use and that the results of this analysis should be brought back to us on a rolling basis as soon as they are available. (Paragraph 83)

13. The study undertaken by HOK looked at areas of the Palace that were currently unused. They concluded that the majority of rooms at basement level are unsuitable for use as offices in permanent occupation since they have no access to daylight. There may be opportunities for better use of basement areas as the current work to review the services (gas, water, heating and electricity), which are distributed via the basement, progresses. HOK recommended that part of the strategy for making more efficient use of floor space at ground level and above in all buildings on the Parliamentary Estate should be to reduce the amount of stored material. A study will be commissioned to help departments and others to rationalise and reduce their storage requirements. The House is also undertaking a pilot project to assess the benefits of an Electronic Data and Records Management system. One of the anticipated benefits would be a reduced requirement for the physical storage of documents.

Constraints

Committee Recommendation 15

Following a period of recent growth, we have to accept that the Estate is unlikely to expand further to any significant extent during the current planning period. (Paragraph 86)

14. In recent years the intention has been to avoid major new acquisitions of office property other than for temporary projects and decanting during refurbishments. However, given recent trends and the absence of mechanisms to limit demand for accommodation, it is likely that a shortfall in accommodation will emerge in the next parliament even after steps have been taken to make more intensive use of existing space. Options for reducing the need for staff accommodation at Westminster will be periodically reviewed; however, the Commission has agreed that the House should also seek to secure sufficient leased accommodation in Westminster to meet anticipated medium-term business needs.

Committee Recommendations 16, 31 & 32

There are legal, practical, aesthetic and historic reasons which mean that it is both difficult and undesirable to make significant alterations to the Palace; but the accommodation within it leaves a great deal to be desired. (Paragraph 88)

The standard of some accommodation on the Estate is unacceptable for full-time office work by anyone, let alone by Members of Parliament. This accommodation needs to be improved, or its use changed, as a matter of urgency. No Members or predominantly desk-based staff should be in windowless accommodation at the beginning of the next Parliament. (Paragraph 125)

We recommend that refurbishment and redesign of the areas identified in the paragraphs above should be carried out by the end of 2009 at the latest, following consultation with us as to the options available. (Paragraph 132)

15. A priority will be to address the areas of substandard accommodation that the Committee identified. This will require the support of the Accommodation Whips. Work to reconfigure the windowless offices on the Upper Committee Corridor North and South will be added to the 2008/09 work programme. This will create rooms of appropriate size, utilising the windows in the western wall. However, this is dependent on finding suitable alternative accommodation for Members whose current offices will be lost in the process. Lower Ministers windowless offices are unacceptable for daily occupation and an alternative use will be found for them. Again, this will require alternative accommodation for existing occupants.

Committee Recommendation 19

We accept the need for decant accommodation to be preserved to enable maintenance, temporary projects and reorganisation of the occupancy of the Estate. We note, however, that it is not always well understood why offices, sometimes good offices, need to be kept empty when there is demand for this accommodation. We therefore recommend that any decant requirement should be justified and explained to relevant stakeholders, including Members. Accommodation which is used infrequently or irregularly should also be justified. (Paragraph 110)

16. Work in developing the Estate Strategy has identified a requirement for ‘decant accommodation’ suitable for occupation by Members during major refurbishments of their accommodation. Undertaking refurbishment work solely during summer recesses is less practical than in the past (because it is now more likely that Members and their staff will want to be at Westminster during at least part of the recess), involves a substantial cost premium (perhaps 50%) and makes it difficult to complete sufficient work each year to prevent deterioration in the overall standard of the estate. While there will be significant costs associated with the acquisition of this decant accommodation, these will be offset by the savings in refurbishment costs. Particular works leading to a requirement for decant accommodation in the next decade are likely to include:

- the repair to the cast iron roofs of the Palace of Westminster that is expected to be disruptive and will continue while the House is sitting. This begins in 2008 with the roofs around Speaker’s Court.
- Norman Shaw North refurbishment.
- 1 Parliament Street refurbishment.

Committee Recommendations 21–24

Where one group of occupants or another claims to need more accommodation, lack of certainty over how accommodation is being used and who it is being used by makes such claims difficult to assess objectively. (Paragraph 113)

It is important that the allocation of accommodation to Members of each and every political party should comprise a reasonably equitable cross-section of the rooms available across the Estate. (Paragraph 114)

Members' needs for office space vary principally according to the numbers of staff they wish to locate at Westminster. But these needs alone do not explain why some Members have more than six times as much space at their disposal as others. Where Members occupy substandard accommodation, this may be because of a lack of sufficient adequate Members' accommodation; but it may also be because of how the Members' accommodation available has been allocated. (Paragraph 116)

The current wide discrepancies in the accommodation allocated to individual Members do not help to make the case that Members may need more overall space on the Estate. (Paragraph 117)

17. HOK has developed an accommodation grading tool. All rooms for Members and Members' staff have now been graded and the results are now being prepared in a format which is easy to use. This information will be made available to the accommodation whips in early May.

Proposals

Committee Recommendation 33

The roll-out of wireless access to the Parliamentary Network and to the Internet from within the Parliamentary Estate should be of use in reducing the demand for fixed workstations for temporary staff and possibly for others as well. (Paragraph 134)

18. Building on the interim wireless solution that was installed in the atrium area of Portcullis House, PICT has completed a procurement for a longer-term solution which will extend wireless coverage to other suitable areas of the Parliamentary Estate and also provide "guest" access for Parliamentary users with suitable non-centrally provided laptops. Implementation of this service should commence in the second quarter of 2007.

Committee Recommendation 34

ICT systems also need to be improved:

- a) so that constituency staff are not at a disadvantage compared to their colleagues at Westminster; and*
- b) to enable electronic file storage to provide opportunities to free up space occupied by paper files and shelving. (Paragraph 135)*

19. These issues were addressed in the evidence and proposals which PICT submitted to the Committee as part of its inquiry into parliamentary ICT. PICT is waiting for the Committee's report on ICT services before finalising a business case that will seek funding to provide the improvements to constituency support that are being sought.

Committee Recommendation 35

We recommend that, as indicated in the House's Corporate Business Plan, new guidance on furnishing offices for Members and their staff should be drafted by the Serjeant at Arms and brought to us for our endorsement as soon as possible. (Paragraph 138)

20. The Committee will be asked to endorse accommodation standards in May 2007.

Committee Recommendation 40

Given the pressures for space on the Estate, it is not normally appropriate for rooms above 20 sq m to be in occupancy by a single person. This rule applies as much to staff of the House and third-party occupants as it does to Members. (Paragraph 144)

21. This recommendation was agreed. Progress towards implementation will be made as the space standards are adopted (see response to recommendations 3, 25, 26 & 27).

Committee Recommendation 42

We recommend that a number of Members' staff desks should be set aside for temporary staff, and a booking system should be put in place to allow Members to use them for that purpose for a limited period at a time. Once this has been done, Members should lose permanent staff desks allocated to them if they fail to ensure that they are used consistently over an agreed period. (Paragraph 146)

22. The SAA Accommodation Manager is now managing the use of Members' staff accommodation outside Members' rooms more actively. She has already been able to agree the re-allocation of a number of desk spaces which have not been used consistently, and has agreed to some temporary use in the way the Committee recommended. It is too early to formalise these arrangements.

Committee Recommendation 43

Better co-ordination of Members' staff accommodation is required, including a proper process for the allocation of desks and regular monitoring of how the desks are used. (Paragraph 147)

23. SAA Accommodation Services staff have begun closer monitoring of the use of Members' staff accommodation. There remains a need for the development of IT systems to facilitate this. The issue is being discussed with PICT with the intention of including system development in the ICT programme.