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Administration Committee

First weeks at Westminster: induction arrangements for new MPs in 2015

First Report of Session 2013–14

Report, together with formal minutes, oral and written evidence

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First weeks at Westminster: induction arrangements for new MPs in 2015

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Summary

Arriving at Parliament as a new Member is a daunting experience and a tough test for many. For some it is an alien working environment which is disorientating and can be difficult. Not only is there a new job to get to grips with but a vast amount of information to absorb, formal procedures to master and an Estate to navigate. There is also the expectation that a new Member can start work straight away on the Monday after a Thursday polling day. In our experience this is unrealistic. We cannot expect new Members to be up and running quickly without properly equipping them first. It is therefore important that Members are provided with as much support as possible to enable them to make an effective early contribution to the parliamentary process and ensure constituents receive an uninterrupted service.

This Report reviews how the House Service, the Parliamentary Information and Communications Technology department, the Accommodation Whips and the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority (IPSA) responded to the challenges posed by the large change of membership that took place after the general election of 2010. More importantly this Report looks to the future—applying the lessons we can all learn from those experiences in 2010 to improve the provision of accommodation, staff, IT equipment, training and induction services for the new Members of 2015.
1 Induction for new MPs

1. At the 2010 general election 227 new Members of Parliament were elected.¹ This represented more than a third of the House—the biggest turnover of departing and new Members since 1997. It had become clear in the months before the election that there was likely to be an unusually large number of changes; the House of Commons Service had also been reviewing and planning induction arrangements and activities for new Members since 2005. This Report comments on what was done for newly arriving Members after the 2010 election and sets out some principles for the House Service, the Parliamentary Information and Communications Technology department, the House of Commons Members Estimate Committee, the Accommodation Whips of the major parties and the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority (IPSA) to follow when the next election takes place.

2. The House Service created a General Election Planning Group to ensure that the transition in 2010 was as smooth as possible. This Group is now planning for the next election. We recommend that members of the Administration Committee should be actively involved in the planning for the election—perhaps as part of the General Election Planning Group. We would also expect that the Whips be engaged by the House Service in planning as soon as possible. We shall seek regular updates on the work of the Group between now and the expected election date of May 2015. In particular we will take evidence in May 2014, one year before the election, to check that our recommendations are being responded to and that plans for the provision of services to new Members after the 2015 general election are well advanced.

Newly elected Members

3. The House Service made considerable efforts in 2010 to ensure that newly elected Members were able quickly and easily to arrive at Westminster. Each returning officer had been asked to give the successful candidate an information pack on election night itself. This included a letter from the Clerk of the House of Commons, a letter from IPSA, a New Members’ Guide and a form asking for essential personal information. There were also maps of the large and complex parliamentary Estate and instructions on how to get to the New Members’ Reception Area (NMRA) where essential documents and information would be made available on arrival at Westminster. This information pack received by winning candidates on election night was a new idea, and was generally found useful by Members. It is welcome that this approach is to be repeated. A number of Members have told us, however, that the election pack did not reach them on election night: one Member suggested that all candidates be contacted before the election, a task which would carry considerable costs and complexities given that there were over 4,150 candidates at the 2010 election.²

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¹ In addition to 227 completely new Members there were five Members who returned to Parliament who had previously been elected but who had lost their seats at the 1997 or 2005 elections.

² Ev 46 [Kate Green MP; Nicky Morgan MP], Ev 48 [Paul Blomfield MP]
4. We recommend that the House Service agrees to report to us by May 2014 on what steps are being taken to ensure that all returning officers hand a welcome pack to newly elected Members on election night. We also ask it to consider other methods of delivery and to assess the cost versus the benefit of such methods: for example placing it online or providing a simpler substitute for the New Members Guide.

Arrival at Westminster

5. The NMRA set up in Portcullis House meant that new arrivals were able within a few minutes to obtain a security pass, car parking details, a parliamentary email address, a laptop and the key to a locker where papers and belongings could be stored. We were told by the Chair of the House’s General Election Planning Group in May 2011 that 82% of new MPs were satisfied or better with their overall welcome, and 96% of them with the NMRA. The Hansard Society, which conducted in-depth research among new MPs, also recorded that 90% of respondents were ‘very’ or ‘fairly’ satisfied with the welcome and orientation provided.3 The NMRA will be repeated in 2015. Plans for it should be scalable so that it is proportionate to the number of new Members entering the House in 2015. The House Service is to be commended for the detailed planning and efficient work that made arrival at Westminster a relatively smooth experience for 227 new MPs in May 2010.

Sources of dissatisfaction

6. Dissatisfaction did arise from new MPs’ initial experience of the role, but this focused largely on two areas outside the immediate control of the House Service. First, and not for the first time, there was considerable dissatisfaction among new arrivals at the length of time it took before they had an office to call their own.4 Responsibility for the allocation of office space to MPs, both those returning and newcomers, lies with the Accommodation Whips of the main political parties. Secondly, there was considerable dissatisfaction among new MPs about the induction arrangements provided by the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority (IPSA). As Matt Korris, Senior Researcher at the Hansard Society, told us, Members elected in 2010 had few complaints about the mechanics of their induction but found that issues such as the absence of an office and difficulties with cash flow to staff and equip a brand new office made it hard for them to hit the ground running in the first weeks after the General Election.5

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3 Ruth Fox and Matt Korris, A Fresh Start? The Orientation and Induction of new MPs at Westminster following the 2010 General Election, Parliamentary Affairs (2012), No. 65, p. 568
4 Administration Committee, First report of Session 2005-06, Post-election services, HC 777, para 8
5 Notes of discussion, 28 January 2013 http://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/administration-committee/formal-minutes/session-2012-13/
2 Finding an office

7. The time taken before permanent offices were made available to new Members was the single biggest problem identified to us by those fellow Members who have contributed to our inquiry. Older hands among us recognise that the process in 2010 was much smoother than it had been in years gone by; the 2010 members of this Committee are not alone, however, in finding office allocation slow and far from ideal. One of our colleagues told us “In 30 years of working life, I have never found myself in such an alien working environment. Not having an office for the first several weeks left me totally disoriented, unable to focus on getting to grips with the job, and very stressed.”6 Another said: “I have never arrived in any job where I did not have a permanent desk and a telephone on the first day.”7 Another, albeit sympathetic to the problems posed by the large intake of new Members, thought the time taken to allocate him an office “inordinate”.8

8. Before permanent accommodation was allocated to Members, temporary office accommodation was provided along the Upper Committee Corridor in the Palace of Westminster and in 1 Parliament Street. Space was provided for 173 desk spaces in open plan rooms, intended for ‘hot-desking’ rather than allocated places, and more than 350 lockers for the storage of laptops, papers and so on.9 WiFi was provided so that the laptops allocated on arrival could be connected to parliamentary services.

9. The General Election Planning Group told us in 2011 that Members’ views on this were mixed. 53% of those who responded to an internal survey were slightly dissatisfied or worse. One Member told us of his fortune in being offered space in another Members’ office, which “I found to be a more useful interim solution than the hot desk facilities offered.”10 Members’ staff also reported some difficulties with the hot-desk system.

I was with a new Member and we were supposed to be ‘hot-desking’ in Committee Room 18 for over a month, clearing everything into small lockers. Provision needs to be made for people to have proper space where they can leave things overnight, only locking away confidential papers.11

10. On the other hand, some Members found the shared working space valuable in their early days in Parliament: “the shared offices were very good. It helped to share knowledge”; “The hot desk system was great on arrival with fellow new MPs working together getting to know each other and learning from each other too.”12

11. The delivery of permanent office accommodation began on 18 May, and ended on 28 June. In other words, some Members were in their offices about a week after being elected,

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6 Ev 46 [Kate Green MP]
7 Ev 46 [Nicky Morgan MP]
8 Ev 48 [Paul Blomfield MP]
9 Ev 43
10 Ev 48 [Paul Blomfield MP]
11 Ev 33 [Members and Peers Staff Association]
12 Ev 47 [Dr Therese Coffey MP; Alex Cunningham MP]
but others had to wait nearly two months before having a permanent office on the Estate. In spite of the best efforts of the House’s accommodation officials, this was only slightly better than the seven to eight weeks it took to move all Members after the 2005 general election. \[13\] Although it is fair to note that the 2010 new intake was far larger than that in 2005, and that the added complication of a coalition Government being formed also delayed decisions on what accommodation would be allocated to which party, its Members and their staff (around 250 room moves resulted from changes in Ministers), we feel that every attempt should be made to reduce the time it takes to allocate offices. Some Members felt that it was troublesome that the allocation of rooms took so long.

12. In 2011, in a post-election memorandum to the Administration Committee, the House Service made the point that “it is hard to see how we can address” complaints about slow allocation of offices “without a fundamental change in the way in which accommodation is allocated”. The responsibility for allocation of offices lies essentially with the party Whips. So long as accommodation is allocated in the current manner rather than allocated by some other means, delays will inevitably occur. Quite simply, the Whips do not know until after the election how many MPs they will need to place, and who will require the offices and areas set aside for Ministers.

13. Alternative methods of allocation are conceivable. In a perfect world, there might be identical office space available for all Members, and the Member for any constituency would simply fill the space allocated to that seat. Alternatively, offices might be allocated by simple lottery. We are not in that world: the accommodation occupied by the House of Commons has developed over 170 years and in many cases was not built with the needs of 21st century Members of Parliament in mind. The accommodation available to Members and their staff is variable. Added to that is the fact that longer-serving Members or those who hold or have held or are in hope of holding ministerial office may be allocated prime or larger spaces than those who have recently entered the House. In addition, it has been the custom to provide accommodation in party blocks, so that Members of the same party are housed relatively closely to one another.

14. We are not recommending that the Whips should surrender the ability to allocate offices; there are very good reasons for their continuing in this role whilst working closely with the Members’ Accommodation Manager. Indeed James Robertson, Director of Accommodation and Logistics Services, was very clear that if the responsibility for allocating offices was handed from the Whips to the House Service it might actually make the process more difficult. He told us:

> We sometimes find it very difficult to get to the bottom of some of the Member issues, which the Whips are possibly better placed to do than us. As far as moving an entrenched Member into or out of an office, we sometimes find it very difficult to achieve levers that are going to make the result actually happen.\[14\]

15. It is important to manage the expectations of new Members. In 2010 the House Service did communicate to Members in the New Members’ Guide that they should not expect

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13 Administration Committee, First Report of Session 2005-06: Post-Election Services, HC 777, para 12
14 Q 106
permanent office accommodation very quickly. This was issued to all new Members with a letter from the Clerk of the House; however, George Mudie MP, former Accommodation Whip, told us that communication was not sufficient for Members to be aware of their choices on arrival.

I think we were insufficiently specific on accommodation the last time. They [newly-elected Members] did not see any of the difficulty or were aware of the choices. I think it would be good to give new people when they are elected some choice of locations and ask them to list them in order, but also explain that certain places on the estate are more popular than others.\footnote{Q 112}

16. \textit{We recommend that a note on accommodation should be developed by the House Service and the Whips to be included in the information pack which is handed to the newly elected Member on election night by the returning officer. In order to manage expectations, this should reiterate information in the New Members’ Guide: how long Members can expect to wait for accommodation; the locations available on the Estate; the roles and responsibilities of the Whips and the House Accommodation and Logistics Service; and the fact that space is planned on the basis of a Member and two members of staff.}

17. The House Service performed well once it was made clear to them what offices Members were to have. A challenging target had been set of getting Members into their permanent offices within five days of these being allocated by the Whips. This was achieved: the General Election Planning Group told the Committee in May 2011 that by the end of June 2010, the Service had managed some 1,300 office moves for Members and their staff. \textit{The House’s accommodation managers and staff are to be commended for their efficiency in moving Members into their new offices once the party Whips had allocated them.}

18. James Robertson said that “the current plan is to repeat what we did last time, which was, from our point of view, reasonably successful”\footnote{Q 114}, however, he also suggested an alternative approach. He told us that serviced offices could provide the opportunity for all new Members and their staff to have an office straight away on arrival at Westminster. (This would not replace the provision of local decant accommodation which is standard practice in estates management and is already built in to the strategy for the Estate).

19. The House could rent an amount of serviced accommodation off the Estate for new Members and their staff who would move in but would then have to be prepared to move out after two or three months when the accommodation on the Estate was ready. Any such accommodation would need to be rented for at least three months in order to get the space set up, move people in, and then clear it out again once it was no longer needed. James Robertson estimated that the cost during this period could be as much as £2,000 per Member. If 200 Members were given offices in this way it would be in the order of £400,000.\footnote{Q 114}
20. In addition to the cost there are other factors that the House would need to consider:

- There is a low likelihood of finding suitable accommodation adjacent to the Palace of Westminster that is available for a short letting period and for a potentially large number of people.

- It could be difficult to remove Members from the serviced offices if there were protracted negotiations with the Whips and Members were hanging on for the best deal possible on the Estate—defeating the purpose of short-term accommodation.

- If new Members and their staff were physically removed from the Estate there would be less opportunity to bond with colleagues and familiarise themselves with parliamentary processes.

21. We think that the provision of serviced offices as temporary accommodation for new Members and their staff is not a viable proposal: the cost would not represent value for money; accommodation is unlikely to be available very near to the Palace; and it would be difficult to guarantee a rental contract for only short period of time.

22. Despite serviced offices for every new Member and their staff being prohibitively expensive we support the current policy of the Department of Facilities that a small amount of decant accommodation should exist near the Estate. This provides an additional supply of offices as a buffer, or contingency, to house some Members and staff during temporary accommodation moves. We look forward to the forthcoming review of accommodation by Accommodation and Logistics Services—the first in ten years. This review will establish a better understanding of the current occupancy of Members’ offices; form a baseline on which future accommodation and workplace support requirements could be based; and assist the development of comprehensive decant space requirements and plans for both Members and their Westminster-based staff in line with the 25 year Estates Programme.

23. Another way of reducing the time new Members would have to wait before being allocated an office would be to encourage certain categories of existing Members to get their offices packed up as soon as possible after dissolution. This would prepare the ground in advance for at least one strand of the complex series of accommodation moves that needs to take place after an election. In 2010, Members not standing were given a limit of 10 days before they had to leave the Estate. Those losing their seats were given a limit of 10 days from the date of the election. George Mudie MP said “There is good reason for saying to people who are leaving, who have been defeated, or whose offices you want to spruce up, ‘Pack up or we will do it for you, and you will have to unpack etc.’.” Current Accommodation Whips supported the idea that colleagues who know they are not returning should be contacted early on in the process of preparing for office allocation.

24. George Mudie MP said that it was not realistic to make all existing Members pack up their offices as a fair proportion of Members will be re-elected and come back to their
offices. Some members of the Committee did not agree with this. Others recognised that small steps could be more productive than a wholesale change in approach at this stage.

25. We recommend that MPs who have announced that they are standing down and Members who occupy an office which is scheduled to be refurbished during the dissolution should be told by the Whips to pack up their offices at the point of dissolution. We also recommend that Members who are defeated at the election should be told by the Whips to pack up their offices within five days of polling day.
3 Funding and the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority (IPSA)

26. IPSA was provided with space within the New Members Reception Area (NMRA) so that new MPs could quickly register with them in May 2010. IPSA is represented on the General Election Planning Group for 2015 and intends once again to be present in the NMRA.

27. Ruth Fox and Matt Korris of the Hansard Society have suggested that IPSA suffered severe reputational damage among new MPs in the early weeks of the 2010 Parliament; our own experience confirms that. More than half of new MPs reported significant levels of dissatisfaction from their early contacts with IPSA and 85% were dissatisfied. We have been told that IPSA’s induction processes were over-bureaucratic and complicated, and that in 2010 IPSA’s rules on reimbursing payments made by new Members caused significant financial hardship for some new Members as they sought to employ staff, source office equipment and simply send letters or make phone calls. One Member told us that he was out of pocket at one stage by £5,000; another that the financial pressure caused by set-up costs was difficult for new Members without private means.

28. IPSA’s Chief Executive, Andrew McDonald, accepts criticisms relating to the 2010 induction period: “I am quite clear that there were elements of our service in the summer of 2010 that fell below a level that we would want to deliver.” He wrote to all Members in the autumn of 2010 to apologise for that, and IPSA has since used the experience gained then, and at 16 subsequent by-elections, to refine its processes and to offer improved services to new Members.

29. IPSA is planning a new, two-stage induction process for new Members and for the staff who act as ‘proxies’ in filling out Members’ claim forms. Stage one, in the first few days after election, will be a brief introduction to the claims system, with a second, longer and more detailed session on the scheme and its rules to follow later. This twin-track approach results from feedback about the sheer amount of information new Members have to absorb during their first days and weeks in Westminster, at a time when they may not yet have a permanent office base, or residence, in London. Training sessions for staff will also be held in the regions, seeking to address another of the 2010 criticisms.

30. IPSA will also extend its telephone answering times post-election to offer a more convenient service to new Members. The fact that Members may usually call IPSA only between 1pm and 5pm each working day remains contentious; Andrew McDonald says that IPSA’s judgment is that it can most effectively offer support that way, given its limited resources. Morning calls will, however, be enabled post-election, and this is welcome.

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20 Ruth Fox and Matt Korris, *A Fresh Start? The Orientation and Induction of new MPs at Westminster following the 2010 General Election, Parliamentary Affairs* (2012), No. 65, p. 564-5
21 Ev 46 [Kate Green MP], Ev 47 [Dr Therese Coffey MP]
22 Ev 47 [Alex Cunningham MP]
23 Q 40
31. **We recommend that a dedicated phone number, adequately staffed, should be established by IPSA which is open at least 9am – 5pm each working day specifically to support new Members in the first three months after the election. This should be in addition to its telephone service for returned Members.**

32. IPSA, to be fair, was itself a new body in 2010, created in a few months from a standing start to devise and operate an entirely new system. Among the more significant changes that have occurred since May 2010 is a shift towards direct payment of Members’ expenses claims, rather than their reimbursement (with 53% of claims now paid direct, as opposed to 15% in 2011). This reduces the need for Members to make payments from their own pocket and wait for reimbursement. IPSA also repays reimbursable expenses in an average of about 9.4 working days now, against a target of 12 days. IPSA will also make new arrangements to ensure that new Members have immediate access to a pre-paid payment card for initial expenses, particularly travel and accommodation in London, before permanent payment cards are operational, and that interest-free loans and start-up budgets will be available for ‘big ticket’ office furniture and equipment and for deposits on rented offices. The cards themselves, once fully operational, are able to pay for a wider range of equipment and other costs than was the case in May 2010.

33. It remains the case that the majority of Members of Parliament, new and returning, require both offices and living accommodation in London and in their constituencies. There are significant costs attached to the provision of both, and pressures can arise on new Members in particular as they seek to begin a new job, employ new staff and move home. MPs currently earn £66,396 a year, and more than half the MPs entering Parliament in 2010 reported that they had taken a pay cut to do so. One who contributed to our inquiry talked of the “huge financial pressure” that arose from setting up an office, employing staff, finding somewhere to live, travel costs and so on. As some Members, not anticipating this situation, declared in 2010 election manifestos that they would not claim expenses, or only the bare minimum, this has put them under additional financial pressure.

34. One Member made the point that most new MPs had given up previous employment or taken leave for the period of the campaign, leaving them without earnings in the weeks before arriving at Westminster, as well as waiting some weeks for reimbursement for necessary spending. A member of our Committee told us that they were significantly out of pocket after booking a hotel for the first few weeks which did not have a parliamentary rate. Andrew McDonald told us that IPSA wants to provide a seamless information service

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24 Q 32  
25 Q 50  
26 Ev 36  
27 Hansard Society, *A Year in the Life: from member of public to Member of Parliament; interim briefing paper, June 2011*  
28 Ev 46 [Nicky Morgan]  
29 Ibid.
to new Members about hotel services and rates.\textsuperscript{30} The Fixed-term Parliaments Act of 2011 means that the date of the election in 2015 is more certain than it has been for previous elections. This means that IPSA could identify hotels now that would offer appropriate rates for 2015.

35. \textbf{We recommend that IPSA work with the House Service to ensure that new Members have access to information on which hotels offer parliamentary rates and how they can be claimed in order to facilitate temporary living accommodation in the first few weeks on arrival in Westminster.}

36. John Sills, Director of Policy at IPSA, likened the situation of new MPs arriving in London to that of a business expatriate. After the election an MP comes down to London for the first time and does not really know where to find somewhere to live and is having to do so when they have many other things to do as a new MP. He said the approach of providing services similar to those of a business expatriate was one IPSA wanted to explore.\textsuperscript{31}

37. \textbf{We recommend that IPSA seriously explores the model often used by businesses with expatriates relocating to other cities or countries (i.e. provision of an initial budget and the services of an estate agent). If it is established by May 2014 that such a scheme is not viable, then we strongly recommend that the amount on the pre-paid payment card is appreciably increased from £500 to cover the initial reimbursable costs for the first few weeks, including potential hotel bills.}

38. There is considerable pressure on office accommodation within the Parliamentary Estate with little capacity for flexibility. Some Members require space for more than two staff, including interns and inevitably that puts pressure on accommodation. Our predecessor Committee in the 2005 Parliament set as a guideline that Members should expect to accommodate no more than two staff on the Estate;\textsuperscript{32} although that average has been maintained among the 650 Members, there are some Members who have substantially more members of staff routinely in their Westminster offices.

39. Matt Korris of the Hansard Society told us that IPSA’s approach to funding office accommodation in effect encourages Members to base staff at Westminster “for free” in accommodation directly provided by the House rather than in their constituencies where they will have to pay for and have reimbursed the costs of renting and equipping a constituency office. The cost of being based in a constituency is also increasing for some Members as ‘host’ organisations, such as the local political party, can no longer afford offices where a Member might rent space. Members therefore need to fund their own offices with their own name above the door.

40. IPSA are due to review Members’ accommodation this financial year.\textsuperscript{33} The Accommodation and Logistics Service of the House is taking a keen interest in that review

\textsuperscript{30} Q 38
\textsuperscript{31} Q 38
\textsuperscript{32} Administration Committee, Third Report of Session 2005-06, House of Commons Accommodation, HC 1279, para 105
\textsuperscript{33} Notes of discussion, 28 January 2013 http://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/administration-committee/formal-minutes/session-2012-13/
as it is hoping it will look at all factors that affect Members and their accommodation needs, both personal and office accommodation in Westminster—including addressing the question of this perverse incentive to base staff at Westminster.

41. Matt Korris pointed out that most voters would probably prefer the bulk of an MP’s staff to be based in the constituency and that “free” accommodation at Westminster is in fact paid for by the House Service, and therefore from the public purse. Given the central London location this will carry a premium. Some Members, particularly those with constituencies comparatively far from London, have also noted that an inability to locate their staff in the “free” offices at Westminster means that their published expenses claims can be significantly higher than the claims of those whose constituencies are closer to central London.

42. IPSA appears not to accept that there is any hidden incentive for Members to locate staff at Westminster rather than in their constituencies, but John Sills, Director of Policy, does agree that the question has been raised and that it is causing concern to some Members and within the House.34

43. We recommend that a dialogue takes place between IPSA and the House Service in order to develop, before May 2015, a payment system related to office accommodation which reflects the variety of ways in which Members want to run their offices. Unintended but inefficient incentives to base staff at Westminster should be addressed.
4 Staffing matters

44. In spite of the media’s tendency to see the House of Commons as a singular entity, each of the 650 Members of the House runs his or her own office in their own way. It is not uncommon to suggest that the Palace of Westminster and its associated buildings house something akin to 650 small businesses with each individual MP taking responsibility for the running of an office and employment of staff. For new Members, getting to grips with their responsibilities as an employer is daunting. One Member told us that “MPs are completely unprepared [...] that they are, in effect, about to start running a small business especially in terms of employing staff”.

45. The hiring of suitable researchers, secretaries or other staff is among the first tasks a new Member must undertake, and with only a matter of days separating election and the sitting of Parliament, it is a task often undertaken in some haste. This can raise future difficulties: some Members arrive at Westminster with substantial office management experience and a detailed knowledge of employment law; most do not. Nor are the skills of staff that helped a Member win a constituency election necessarily the skills required to run an office or be a caseworker, either at Westminster or in a constituency.

46. The House provides a Personnel Advisory Service (PAS) which offers Members assistance on matters including recruitment, tribunals, redundancies and employment law. The PAS earns praise from those Members who have used it—one told us that he had found its support invaluable as he hired his permanent staff. Other new Members have, however, consistently told us that they were unaware of what help was on offer until sometime after they had set up their offices and employed their staff, or else thought this was IPSA’s role. The Head of PAS, Mr Dapo Coker, confirmed to us in March 2013 that take-up of initial training sessions by PAS had been low, and it is planning for presentations on these matters to be provided a few weeks after new Members arrive in 2015 rather than in the first weeks, when the pressure of events, office set-up and a new parliamentary life might tend to make them a low priority.

47. We recommend that there is clarification from the Personnel Advisory Service (PAS) and IPSA on their respective roles in providing advice to new Members on staff matters.

48. There is also the question of training in employment of staff for new Members who may previously have had no experience in that area. The parliamentary branch of Unite, the only trade union that represents Members’ staff, suggested to us that new Members should have to undergo some mandatory training on how to be an employer and how to manage staff. Max Freedman, the branch chair of Unite, told us:

It would not be unreasonable to say that an MP should have an hour of training or the opportunity to discuss [employment] matters before they were given access to a budget for staff of over £130,000. You have a range of different employment styles, to put it mildly, in here, from people who are absolutely expert, terrific and very

35 Ev 46 [Nicky Morgan MP]
36 Ev 48 [Duncan Hames MP]
37 Ev 7
...professional in the way they do things, to people who have had no training or experience in management and who are frankly slapdash at it.\textsuperscript{38}

49. Several Members have agreed that the experience of employing staff can be a significant challenge. One told us that guidance on contracts and job descriptions would have been invaluable, and suggested that the House could contact all candidates once an election was called inviting them to consider what would be required in this area.\textsuperscript{39} This would be a considerable, complex and costly undertaking for the House Service—there were more than 4,000 candidates at the last election, most of whom, with the best will in the world, had little or no chance of winning. \textbf{Rather than the House Service, it is for the political parties to have processes in place to ensure that their candidates are suitably aware of the challenges they will face if they win a seat in the House.}

50. \textit{We recommend that the functions of the Personnel Advisory Service be more heavily emphasised in both the written material sent to new Members ahead of arrival at Westminster and in the New Members’ Reception Area.}

51. \textit{We recommend that staff from the Personnel Advisory Service make telephone contact with the offices of all new Members before the summer recess after the general election to ensure that new Members are aware of the services on offer.}

52. \textit{We recommend that the Personnel Advisory Service should be provided with additional resources during the immediate pre and post-election period in order to meet demands from departing and new Members.}

53. One Member has suggested to us that a clearing system could be created for experienced Members’ staff that might help new Members during the first weeks in Westminster. Several others who provided us with experiences of the early days here said that the inheritance of competent and experienced staff from a predecessor had prevented constituents from suffering: “I simply wouldn’t have been able to deal in any sort of systematic way with their issues, queries and problems, and would have been left with a terrible backlog.”\textsuperscript{40} said one. Another suggested that a pool of secretarial staff could be provided by the House Service for a few weeks to deal with non-political work, such as the “mountain of correspondence and invitations.”\textsuperscript{41} This would also give new MPs some breathing space to employ staff, avoiding the temptation to appoint too quickly and then have to unravel arrangements that did not work out well.

54. \textit{We recommend that IPSA, the House Service and the political parties consider the feasibility of providing Members with access to a pool of short-term administrative staff during the first three months after a general election.}

55. It is accepted that new Members require training but staff of new Members, whether in Westminster or constituencies, are often overlooked. Lisa Townsend, Branch Chair of the Members and Peers Staff Association (MAPSA), told us that in particular new staff in

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{38} Ev 9
\textsuperscript{39} Ev 46 [Nicky Morgan MP]
\textsuperscript{40} Ev 46 [Kate Green MP]
\textsuperscript{41} Ev 46 [Nicky Morgan MP]
\end{flushleft}
constituency offices felt isolated. They would like training but have little idea of what is available and are not always able to come to London to attend training. Lisa Townsend recounted a conversation that a staff member based in Scotland had had with IPSA about training she wanted when she took over as the proxy for her new Member. The staff member asked whether it could be done via the internet or the phone but she was told she would have to come to London. “These are things that [MAPSA] are constantly trying to address with IPSA to just make it a little bit friendlier.”

56. *We recommend that IPSA develops, and more vigorously promotes, training available for Members’ staff, which could be offered via the internet, video conferencing or face to face outside London.*
5 Provision of IT equipment

57. In 2010 all new Members arriving at the New Members Reception Areas (NMRA) on their first day in Westminster were set up with a network account (with a .MP@parliament.uk email address), offered a laptop computer, and issued with a telephone number and access to voicemail. Once Members had been allocated an office, the in-house IT department, Parliamentary Information Communications and Technology (PICT), offered them up to five desktop or laptop computers and two printers—the equipment that the House Service is expected to provide on loan to Members. From both the perspective of PICT and new Members the presence of PICT in the NMRA worked well and will be repeated in 2015.43

58. The current provision of loan equipment is based on recommendations of the Senior Salaries Review Board, endorsed by the House in July 2001 and November 2004 (amended by the Members Estimate Committee on 30 April 2012). For convenience this is referred to below as the 2004 Resolution. It states that each Member should have access to: –

a) one fixed workstation and either one laptop or one iPad for his or her own use, plus three further workstations (up to two of which may be substituted by an equivalent number of laptops), sufficient for each full-time equivalent member of staff paid for by IPSA through Staffing Expenditure to have his or her own PC; and

b) a heavy-duty printer in both Westminster and the constituency.

59. Generally under this arrangement equipment is expected to last for the whole Parliament. Equipment comes with a four year warranty; failures after this point are managed by PICT. Tablet computers on the other hand have a shorter assumed life, and are likely to require replacement mid-Parliament.

60. In addition, but not noted as part of the Resolution, PICT provides up to three broadband services (cable and asymmetric digital subscriber lines—known as ADSL).

61. Since the Resolution in 2004 technology has changed and will continue to do so before the next election. PICT’s ICT Strategy Programme is embracing this evolution and actively planning for a shift in the way Members want to work as follows:

- PICT is moving towards the adoption of cloud-based (hosted) computing. This approach will provide opportunities: more mobility, increased storage and greater choice; and reduce costs. Working in the cloud means accessing information off-site via the internet. As devices will no longer have to meet minimum requirements to connect directly to the Parliamentary Network, they can be of lower specification. This will enable a greater variety of devices to be used.44

- Later in 2013 a small group of Members will be piloting the use of Microsoft Office 365 to provide cloud-based services. Current planning assumes that by the 2015
election Office 365 will be available to newly-elected and returning Members. PICT will support Members as data owners to understand their responsibilities for data security in the cloud and the conduct of their staff in this respect.

- PICT anticipates, and we agree, that new Members will in future be more likely to arrive with their own IT equipment and will want to link this to the Parliamentary Network. The ability to ‘Bring Your Own Device’ will also provide greater flexibility for Members in how they carry out their work. The only limitation is that their device is capable of connecting to the internet with a modern browser and operating system.

- Since the last election WiFi was been extended to all Members offices and by the end of 2013 WiFi will be available across the Estate. This will remove the dependency on temporary WiFi-enabled accommodation in order for new Members to get connected in their first weeks at Westminster.

- iPads/tablets are now issued and supported by PICT. All members of select committees are entitled to a PICT-issued iPad to carry out the work of their committee if it has resolved to distribute papers electronically. (If Members want to use their own iPad for committee work, then this currently has to be configured to receive committee papers).

62. Since the Resolution in 2004 the needs of Members have also changed. As email traffic, case-work and constituency activity has grown, so has Members’ complement of staff and their need to work on the move. As we have said elsewhere in this report, Members now tend to have a higher average number of staff, so there are more people who require access to IT equipment within a Member’s office. Joan Miller, Director of PICT, said that on recent visits to Members’ constituency offices she realised just how much Members needed a variety of equipment and a mix of static and mobile devices to cater for them and their staff.

63. As the Commons begins to move away from working on paper towards a digital-first approach, Members will become even more dependent on IT. We were the first committee to pilot working electronically with tablets and now about 140 Members on 18 committees have followed our lead. These tablets do not form part of a Member’s core allowance—funded by the Members’ Estimate—since for the purposes of the trial they are funded from the Administration Estimate to allow participation in the new ways of working being adopted by committees.

64. Through the use of tablets our Committee has considerably cut its printing costs and reduced the staff time devoted to distributing its papers. This small initiative provides a welcome contribution to the House’s target of reducing costs by 17% in real terms between 2010/11 and 2014/15. More broadly, increased electronic working and less reliance on printing will be saving more than £2 million a year by 2014/15 and we need to ensure that Members are properly equipped for this transition so that these changes in working
practices can be embedded, and in particular that committees can start the new Parliament working electronically.

65. Use of tablets and other mobile devices, but not laptops, is now permitted in the Chamber as well as committees. As other initiatives, such as the online Order Paper and e-tableting for questions, begin to bear fruit (and savings for the House) there are more and more opportunities for Members to work electronically.

66. The shift to working less with paper, in a more mobile way and remotely from the Estate has been recognised by PICT, but at the moment there are certain limitations that prevent full use of mobile devices. Joan Miller told us that these constraints should be removed with the move of IT services to the cloud, another reason for us to support such a change.

We are able to provide iPads with a security wrapper that makes it possible for Members to receive emails and documents. What we are not able to do is provide full access to the office environment at the minute, so being able to access your stored files and folders is not available on an iPad at the minute. Moving to Microsoft 365 in a cloud environment, we would expect that to also be available to Members by the time of the next election.

67. PICT believes that if a tablet can be enabled to provide the majority of core functions to Members from the outset of a new Parliament then it should be the first piece of equipment provided to a Member. Joan Miller said:

We believe that the first piece of equipment being an iPad would allow Members to have documents they could read; emails they could read; to be able to see files in their folders that they could read, and to be able to see the documents and papers for the first meetings that they have. That might be an adequate first step for the first few weeks.

68. The suggestion that a tablet should be the first piece of IT equipment that all Members are offered on arrival after an election, whether a new Member or an existing one (instead of a laptop which is what Members received in 2010), is a positive step towards better meeting the needs of Members and catering for their emerging working patterns. Tablets should be viewed in the same way as a desk—a piece of equipment that is vital to getting started in a new job—and should be given to Members as soon as possible on arrival.

69. If this tablet was additional to the current core allowance of IT equipment for Members it would go some way to addressing concerns that Members and their staff require the use of a greater number of devices. However, this would only be part of the solution as we discuss below. The provision of tablets through this route would replace the current select committee pilot and would enable all Members to work electronically in committees and the Chamber from the outset. On an assumption that 250 Members would have been issued with a tablet for committee work in any case under the terms of the current pilot, we

48 Q 76
49 Q 76
50 Q 75
estimate that the additional cost would be in the order of £150,000 per annum averaged over the whole parliament.

70. Once Members have got a parliamentary tablet they need to be free to roam with it. Any tablet provided by PICT should have a SIM card to enable Members to continue to work where there is no WiFi. (If the tablet belongs to the Member then it is fair to assume that they are then responsible for providing their own SIM card and reclaiming the cost).

71. **We recommend that a tablet and a laptop should be the first pieces of equipment offered to all Members after the 2015 election. The tablet should be in addition to the current allowance and should come with a SIM card. This provision of a tablet would replace any tablets available as part of the current select committee pilot. The laptop would come from the IT equipment allowance for Members provided by PICT.**

72. In terms of other mobile devices, although not part of the Resolution, it is worth noting that PICT currently assists Members by sourcing smartphones under a contract with a single supplier. Members are responsible for meeting all their running costs. Compared to the variety of packages on the high street or internet this service is relatively inflexible and only 90 Members use it.\(^{51}\) Members would have more choice and be able to secure a better deal on smartphones outside PICT and with the benefit of PICT’s advice they could select a device which will connect to Parliament’s services.

73. **We recommend that PICT wind down its current smartphone service and cease this after the next election.**

74. Two printers are part of the current allowance of loan equipment from PICT. Joan Miller proposed that after the election in 2015, Members would be provided with access to “very big floor standing printers, scanners and photocopiers that might be used for whole sections of areas of the floor.”\(^{52}\) These are known as multi-functional devices. Joan Miller said that these devices would be in addition to local printers. "It is not about replacing or removing a printer [...] It is about a cheaper, lighter printer for the office, with a heavy-duty printer a little way down the corridor where you could do very heavy runs."\(^{53}\)

75. Providing an alternative printer which would print at a lower cost per page to the user (up to a third cheaper than the current desk printers) and is secure via the use of a personal pin would mean that Members could opt for lower specification printers in their offices and reallocated the savings to other IT equipment. (We understand that these multi-functional devices can be configured so that as now costs for photocopies are not charged to Members).

76. We believe that Members will still be keen to retain personal printers in their offices and it will be important to communicate in 2015 that any provision of multi-functional devices is in addition to a personal allowance, not instead of. **We recognise the benefit of providing access to multi-functional devices, and thereby a choice of cheaper bulk and**
colour printing, which could allow Members to use their own IT equipment allowance in a more efficient way.

77. Currently Members who want more IT equipment can purchase it from the parliamentary catalogue or buy their own preferred equipment, and reclaim costs from IPSA. IPSA therefore has an interest in the provision of IT equipment to Members. Joan Miller told us that it is unlikely by 2015 that all IT equipment for Members would be purchased directly through IPSA, removing the need for PICT to loan the equipment. Andrew McDonald said that any changes to the existing arrangement are for the future “there is a broader strategic conversation that we and the Commons Authorities are now beginning, about how MPs are supported in respect specifically of IT equipment. [...] it does raise questions as to where the boundary should be in future.” Andrew’s colleague, John Sills, gave his view on where this boundary currently lies:

[T]he House provides MPs with a basic level of IT, does it not? A certain number of stations and things like that. Where MPs need more then they can claim that out of their office costs budget. IPSA itself does not bulk purchase equipment [...] we are not in the business of buying things ourselves.

78. Although whether equipment is purchased from IPSA or loaned by PICT does not make a difference to the taxpayer, it does matter to Members. As we have already observed some Members declared in their election manifestos that they would not claim expenses, or at least only a minimum amount. This is another area where Members would be reluctant to claim from IPSA the cost of equipment, even though this might be necessary to carry out their Parliamentary duties. In addition, it is unlikely that Members would want to purchase directly via IPSA when PICT provides high levels of training, on-site support and security which Members would not receive if they bought equipment on the high street. PICT’s ability to purchase in bulk also means that it can achieve value for money based on economies of scale. **We support the proposal that PICT continues to loan IT equipment to Members.**

79. If PICT is still going to loan core IT equipment to Members, even if this includes a tablet, how should the concerns that the existing allowance is too restrictive be addressed? Joan Miller recognises that “There is an argument to be made that, for a full range of services, Members may not have enough choice within the five pieces of equipment in today’s world.”

80. Joan Miller told us about companies “that can provide a catalogue, where Members can choose what equipment they wanted from that catalogue, up to perhaps a capped allowance, that is equal to the current cost of five pieces of equipment.” This approach would allow Members to purchase whatever combination of devices they needed.
Members could squeeze more devices out of the equivalent value of the current allowance if they bought lower specification devices for certain purposes.

81. This prospect does come with a warning from PICT—that with choice comes responsibility. PICT would focus on only including equipment that is safe and secure to operate on the parliamentary network in any catalogue. Members who chose to buy IPSA-funded IT equipment from the high street would be responsible for obtaining a warranty from the suppliers to ensure that there was first line support if something went wrong with it.59

82. We recommend that in order to allow more choice and the opportunity for new and existing Members to spread the procurement of IT equipment over time, directly after the 2015 election PICT should enable Members to select from a catalogue of IT equipment, including a range of products from most major manufactures, up to the equivalent value of the current provision.

83. We recommend that to enable a catalogue-based approach the Members Estimate Committee, under the provisions of Standing Order No.152D(3)(b), further amends the Resolutions of the House relating to IT provision to include, with effect from the date of the next general election, the sub-clause:

(c) or, as an alternative to (a) and (b), a different mix of business standard equipment from the prescribed catalogue up to the same value.

84. We recommend that PICT consults this Committee by May 2014 on the detailed mechanics of how the post-2015 scheme for providing IT equipment to Members would work in practice.

85. Although not part of the Resolution, PICT provides broadband services to Members. Each Member is entitled to up to three broadband lines at the moment. Only 476 Members use the broadband service at all and the majority of these (301) only take one service. 124 take two services and 48 take the full allowance of three. The ubiquity of broadband and its bundling with television and domestic phone packages probably explains why a quarter of Members do not use the service at all and so few (48) take the full three services.

86. The installation of broadband services in constituency offices was cited as one of the main frustrations with PICT’s service by new Members in 2010 due to the dependencies between BT and the broadband provider, and the time delay between ordering and receiving these services.60 This is likely to continue beyond 2015 due to PICT’s reliance on external suppliers and the rigidity of working with only one broadband provider. Complaints are disproportionate to the number of Members who take the broadband service which shows the strength of feeling behind them. We appreciate that PICT has made numerous attempts to bring external broadband suppliers to account and is as frustrated as Members are in trying to improve services but PICT should continue to challenge them to deliver an optimum service for the House.

59 Q 79

60 Ev 49 [Sue Plimmer-Clarke on behalf of Nicky Morgan MP]
87. We recommend that PICT offers Members “dongles” (wireless modems that plug into PCs or laptops) to alleviate any problems with broadband as soon as a delay occurs until the problem is fixed.

88. It is clear that for some Members in 2015, both newly elected and returning, there will be much to get to grips with in terms of technology, devices to choose from and new ways of working. There will be a need for quality advice and efficient customer service from PICT to support Members through a potentially confusing array of options. PICT is remodelling its service model now so that by 2015 its service desk agents will be fully aware of the different options and functionality available when Members’ offices are set up. PICT staff will be able to sit with the Member, discuss how the Member uses IT and help them select the right equipment for the job. Joan Miller told us that:

If it is something that is easy to use, easy to plug in, and light and transportable, then they will be able to point you to the kinds of equipment that will be a better choice for you than other kinds of equipment. We will provide that personalised kind of service.61

89. We recommend that PICT establishes a model office in a central location on the Estate where Members can drop in and learn more about the cloud, Microsoft Office 365 and different devices. This would alert existing Members, who of course may return in 2015, to the possible changes to their IT. PICT should encourage Members to adopt new ways of working in the current Parliament so that the impact of the change in 2015 is minimised.
6 Learning the ropes

90. The House Service provided a considerable number and variety of training courses, but according to the General Election Planning Group in May 2011 take-up by Members of briefings and talks was “disappointing”. The Hansard Society, too, has noted that support ‘in principle’ by the main parties of induction and training programmes did not noticeably translate into attendance at those programmes by new Members. Only about 19% of new Members attended at least one session; few individual sessions achieved an attendance of more than six, and a number were cancelled for zero attendance.

91. In 2011 the House Service told us that it is proposing next time round, on the basis of the experience of 2010, to offer a more extensive training programme to Members and their staff as part of ‘Business as Usual’ activity over a much longer period, with a mix of formal briefings and opportunities for informal learning which are better co-ordinated and advertised to Members. In spite of their low attendance at offered training sessions, Members continued to report a need for more training and information: nearly two-thirds of new Members, for example, sought more support on parliamentary procedure. The lesson to learn from this may be that new Members (and, indeed, their returning colleagues) do need training in aspects of parliamentary procedure and other matters, but that they may not need it or have time for it in the rush of their first few weeks in office.

92. The Institute for Government argues that MPs need more professional training:

> Our starting point is that MPs, both new and existing ones, do not receive sufficient access to high quality development and mentoring support on a continuing basis of the kind that they would have, and expect to receive, in other organisations in the public, private and voluntary sectors.

Peter Riddell, the Institute’s Director, told us that induction “should not just be the first few days or even weeks. It needs to be over a much more extended period.” Peter Riddell also agreed that it would be a good idea to make some training available on the web to watch, thereby reducing the reliance on when guest speakers are available.

93. **We recommend that training and professional development provided for Members is an activity which should be undertaken for the course of a parliament, not just as an element of induction. It should be provided in a variety of formats to cater for different learning styles and time availability and should be offered at times that suit individual Members, rather than fixed slots.**

94. The Institute is working with the House’s General Election Planning Group to provide training for MPs post-2015, and, like the Hansard Society, will seek to use existing MPs.

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62 Ruth Fox and Matt Korris, A Fresh Start? The Orientation and Induction of new MPs at Westminster following the 2010 General Election, Parliamentary Affairs (2012), No. 65, p. 562
63 Ruth Fox and Matt Korris, A Fresh Start? The Orientation and Induction of new MPs at Westminster following the 2010 General Election, Parliamentary Affairs (2012), No. 65, p. 574
64 Ev 32
65 Q 1
66 Q 5
and other political figures to inform their new peers about how parliamentary life and government work. Peter Riddell noted that many new MPs arrive at Westminster highly skilled in winning elections and highly knowledgeable about their constituencies and about politics, but with limited knowledge of the workings of government or legislation. It is fair to say that the skills that win a campaign are not the same as those required for detailed line-by-line scrutiny of legislation or the forensic questioning of select committee witnesses. The Institute suggests that follow-up activities be carried out perhaps six weeks or two months after the election to focus on first impressions gained by new MPs and on how they can be more effective at Westminster. It also suggests specific training for new select committee members. These are sensible ideas and it is welcome that the General Election Planning Group is already discussing them with external bodies including the Institute and the Hansard Society.

95. Another opportunity for new Members to learn is through the range of books available about Parliament, its processes and the work of an MP. (These can be borrowed from the House of Commons Library). Existing Members have commented that there are a variety of books which helped them in their first days at Parliament, and still do. For example, Robert Rogers and Rhodri Walters, *How Parliament Works*, 6th edition (2006), which we look forward to seeing an updated version of soon. We recommend that the House Service provides new Members with a reading list of reference materials as another source to help them learn about Parliament in their own time.

96. One Member told us of being unaware of training courses, attributing this to not having had a permanent office during the first few weeks. Others have told us that they were unaware of the range of training on offer. There appear to be two broad reasons for this: first, the many challenges facing a brand new Member may make training a fairly low priority in the early weeks in the job; secondly, the House’s internal communications are not always effective at reaching Members, as this Committee has also noted in other circumstances in regard, for example, to the range and provision of catering outlets or Members’ responsibilities for the fire safety of their staff. This is not entirely the fault of the House Service: much information is sent to Members by email and post and is made available on the House’s intranet, but we must accept that Members are not always aware of information that has been provided (again, fire safety responsibilities are a good example of this). There is little point in the House communicating information which Members are not, for whatever reason, receiving.

97. We recommend that the House Service discuss with a focus group of Members how best to ensure that essential information is not only transmitted to Members but received by them. This might include consideration of providing a simple hardcopy directory of key services to Members, similar to those found in hotel rooms.

98. We recommend that each new Member arriving on the Estate should be assigned a suitably experienced member of House staff who will meet them on arrival on the Estate and look after them. This member of staff could act as their main point of contact in the
short-term for communicating logistical information but in the medium-term be a guide to resources about the House and its procedures.

99. The House Service deserves credit for trying to reach Members through different communications channels and to engage the Whips of the main parties in promoting training programmes in 2010. The low take-up of the training on offer suggests that this effort did not entirely bear fruit.

100. We will write to the Leaders of all parties represented at Westminster to encourage more proactive support by the parties of the training programmes put in place for 2015.
7 The responsibility of Members

101. The House Service will again run a New Members’ Reception Area in 2015 and the quality of induction for new Members can again improve, as happened in both 2005 and 2010.

102. Whatever the responsibilities of others, the primary responsibility for being a good new MP, diligent and effective in the dispatch of their parliamentary and other duties, lies with the Members themselves. One new Member who contributed to our inquiry fairly praised the quality of guidance given by the House Service on his arrival but added rightly that we “are not employees of a corporation and should not be”. This Report makes various suggestions for action by the House Service, PICT, IPSA, the Members Estimate Committee and by the political parties represented at Westminster. Although others may be able to help, the ultimate responsibility for being a good Member of Parliament, fully aware of our responsibilities as parliamentarians, constituency Members and employers, lies with each one of us ourselves.
Conclusions and Recommendations

Conclusions

Newly elected Members

1. The information pack received by winning candidates on election night was a new idea, and was generally found useful by Members. It is welcome that this approach is to be repeated. (Paragraph 3)

Arrival at Westminster

2. The House Service is to be commended for the detailed planning and efficient work that made arrival at Westminster a relatively smooth experience for 227 new MPs in May 2010. (Paragraph 5)

Finding an office

3. Although it is fair to note that the 2010 new intake was far larger than that in 2005, and that the added complication of a coalition Government being formed also delayed decisions on what accommodation would be allocated to which party, its Members and their staff (around 250 room moves resulted from changes in Ministers), we feel that every attempt should be made to reduce the time it takes to allocate offices. Some Members felt that it was troublesome that the allocation of rooms took so long. (Paragraph 11)

4. We are not recommending that the Whips should surrender the ability to allocate offices; there are very good reasons for their continuing in this role whilst working closely with the Members’ Accommodation Manager. (Paragraph 14)

5. The House’s accommodation managers and staff are to be commended for their efficiency in moving Members into their new offices once the party Whips had allocated them. (Paragraph 17)

6. We think that the provision of serviced offices as temporary accommodation for new Members and their staff is not a viable proposal: the cost would not represent value for money; accommodation is unlikely to be available very near to the Palace; and it would be difficult to guarantee a rental contract for only short period of time. (Paragraph 21)

7. Despite serviced offices for every new Member and their staff being prohibitively expensive we support the current policy of the Department of Facilities that a small amount of decant accommodation should exist near the Estate. (Paragraph 22)
Funding and the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority (IPSA)

8. IPSA has taken welcome steps to learn lessons from a less than satisfactory induction performance in 2010, but 2015 will be a further test that a more customer-focused ethos has become embedded. (Paragraph 32)

Staffing matters

9. Rather than the House Service, it is for the political parties to have processes in place to ensure that their candidates are suitably aware of the challenges they will face [as employers] if they win a seat in the House. (Paragraph 49)

Provision of IT equipment

10. The shift to working less with paper, in a more mobile way and remotely from the Estate has been recognised by Parliamentary ICT (PICT), but at the moment there are certain limitations that prevent full use of mobile devices. The Director of PICT told us that these constraints should be removed with the move of IT services to the cloud, another reason for us to support such a change. (Paragraph 66)

11. We recognise the benefit of providing access to multi-functional devices, and thereby a choice of cheaper bulk and colour printing, which could allow Members to use their own IT equipment allowance in a more efficient way. (Paragraph 76)

12. We support the proposal that PICT continues to loan IT equipment to Members. (Paragraph 78)

13. We appreciate that PICT has made numerous attempts to bring external broadband suppliers to account and is as frustrated as Members are in trying to improve services but PICT should continue to challenge them to deliver an optimum service for the House. (Paragraph 86)

Learning the ropes

14. The Institute for Government suggests that follow-up [training] activities be carried out perhaps six weeks or two months after the election to focus on first impressions gained by new MPs and on how they can be more effective at Westminster. It also suggests specific training for new select committee members. These are sensible ideas and it is welcome that the General Election Planning Group is already discussing them with external bodies including the Institute and the Hansard Society. (Paragraph 94)

The responsibility of Members

15. Although others may be able to help, the ultimate responsibility for being a good Member of Parliament, fully aware of our responsibilities as parliamentarians, constituency Members and employers, lies with each one of us ourselves. (Paragraph 102)
Recommendations

Induction for new MPs

16. We recommend that members of the Administration Committee should be actively involved in the planning for the election – perhaps as part of the General Election Planning Group. We would also expect that the Whips be engaged by the House Service in planning as soon as possible. (Paragraph 2)

17. We recommend that the House Service agrees to report to us by May 2014 on what steps are being taken to ensure that all returning officers hand a welcome pack to newly elected Members on election night. We also ask it to consider other methods of delivery and to assess the cost versus the benefit of such methods: for example placing it online or providing a simpler substitute for the New Members Guide. (Paragraph 4)

Finding an office

18. We recommend that a note on accommodation should be developed by the House Service and the Whips to be included in the information pack which is handed to the newly elected Member on election night by the returning officer. In order to manage expectations, this should reiterate information in the New Members’ Guide: how long Members can expect to wait for accommodation; the locations available on the Estate; the roles and responsibilities of the Whips and the House Accommodation and Logistics Service; and the fact that space is planned on the basis of a Member and two members of staff. (Paragraph 16)

19. We recommend that MPs who have announced that they are standing down and Members who occupy an office which is scheduled to be refurbished during the dissolution should be told by the Whips to pack up their offices at the point of dissolution. We also recommend that Members who are defeated at the election should be told by the Whips to pack up their offices within five days of polling day. (Paragraph 25)

Funding and the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority (IPSA)

20. We recommend that a dedicated phone number, adequately staffed, should be established by IPSA which is open at least 9am – 5pm each working day specifically to support new Members in the first three months after the election. This should be in addition to its telephone service for returned Members. (Paragraph 31)

21. We recommend that IPSA work with the House Service to ensure that new Members have access to information on which hotels offer parliamentary rates and how they can be claimed in order to facilitate temporary living accommodation in the first few weeks on arrival in Westminster. (Paragraph 35)

22. We recommend that IPSA seriously explores the model often used by businesses with expatriates relocating to other cities or countries (i.e. provision of an initial budget and the services of an estate agent). If it is established by May 2014 that such a
scheme is not viable, then we strongly recommend that the amount on the pre-paid payment card is appreciably increased from £500 to cover the initial reimbursable costs for the first few weeks, including potential hotel bills. (Paragraph 37)

23. We recommend that a dialogue takes place between IPSA and the House Service in order to develop, before May 2015, a payment system related to office accommodation which reflects the variety of ways in which Members want to run their offices. Unintended but inefficient incentives to base staff at Westminster should be addressed. (Paragraph 43)

**Staffing matters**

24. We recommend that there is clarification from the Personnel Advisory Service (PAS) and IPSA on their respective roles in providing advice to new Members on staff matters. (Paragraph 47)

25. We recommend that the functions of Personnel Advisory Service be more heavily emphasised in both the written material sent to new Members ahead of arrival at Westminster and in the New Members’ Reception Area. (Paragraph 50)

26. We recommend that staff from the Personnel Advisory Service make telephone contact with the offices of all new Members before the summer recess after the general election to ensure that new Members are aware of the services on offer. (Paragraph 51)

27. We recommend that the Personnel Advisory Service should be provided with additional resources during the immediate pre and post-election period in order to meet demands from departing and new Members. (Paragraph 52)

28. We recommend that IPSA, the House Service and the political parties consider the feasibility of providing Members with access to a pool of short-term administrative staff during the first three months after a general election. (Paragraph 54)

29. We recommend that IPSA develops, and more vigorously promotes, training available for Members’ staff, which could be offered via the internet, video conferencing or face to face outside London. (Paragraph 56)

**Provision of IT equipment**

30. We recommend that a tablet and a laptop should be the first pieces of equipment offered to all Members after the 2015 election. The tablet should be in addition to the current allowance and should come with a SIM card. This provision of a tablet would replace any tablet available as part of the current select committee pilot. The laptop would come from the IT equipment allowance for Members provided by PICT. (Paragraph 71)

31. We recommend that PICT wind down its current smartphone service and cease this after the next election. (Paragraph 73)
32. We recommend that in order to allow more choice and the opportunity for new and existing Members to spread the procurement of IT equipment over time, directly after the 2015 election PICT should enable Members to select from a catalogue of IT equipment, including a range of products from most major manufactures, up to the equivalent value of the current provision. (Paragraph 82)

33. We recommend that to enable a catalogue-based approach the Members Estimate Committee, under the provisions of Standing Order No.152D(3)(b), further amends the Resolutions of the House relating to IT provision to include, with effect from the date of the next general election, the sub-clause:

(c) or, as an alternative to (a) and (b), a different mix of business standard equipment from the prescribed catalogue up to the same value. (Paragraph 83)

34. We recommend that PICT consults this Committee by May 2014 on the detailed mechanics of how the post-2015 scheme for providing IT equipment to Members would work in practice. (Paragraph 84)

35. We recommend that PICT offers Members “dongles” (wireless modems that plug into PCs or laptops) to alleviate any problems with broadband as soon as a delay occurs until the problem is fixed. (Paragraph 87)

36. We recommend that PICT establishes a model office in a central location on the Estate where Members can drop in and learn more about the cloud, Microsoft Office 365 and different devices. This would alert existing Members, who of course may return in 2015, to the possible changes to their IT. PICT should encourage Members to adopt new ways of working in the current Parliament so that the impact of the change in 2015 is minimised. (Paragraph 89)

**Learning the ropes**

37. We recommend that training and professional development provided for Members is an activity which should be undertaken for the course of a parliament, not just as an element of induction. It should be provided in a variety of formats to cater for different learning styles and time availability and should be offered at times that suit individual Members, rather than fixed slots. (Paragraph 93)

38. We recommend that the House Service provides new Members with a reading list of reference materials as another source to help them learn about Parliament in their own time. (Paragraph 95)

39. We recommend that the House Service discuss with a focus group of Members how best to ensure that essential information is not only transmitted to Members but received by them. This might include consideration of providing a simple hardcopy directory of key services to Members, similar to those found in hotel rooms. (Paragraph 97)

40. We recommend that each new Member arriving on the Estate should be assigned a suitably experienced member of House staff who will meet them on arrival on the Estate and look after them. This member of staff could act as their main point of
contact in the short-term for communicating logistical information but in the medium-term be a guide to resources about the House and its procedures. (Paragraph 98)

41. We will write to the Leaders of all parties represented at Westminster to encourage more proactive support by the parties of the training programmes put in place for 2015. (Paragraph 100)
Formal Minutes

Monday 15 July 2013

Members present:

Sir Alan Haselhurst (in the Chair)

Karen Bradley          Nicholas Soames
Thomas Docherty        Mr Desmond Swayne
Mr Marcus Jones         Mark Tami
Nigel Mills            Mr Dave Watts
Tessa Munt             David Wright

First weeks at Westminster: induction arrangements for new MPs in 2015

The Committee considered informally the Chair’s draft report.

Draft Report (First weeks at Westminster: Induction arrangements for new MPs in 2015), proposed by the Chair, brought up and read.

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

Paragraphs 1 to 102 read and agreed to.

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

Ordered, That embargoed copies of the Report be made available, in accordance with the provisions of Standing Order No. 134.

Written evidence was ordered to be reported to the House for printing with the Report, together with written evidence reported and ordered to be published on 4, 18 and 25 March, 22 April, 13 May and 3 June 2013.

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

[Adjourned till Monday 9 September at 4.30 pm]
Witnesses

Monday 18 March 2013

Rt Hon Peter Riddell CBE, Director, and Zoe Gruhn, Director of Learning and Development, Institute for Government  

Max Freedman, Parliamentary Branch Chair, Unite, Lauren Edwards, Unite, Lisa Townsend, Branch Chair, MAPSA, and Georgina Kester, MAPSA  

Monday 25 March 2013

Andrew McDonald, Chief Executive, and John Sills, Director of Policy, Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority (IPSA)  

Monday 03 June 2013

Joan Miller, Director of Parliamentary ICT, and Matthew Taylor, Director of Operations and Members Services, PICT  

George Mudie MP, former Accommodation Whip, James Robertson OBE, Director of Accommodation and Logistics Services, and Fiona Channon, former Members’ Accommodation  

List of written evidence

1  Institute for Government  
2  Members and Peers Staff Association (MAPSA)  
3  Unite the Union, Staff Branch  
4  Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority (IPSA)  
5  Parliamentary ICT  
6  Department of Facilities, House of Commons  
7  Kate Green MP  
8  Nicky Morgan MP  
9  Adam Afriyie MP  
10  Therese Coffey MP  
11  Alex Cunningham MP  
12  Duncan Hames MP  
13  Paul Blomfield MP  
14  Susan Plimmer-Clark  
15  Royal Society of Chemistry  
16  Dr Emma Crew
# List of Reports from the Committee during the current Parliament

The reference number of the House of Commons Commission response to each Report is printed in brackets after the HC printing number.

## Session 2010–12

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Oral evidence

Taken before the Administration Committee

on Monday 18 March 2013

Members present:
Mr John Spellar (Chair)
Karen Bradley
Thomas Docherty
Graham Evans
Nigel Mills
David Morris
Tessa Munt
John Penrose
Mr Desmond Swayne
Mark Tami
Mr Dave Watts
Keith Vaz

In the absence of the Chair, Mr John Spellar was called to the Chair

Examination of Witnesses

Witnesses: Rt Hon Peter Riddell CBE, Director, and Zoe Gruhn, Director of Learning and Development, Institute for Government, gave evidence.

Q1 Chair: Colleagues, Peter and Zoe, thank you very much for coming in. We have your paper before us, and I wondered if you wanted to say anything by way of introduction before I ask my colleagues to ask questions on this.

Peter Riddell: I have a couple of points if I might. This reflects our joint experience, both the Institute for Government and also the Hansard Society, which I chaired until last year, so there was a double-banking of experience before the 2010 election. There are two main points I want to make. One is that we are essentially about experience of government, not as politicians. The last thing anyone outside can teach you lot, if I might respectfully call you that, is how to be politicians, because you get yourselves elected, you know your constituency links and all that. It is all about the scrutiny role and also some aspects of government. One thing I learnt from my long experience as a journalist here, and my time with the Hansard Society and more recently the IFG, is that a lot of MPs arrive at Westminster not knowing very much about government. They know an awful lot about politics and their constituencies, but not about government. The trouble is that in the rush of arrival at Westminster, some of the information about how effectively to scrutinise government does not get done because there are plenty of other things to happen. The second point I would make is that when looking at the arrival of new Members, it should not just be the first few days or even weeks. It needs to be over a much more extended period.

Zoe Gruhn: I ditto what Peter has to say. The work we have already done in 2010 as part of the induction of new MPs was very much helping them to understand the process of Whitehall and its relationship with Westminster. They know an awful lot about politics and their constituencies, but not about government. The trouble is that in the rush of arrival at Westminster, some of the information about how effectively to scrutinise government does not get done because there are plenty of other things to happen. The second point I would make is that when looking at the arrival of new Members, it should not just be the first few days or even weeks. It needs to be over a much more extended period.

Q2 Chair: Peter, in a sense at the outset you outlined that part of the difficulty here is that the sole qualification for being a Member of Parliament is the fact that one has been elected with more votes than anybody else in that particular constituency. Therefore, people come with a wide range of experience and expectations, and at the time that they are going to be able and ready to take up such experience there is too often too much focus on initial training when there is just a huge quantity of it—it is a complete change of people’s way of life and even the location of where they live. Suddenly, they are picking up a huge wodge of constituency work, unless they have had a fairly seamless transition, but particularly if they have won a seat from an incumbent Member. Therefore, any idea that they are going to be able to take on board some of the wider aspects of relationships between Parliament and the Executive in its two manifestations, as Ministers and Whitehall, I just think is not likely. Therefore, something that is available later on in their career is probably better.

What are your feelings on that?

Peter Riddell: Absolutely. If I might, there are two aspects of that. We will see how the Fixed-Term Parliaments Act works over the long term, but given the expectation that there will be an election in May 2015, it is possible to do something—it would make sense to do it either just before or after the summer recess—particularly related to Select Committees, because a very high proportion of the people elected to Select Committees under the new procedures were new Members. Some of them immediately dropped off when they were appointed as PPSs or part of shadow teams. There is a time to do it.

Another aspect is our work with Ministers, which Zoe organised. Often, six, 12 or 18 months in is quite a useful time to get people round—in a group like this—to compare experiences. I really do stress that this is not a matter of outsiders telling you what to do.
It is convening a discussion. I will give you examples of two things at the last election that were in concept right but where the timing was wrong. It is exactly in line with your point. The Hansard Society had a session with the then new Deputy Speaker Lindsay Hoyle and the then Clerk Assistant, Robert Rogers, before his elevation. It was actually high-quality stuff from the two of them on how to make the best of scrutiny opportunities and so on, but it was at the wrong time. There were not enough of them, but the people who were there actually came away saying, “This is really interesting. I didn’t know anything about that.”

Then we organised something at the Institute, when we got one of your colleagues, Charles Walker, Chairman of the Procedure Committee, talking about his experience. He had been on the Public Administration Committee. Again, it was very good. It was them coming in, and I would add to that now something about how government works and so on, because I think it would be quite useful to do that. Certainly, though, assuming that timetable, you would want to delay these sessions until either just before or probably after the recess because people are pretty tired after running for election, the first few weeks at Westminster and all that. You would probably want to do it in early autumn or something like that. Also, you should come back to it at a later stage to compare experiences. We have found that to be extremely valuable when we have done it with Ministers, because quite often people do not swap experiences because you all lead such busy lives.

**Zoe Gruhn:** The other point to make is not to feel valuable when we have done it with Ministers, should come back to it at a later stage to compare—to do it in early autumn or something like that. Also, you would probably want to delay these sessions until either just before or probably after the recess because people are pretty tired after running for election, the first few weeks at Westminster and all that. You would probably want to do it in early autumn or something like that. Also, you should come back to it at a later stage to compare experiences. We have found that to be extremely valuable when we have done it with Ministers, because quite often people do not swap experiences because you all lead such busy lives.

**Zoe Gruhn:** The other point to make is not to feel a sense of shame about doing it. I have heard some politicians say to me, “Well, it is a sign of weakness if I’m seen to be attending training.” That is probably an unhelpful way to think about it. Obviously, you are elected into the role, but as Peter said you are not familiar with the role, and so there is something about being things to learn. There is nothing wrong with that. Indeed, as we discovered in the 2010 election, a lot of stuff happened right at the beginning and then nothing. That is a pity because people get fatigue from induction: there is a lot to take in, including finding out where you are going to have an office and so on. Actually, it is better to do it over a period of time. On the point made earlier about the scrutiny role, how can you get better and be as effective as possible as part of the Select Committee process in getting the most information you can from people who are giving evidence?

**Q3 Mr Dave Watts:** I have just two points. There is a need for a general induction, and that is what we concentrated on a few years ago when I was involved in some discussion about the training side. Then, short, repeated sessions where people can dip in and out are something that is useful. People will want to know some of this the longer they are there—the first week, first month or first year. The second thing that I thought was very useful is the idea of, for want of a better term, a mentor—someone else who will support that MP for the first six months they are there and whom they know they can go back and dip into if they need any help or assistance. Is that something you are looking at in some detail?

**Zoe Gruhn:** Yes, definitely. The role of mentor is hugely valuable. Obviously, some people do it independently and privately themselves. They seek out people whom they have respected over time and want to get their views. I do think it is an ongoing process; it is about continuous professional development. Every occupation I have been involved with or sector I have worked in, both public and private, does it. It is not shameful. People who become chief execs do it. It is just a normal part of good practice in terms of making sure you are being as effective as possible. A drip-drip process is far better than simply starting it and stopping it right at the beginning of taking on the role.

**Q4 John Penrose:** Just very quickly, I completely take your point that people turn up with different levels of expertise, a wide variety of backgrounds and encounter different issues at different points, and they therefore need things in a variety of ways. The conversation so far has sounded as though we are talking about one principal method of delivery, which is whole-class teaching, where everyone turns up in a room at the same time for either a discussion or someone offers an exposition followed by some kind of conversation afterwards. Can you just clarify that for me? I am presuming that is an accident of the way we have been discussing it and that you are also talking about briefings, online materials and all those other things. If Members are not, for example, put on a Select Committee on day two of arriving here, but are put on something six months later because someone has become PPS and they are the only person, they need to be able to have the same level of training. There have to be some materials available that they are made aware of as they arrive. Presumably, we should be couching this entire conversation in those terms in a variety of different delivery methods.

**Peter Riddell:** Very much so—absolutely. For obvious reasons, there is naturally a focus on the beginning of a Parliament, but I agree with you entirely on that. If you look at the turnover on Select Committees, it certainly underlines that process. Equally, and I know this has happened on a small scale, there was a group of new Members arriving in the autumn because there was a clutch of by-elections. The House authorities did organise a mini-induction on that, partly to test out some ideas. It has to be adaptable.

The key point about it is that people should not feel afraid to ask questions. I remember, after one of the sessions we did, a couple of your newly elected colleagues came up to me and said, “Can you tell me what actually happens on Budget day”? The 2010 Budget was going to happen two days later. I am of course rather familiar with that from having spent a lot of time here as a journalist, but it is almost at that level and having the right material. However, I could not agree with you more that it has to be flexible. It has to be flexible and accessible, so that people feel that would be helpful to do. On Select Committees, Zoe has been involved a bit in trying to improve effectiveness. There is an
assumption that, if someone goes on a Select Committee, it is often dominated by two, three or four people who have been on it before or are strong personalities, even though it is now the elected system. Some new Members can feel slightly, “What’s my role?” without help, guidance and so on. We have to maximise their effectiveness and satisfaction from the role.

Zoe Gruhn: Also, it is absolutely about being flexible. “Just in time” is a good way of describing it: as and when the person feels that they really need it, there is material and access to learning.

Q5 John Penrose: Therefore, if there is some genius piece of commentary by Charles Walker on whatever it was, it is making that available on the web to watch on video rather than having to wait until the next time he feels like turning up to a session or whatever it might be.

Peter Riddell: That would be a good idea. What we can do at the outset is quite modest because of resources and so on, although we have discussed this with the Clerks department and with the information department to offer to help them. We can do certain things independently that are obviously more difficult for them to do in-house.

Q6 Graham Evans: On my first day here—I had never set foot in the place. I was not expected to win—walking through these doors, the policeman had a lot of fun with me. He is there, armed with a gun, he does not know me from Adam and I have no pass, so that was not a great introduction to this place. I would say there are four areas: PAS, PICT, IPSA and Whips. Is it possible to have an induction pact that those four areas actually talk to each other? The new MP has no office, a stack of unanswered mail, no staff, constituency work and parliamentary work, which you have alluded to. Is it not possible to have long-standing MPs as mentors, so you could say, “Are you a regional MP? Are you a London MP? Are you a South West MP?” So you have people who have been there and done it, and when new colleagues join, they are not left, as I was, for six weeks without an office and searching around for staff. A lot of colleagues made a big mistake with their staff, and it caused you a lot of grief further down the line. There are a lot of pitfalls that could have been avoided if somebody had held their hands. Perhaps allocate new Members to an existing Member of Parliament and somebody had held their hands. Perhaps allocate new Members to an existing Member of Parliament and they could be in contact.

Peter Riddell: The answer is obviously yes, but the key point there is the various different groups that can help. Some can help formally, such as the House authorities. Dare I say it, IPSA can help. The party Whips can help and the parliamentary grouping the Member is from. They are all helping at different levels and different degrees, because the relationship any MP has is a whole series of different points of authority.

Q7 Graham Evans: Peter, I agree with that in theory, but there are flaws in all of those departments—within IPSA, within PAS and within PICT. There is nothing quite like a seasoned MP who has been through the mill. These guys are good to a certain extent, but you cannot quite beat that person who has been there, done it, been through the mill and knows the flaws in well-meaning institutions and people. I do feel that it can be vastly improved.

Zoe Gruhn: The Whips’ office, for example, could organise a network of potential mentors. It just needs co-ordinating in that kind of way so you know who to contact, unless you have already identified someone. I would have thought that would be hugely valuable, because otherwise you can waste an awful lot of time trying to work it out yourself when actually there are a lot of people around who already have that experience. The other thing as well with that Charles Walker session is that there were some people there, and he was very good about how he put it across. He worked out where everyone’s constituencies were and was also quite sympathetic to those who had a marginal majority, because that is going to change where their focus lies in the whole issue around casework as being a quite critical area. This is not our particular area, but there were people talking about areas of concern within their constituency and how they manage that. There was someone who was taking on a mentoring role, which was very useful.

Q8 Thomas Docherty: Are you aware of what training Congress provides to new Members?

Peter Riddell: Only with envy from your point of view, if I might put it like that. Remember, they have a great advantage in Congress. They elect them on the first Tuesday in November and they do not take their seats until the beginning of January, either in the mid-term or when there is a presidential election, so there are two months. They have very formal processes of handover and induction. They have the time to do it and they spend many days doing it. There are very elaborately worked out procedures fulfilling all the criteria Mr Evans raised: mentoring, explaining resources, hiring staff—there are of course many more staff than any of you would have—explaining Committees and so on. It is very much more extensive because you have time.

There was an advantage at the last election. It was a double thing because of what happened with the formation of the coalition. The election of the Speaker was a week later than normal and so there was more time to do it, even though I do not think it felt like it for any of you at the time. Of course, in Congress, though, you have that period of nearly two months, and that gives them much longer to do it. It is very much more worked out, and 20 years ago or more I worked in Washington. I remember talking to people about it—then, I was detached from it—and it is very impressive what they do there. They have the resources to do it and, above all, they have the time to do it.

Q9 Thomas Docherty: On the practicalities, if we assume that the coalition is going to go its full term, we have a fixed election date of the first Thursday of May 2015. Newly elected Back Benchers are unlikely to be asked by the Prime Minister to become a Minister on the first day. Given that we pretty much know now when the general election is going to be
and that things do not really get started for the House for 10 or 12 days afterwards, notwithstanding coalitions or a straight victory, how practical would it be to do a mini version of what Congress provides for MPs?

**Peter Riddell:** We are in a transition at present. What happened last time was better than what happened in 2005, which was better than what happened in 2001. It is steadily improving. All the actors are improving: the parties are improving what they are doing; the House authorities are improving. Of course, IPSA only existed in 2010; it did not occur. It is more practical, provided you have that gap between the election date and when the House meets to elect a Speaker. It is crucial to have that gap because you need a good 10 days. Normally, the House would meet for the first time on the Tuesday or Wednesday after an election. The advantage of doing it the following week is it gives you 10 days to do it. The answer is you would be able to do it in those 10 days before the Speaker is elected.

**Q10 Thomas Docherty:** Forgive me for being slightly slow. Why is the date of the election of the Speaker so critical? From memory, we have the election of the Speaker and there is then the Queen’s Speech debate a week later. Surely it is crucial that the election of the Speaker is elected.

**Peter Riddell:** It comes back to the Chairman’s initial point, which I think was a good one. It depends what you are talking about. You want to hit pretty soon the really practical things like getting your pass, sorting out money and sorting out communications, which I gather was not entirely satisfactory last time, let alone an office. Even with the best will in the world, that is going to take quite a long time. You have a series of objectives over a period of time to do, rather than doing the whole package. That is what we are saying. There are some absolutely vital things you need as a constituency MP so you can talk to your constituents. You need to do that very quickly.

I take your point on that, but I think there is a period of maximum tension where you are not just getting on with your normal job, and it is probably not much longer than a week before all the pulls of constituency and other obligations here are coming on you. It might be two weeks if the Queen’s Speech is a bit delayed, and there is no reason why it cannot be. It is good for Government if they have a slightly delayed Queen’s Speech; they are probably going to get it right or a bit better if they have longer to reflect on it. You can use that period and it would be possible to organise it better, but the key point I am making is do not do everything at once; do the essentials then come back to some of the other matters later. The problem always is getting MPs to turn up to things later on, because their diaries fill up.

**Q11 Mark Tami:** Things have improved a bit since I was elected in 2001, but I still think there is this assumption that you come here and somehow know everything anyway. Although things have got a bit better, I still think there is a big gap there. For some people who perhaps do not know anybody here, it can be quite a lonely place. I know people might think that is a strange comment, but without naming any names I think across all parties at all times there are people who have not really fitted in and have tended to withdraw a bit from the whole process. I think we have let them down early on. I know it is difficult to address that because everyone is different, but do you have any views on it?

**Zoe Gruhn:** Yes. I think there are already some of the things we have said. There is partly the mentoring role, so you will get some sort of private one-to-one sessions with those individuals, but I also think it is about having regular reviews. Groups do meet up on an informal basis, and that is actually quite helpful as part of the whole induction process; being connected with a network is important too. It is also that point that it is not just at the beginning; it is a process that goes on throughout the duration of the term. People feel that once they get stuck in, with their constituency work in particular, they just do not have the time. It is about finding the time and seeing it as a priority in terms of what you do.

**Peter Riddell:** If I can draw a parallel, before the last election Zoe organised a session with a number of members of the then Labour Government. Many of them had been in office for several years. They were at the Minister of State level and a few Parliamentary Secretaries. Virtually none of them had had a collective discussion before of the experience of being a Minister and the problems. It was quite extraordinary. It was quite telling, actually. We have done the same with coalition Ministers, and when I say coalition Ministers, we had Tories and Lib Dems in the same room discussing their issues about being a Minister. They found it quite satisfying in a way to have the opportunity to discuss, highlight things and so on, because there are a lot of common problems. On the whole, they have not normally discussed them, because, as you say, people are individuals. You are all individuals here by definition under a constituency system. That is one of the great virtues of it.

**Chair:** Tony Blair did actually set up a committee of Ministers of State chaired by Gus Macdonald to try to look at some of the cross-cutting experiences and procedural issues within Government. It did actually have some quite interesting discussions. I am not sure it fed through much into the practice of Government, but it was quite well done. Does anyone else have any questions on that? Thank you very much, Peter. This is work in progress, and we may well want to revert to you after we have talked to some other people to get some further ideas out of you. Thank you very much for coming here today.

**Peter Riddell:** Absolutely, a pleasure.
Examination of Witnesses

Witnesses: Max Freedman, Parliamentary Branch Chair, Unite, Lauren Edwards, Unite, Lisa Townsend, Branch Chair, MAPSA, and Georgina Kester, MAPSA, gave evidence.

Q12 Chair: Welcome. We have your written evidence to us. Firstly, is there anything you want to say by way of introduction to that?

Lisa Townsend: First of all, we want to say thank you for inviting MAPSA. We have only in the recent few months or last couple of years come to the attention of the House authorities, although MAPSA has actually been running since 1974 in the form of the Secretaries and Assistants Council. Most people do not really know about us, so we are always grateful to be invited. We are very proud of our relationship with the House authorities. We have a memorandum of understanding with the House authorities and we are cross-party. We are not a union; Unite fulfil that role, and they fulfil it very well. We do not do that; we are not political and we have members from across the political parties, and across the House and the House of Lords. That is the first thing I wanted to say. The other thing is that we canvassed our members in terms of their feedback on the first few weeks, and it was overwhelmingly positive, particularly with regard to IT and particularly with regard to the Committee Room set-up and how that worked. There was some negative feedback, but generally speaking it has been overwhelmingly positive. We, as MAPSA, and our members are very aware of the fact that the House, for various reasons, was dealing with a very large intake and had an awful lot to deal with. There was also the fact that they had the Coalition Agreement time in which to deal with it. That may or may not happen again, and so that has to be taken into consideration as well.

Q13 Chair: Obviously those were slightly extraordinary times, firstly, because the arrangements, for example, for those Members of the Liberal Democrats were going to be quite different depending on whether they were in government or opposition. As Mark Tami will know, though, some of them wanted to hold on to their offices as Front-Bench opposition spokesmen, and this became an issue of contention. You are absolutely right that was an abnormal circumstance and also, apart from '97, an unprecedented level of turnover. I am not sure there is anything that can be done in that context, particularly given the very short time we have before Parliament comes back again. In the interim arrangements, though, are there things that staff have said to you that the House authorities and the Whips’ offices responsible for the parties could do more efficiently and effectively to enable what is inevitably going to be a transition period? Part of the length of time will depend on the level of turnover, but are there physical provisions they could make that would make that much easier, particularly with the influx of letters and information coming through, and also in some cases new staff coming in?

Lisa Townsend: Yes, very much so. One of the things that seemed to come up time and again is that, of course, as we know, with 600-odd small businesses, everybody will employ staff at a different rate. Some people came with their new Member because they knew their new Member was about to be elected or they had a very good idea they were, so staff were in place. Other Members did not hire for several weeks or even in some cases a couple of months. There were comments made that there should or could have been better provision made for those Members who came with new staff and that those staff could have been included in any training or briefings that were happening. Maybe that is something that actually could be changed. Georgina in particular had that experience.

Georgina Kester: Yes, I arrived with my Member. I had worked for him in a previous role, so when I arrived straight in with him, obviously he was going into a process for the Members is very comprehensive, but it focuses quite a lot on activity in the Chamber and those sorts of issues. They seemed a little bit overwhelmed at times by issues involving PICT. It would have been great if we had been recognised as new staff members right from the start and involved in all the briefings on IT issues, accommodation and those sorts of matters. But as I say, overall it worked very efficiently.

Q14 Thomas Docherty: This is not at all having a go at your employers’ hiring arrangements, but it strikes me sometimes that Members are hiring without knowing what they want. Is it your experience that that causes a problem?

Lisa Townsend: That has been an experience. I now work for a new Member, but I have actually worked in the House for almost eight years. No disrespect to Georgina, who had worked for her Member before, but I have seen an awful lot, and I am still seeing a little bit, of the blind leading the blind in the first few months. I was hired specifically because I had worked here before and my Member had no particular experience of having worked in Westminster at all. There was a little bit of that. I think that is inevitable to a point and I think we probably need to work better together.

Q15 Thomas Docherty: Why is it inevitable?

Lisa Townsend: Because when I think of those new Members coming in who hired people who were fresh out of university, those people had maybe worked very hard on campaigns with them, so there was a certain element of, “I know this person. They know me. I can trust them.” They are going into a situation, usually miles from home, and an environment they do not know and they are a little bit scared of, if they are honest. They have been working for years and years to get into this place and they want somebody with them they can trust and they know. Often, that person will be somebody they have known for a little while and has maybe helped them get elected. There was an awful lot of that, and I can absolutely see the reason why. Maybe what we need to do, both in terms of the House and as MAPSA—we have a role here—is support those staffers and those Members in doing that.
Q16 Keith Vaz: The problem I have seen, especially with the turnover at the time of an election, is basically the lack of career structure for the staff of Members of Parliament. You sink or swim with your Member. If your Member stays, you stay. Otherwise, that is it. After two years, I find that there is a turnover. People want to go out of the House for alternative careers because the pay structure is so bad. You cannot promote people and keep them. At the time of a general election, a lot of the senior people might have left, so there is no one to turn to. Whereas under the American system, which we have just heard about, you have staffers who are recognised as being part of a career structure in the US Congress. Do you think that would help deal with the kind of issues that you have raised—the senior people? You cannot go to your Member because your Member is very busy. There is a lack of your Member because your Member is very busy. At the time of a general election, a lot of the senior people might have left, so there is no one to turn to. Whereas under the American system, which we have just heard about, you have staffers who are recognised as being part of a career structure in the US Congress. Do you think that would help deal with the kind of issues that you have raised—the senior people? You cannot go to your Member because your Member is very busy. At the time of a general election, a lot of the senior people might have left, so there is no one to turn to. Whereas under the American system, which we have just heard about, you have staffers who are recognised as being part of a career structure in the US Congress. Do you think that would help deal with the kind of issues that you have raised—the senior people? You cannot go to your Member because your Member is very busy.

Lisa Townsend: You are absolutely right and this is something we have raised with IPSA, although there is not that much they can do about it. We have raised it with IPSA in terms of the pay scales, obviously. We have had that conversation and we continue to have that conversation with them. You are absolutely right; having been here for eight years, I am very aware that I cannot go above my salary or job description. I am stuck in that regard, so the answer for me was to go and work for a new Member because there are new challenges there and a lot that comes with that. One of the things that MAPSA is trying to do is set up, for want of a better word, a buddy system. We are starting to trial it now ahead of the 2015 general election, so that when people come in, we can say, “I’ve been here for eight years; Georgina has been here for three years. Here is somebody you can talk to and of whom you can ask what seem like the stupid questions, like, ‘Where is the Vote Office? What do they do? Where is the library? Can somebody explain the sitting times? How does that actually work?’” There are all those questions. However, if we are going to do it properly, we need the support of the House. We really do need the support, because we do not have access to the information of who is new coming in. There is this problem of, “They’re new. They don’t know we exist. We’re here and want to help, but we don’t know they exist.” With a little bit of help, I think we can hopefully start to address that issue.

Q17 Graham Evans: What is your view on some form of agency? Recruiting staff in any business is a potential nightmare, and in the real world you can go to an agency that specialises in that field or that industry, broadly speaking. You can say, “I need an experienced engineer,” or, “I need an experienced office manager.” We do not have that here. When I joined, there was something that was going to be started, but then it disappeared rapidly because of IPSA. It disappeared. I remember saying, “That’s just what I’m looking for,” just as it disappeared into a puff of smoke. I am not saying it should be an independent or private venture—it could be an internal venture—but do you think there could be some facility like that, where you could go as a new or existing Member looking for new staff?

Lisa Townsend: I do. As you said, this was something that was talked about an awful lot before the last election. IPSA made it very difficult. There were quite a few of us pre-2015, those who knew their Members were leaving or who just wanted to go on to something else, who said, “Put us into a pool and let us come and do that.” IPSA, for various reasons, made that very difficult. I used to do a certain amount of that because I used to freelance, effectively. IPSA made that a very difficult thing to do. I would get called on, for example, when a Member had somebody going off on long-term sick leave or maternity leave. That is a very difficult thing to do. If there is a way of the House authorities finding a way to help that—I suspect you would have to do it with the Whips’ offices—it would help Members, particularly new Members who often hire without really knowing what they are doing. Of course, a lot of Members come down with no clue as to whom to hire—not a clue.

Graham Evans: Absolutely—me.

Lisa Townsend: You have had great staff, though.

Q18 Mr Dave Watts: I read in the report that you think MPs can badger IPSA. Many of us try, but we do not often succeed in that challenge. Do you think there is scope for actually explaining to Members about career grades—as you said, you cannot have a career here, but you can have scales that go up—and also about opportunities for training? I think we probably need some sort of guidance about how you get through the bureaucracy of IPSA now. Do you think that would be useful?

Lisa Townsend: Those were not my words, but I think that that would be incredibly useful. Of course, IPSA was very new. We work very closely with IPSA and they have undoubtedly ironed out a lot of the problems they had. Undoubtedly, they are a much better organisation in a lot of ways than they were three years ago. In terms of advising Members, some of the feedback we had, which will not be included in the evidence there because it has come in since then, was people saying—particularly in the constituency offices, which is a separate issue, again, almost—they had no idea there was training available. Their Member had no idea of his or her HR obligations, data protection obligations, or health and safety obligations. There is a huge vacuum there that needs to be filled.

Within MAPSA, we try very hard to work with constituency offices particularly because they often feel isolated. The staff there often feel like they have no recourse to IPSA. We actually had a staffer based in Scotland—she works for a Scottish MP—come to us last week. She said to IPSA, “I’d really like training on this and this, because I’ve taken over as the proxy,” and IPSA said, “Great. Next time you’re in London, come down.” She said, “I don’t come to London. I’m based in Scotland and I don’t have need at all to come to London. It would be a waste of taxpayers’ money for the taxpayer to pay for me to get a train down to London. Can you do this on the web? Can we have a conversation on the phone?” “No. You have to come
to our offices in London.” These are things that we are constantly trying to address with IPSA to just make it a little bit friendlier.

Q19 Chair: The usual co-operative attitude. Would our colleagues from Unite like to join us? I will ask Unite if they want to say anything and then pose a question that can be taken by any or all of them. I am just mindful of the time; we will lose our quorum at 6 o’clock. Colleagues, thank you very much. We have your paper here. Is there anything that you want to say to supplement it?

Max Freedman: Nothing in detail. Just to introduce ourselves, I am Max Freedman, Chair of the Unite branch that represents staff of MPs. We have just short of 500 members, fully cross-party, and obviously we try to be as constructive as we can. This is Lauren Edwards, Secretary of the branch.

Chair: That is absolutely fine. The reason I asked you to join up here is because I am mindful that we will lose a quorum at 6 o’clock for the Parliamentary Labour Party meeting. Therefore, we will take questions.

Q20 Graham Evans: I was just going to pick up on what Dave was saying about the issue that I just alluded to and constituency offices, because there are those two things: first of all, you know nothing about what goes on here, and then there are your obligations to staff in constituency offices. There was a freedom of information request we have just had about MPs and when they get a loan. If you have a new office as a new MP, in the constituency you have fire regulations, health and safety and security issues—alarms, panic alarms and the like. That all costs money. The point I am making is that IPSA is setting us up for a fall on that because you go along with your obligations, there is a cost to that, it goes into your expenses and then journalists say, “What are you doing spending thousands of pounds on health and safety?” and so on and so forth. I just think it is something we should be aware of moving forward—that IPSA is actually setting us up for a fall for doing the right thing.

Max Freedman: There are now some specific budgets that IPSA does have, for example, for improving security measures in constituency offices. Hopefully, because those are discrete budgets, it is easier to make the explanation that measures paid for out of those budgets are specifically for that purpose. Hopefully, the press and other people can appreciate that more simply.

Graham Evans: One hopes.

Q21 Thomas Docherty: I do not know who wrote the paper, but one of the points you make under point 3 is that you favour mandatory training for all new MPs. How would you make it mandatory?

Max Freedman: I wrote some of that paper. One thing I think I mentioned in one of the bullet points is when I started here, which was the beginning of 2005, it was an odd situation where you were not entitled to get an email address until you had done an afternoon of training on how to use the internet. Most people found that not the best use of time in any case, but it was a hurdle that you had to jump over before you were given access to that facility. If that could be done for an email address that does not cost the public purse anything, then I would have thought it would be not unreasonable to say that an MP should have an hour of training or the opportunity to discuss these matters before they were given access to a budget for staff of over £130,000 a year.

Q22 Thomas Docherty: There are those who argue, and I do this neutrally, that the electorate have elected a Member of Parliament. If I understand you correctly, Max, what you would then do is say that you could not start carrying out your functions until you had gone on a training course. Knowing the House authorities, that could take quite a while, so how would that work?

Max Freedman: Obviously, we do not want to make things too onerous, but as I think I also alluded to in that paper, MPs can come from anywhere. You have all had different experiences before being elected. The nature of being elected, though, has nothing to do with an experience of managerial skills or experience of employment. The skill you need is the skill to be selected in a seat where you can win and persuade the public to vote for you, essentially. People get elected from every walk of life, as is right, but to then employ members of staff and to have a productive office, which is what we all want for constituents, you want an office where the relationship between the employer and the employee is understood—how you can get on together and how you can actually get things achieved.

I am not just going to sit here and say that, within the first 48 hours after election, you need to have done that, but the nature of first emerging in this place I imagine is one that takes you by shock a bit and it takes a bit of time to set up an office, as we know. If within that period you have an hour in which you are told what your responsibilities are towards staff and how they recommend that relationship should operate, I suspect that the MP and the staff will be set up for a more productive partnership than otherwise.

Q23 Chair: That may be true, but the underlying difficulty, which is behind Thomas’s question, is that we allow people to employ staff without even taking their seats in Parliament. The facts of the matter are that essentially there is no way you can deny staff to someone who is elected. That is just a statement of fact. It might be desirable and it may be that there are various group pressures—we have seen this in areas before—where an initial request followed by Whips in various parties talking to people has actually managed to move people around. Ultimately, what slightly worries people is that once you say this is mandatory, you are setting yourself up for a fall, because there will always be the person who will say, “No, and what are you going to do about it?” You cannot say, “We are not going to provide you with staff to service your constituents because you will not turn up to a course.” This will not look good in the end.

Max Freedman: I am not going to argue for a right of recall for someone simply because they have not done an hour of training. We have existed as a branch
for 30 years now, and all I can plead is that over the years we have dealt with a huge number of grievance situations in that time. It seems to us that many of these could have been averted if there were better relationships initially.

**Q24 Chair:** Part of it is there has just been a substantial change, not least in the numbers of people. Whereas before, if you went back a number of years, it was very much a secretary-cum-PA-cum-researcher, you are now looking at a situation where people are running an office as an organisational unit as opposed to someone ancillary to them. I fully take on board the change that has taken place and the need to catch up, but I think it is just terminolgy.

**Lauren Edwards:** Just getting away from the use of the term “mandatory”, we think it is feasible; in the first couple of weeks that you are in here, you could hire a big Committee Room, or a couple per party, and you could have your MPs in there. In terms of mandatory, we want people to be strongly encouraged to come by the Whips’ office and the people who are mentoring them, because I know that happens in the early stage: “You need to come along to this so that you understand your obligations.” We need the help of the political parties and the party leaders in doing that. I think it is quite feasible to have a couple of meetings, or however many you need, in the first couple of weeks, whether it is an hour or half an hour, and then for there to be an additional drop-in service.

If you are having problems managing your staff or you need information, the Personnel Advisory Service runs regular drop-in sessions. You could do a version of that in the first month or so of people being elected.

**Q25 Thomas Docherty:** That is very different from mandatory. You are going to, “We could do more drop-ins.” Take the Sinn Fein, for example: there is a debate about money from Sinn Fein Members, but if you go down the mandatory route, you are saying Sinn Fein cannot get their money until they have come to a course, which they are not going to do because it is London. What you are talking about, Lauren, is an added mentoring system, which is significantly different. It is a bit like a Royal Charter and statutory underpinning.

**Lauren Edwards:** It is not so much a mentoring system as having MPs in a room so they understand the basic obligations they have as employers. It can be done en masse in a big meeting or it could be done in one-on-one sessions for people who need additional support.

**Q26 Thomas Docherty:** What would you do in the extreme with Sinn Fein, who say, “We’re not coming to London. We’re not taking our oaths or any of this stuff, but we’d like our £100,000 please.”?

**Lauren Edwards:** I do not think we ever put in our submission that we would want MPs not to be taking their money without having this training. Maybe the use of the term “mandatory” was a bit strong, but we think it is a basic expectation for MPs, if they are going to take up their seat and they are going to employ staff, that they understand their responsibilities as employers and that they get some training so they can manage their staff properly so we do not have to come in when there are problems and have protracted dealings with them and their staff.

**Mr Swayne:** I am not sure whether we would want to make it mandatory, but I think it is worth considering. I do not think there is that great difference in principle and that this would be some great new innovation. After all, Sinn Fein cannot participate in the Chamber because they have not taken their oath. We impose that mandatory condition. You cannot get anything out of IPSA unless you use their online system; it is mandatory. It seems to me that it would be perfectly possible in principle to say that, after the first couple of months, you will not be able to continue to access your staff budget unless you can tick this box. I am not saying that we would want to do it, but it is certainly something we could possibly do without any great leap in terms of principle beyond what we have already established.

**Graham Evans:** Just alluding to the point I raised earlier and the point you have just made, Chairman, the fact is you have become a Member of Parliament having campaigned for several years as an advocate for this great constituency. When you get down here, you have this lot telling you, “Before you do anything, you have to make sure you do this and this,” and you are an employer in a small business. As I mentioned earlier, I just think when you become a new MP you do need some handholding, to a lesser or greater degree, against these good people who are out to get you. Wannabe MPs need to be aware of what is involved in becoming an MP. That is the point I am making, because you are quite right that nobody wants to employ somebody for the wrong reasons and for it to go pear-shaped. You know it is a complete failure when you guys are involved. On the question I mentioned earlier, it is about employing the right people for the right position and treating them correctly. It is common sense, and the last thing we want is to have the problems you alluded to.

**Q27 Keith Vaz:** This arises out of Graham Evans’ question concerning an agency or someone to vet and make sure that people have reached a certain standard. I have just advertised for a parliamentary assistant. I have had 200 applicants and probably 150 journalists have applied. It would be great to have someone who is able to do some sifting before they came to me, because there would be a lot of people who apply to work for a lot of MPs. This is especially so at the start of a Parliament, when there are a lot of people looking for jobs and a lot of MPs looking for assistants. The first point is, what do you think of that?

Secondly, I put a point to Lisa Townsend and her colleague, Georgina, about the career structure. There is no career structure. I know you have been around a long time, Max, because I have seen you down that corridor over the last 15 years. People have to leave because they just cannot get enough money. They would love to stay, people have said to me, “We’d love to stay, but this is the limit that we can be paid, and we really can’t live in London on this kind of salary.” What do we do about getting a career structure in there so that we have people with
experience and knowledge who can stay on and make a career out of being staffers in Parliament as they do in America, and as we have with the Clerk system, for example. They can stay on, get promoted and get on to different grades. We just do not have the capacity to do this.

Max Freedman: You are right. In terms of finding the right people to employ when you are advertising, we all know that personal recommendations count for a lot in here, not least because one of the values most sought after is loyalty, and the ability to be discreet and other things like that. You cannot really tell that from a CV, but people can make recommendations to you that you can appreciate and you can trust. Certainly, I know in the last Parliament when an MP stepped down, died or whatever it might have been their staff had the opportunity to put their CVs in at the PLP office. It would then be available if an MP needed to recruit someone who already had some experience and had already demonstrated some of the skills that were required. That was somewhere to go and look. It is not an official pool of people, but that is a step beyond 200 unknown people throwing their hats in the ring.

In terms of career progression, I obviously completely agree with you. It is one of the reasons why we fought to improve redundancy pay, so that people were less likely to quit halfway through a Parliament or towards the end of a Parliament. You want to retain those skills, and if you can see that your boss is unlikely to retain their seat at the next election, where would the incentive be unless you could actually get a reasonable piece of redundancy at the end of it? I am glad to say we managed to get that improved, but you are still talking about pay scales that in London may not be what everyone is looking for. It is a different question in the constituencies. This place is set up with 650 MPs and constituencies of 100,000 people. You have to ask how many staff are required from that if you are not a Committee Chair and what skills they can bring along. People do improve their skills while working for an MP and become more valued because of that experience, but there is a clear ceiling in terms of salary that they reach. I have not given you any answers there, but I have just talked through it.

Q28 Nigel Mills: One potential answer would be to change the situation so an MP does not employ staff anymore and there is some kind of central employment, perhaps done by IPSA. That usually gets things thrown at you when you suggest it, but is it something you think would be a better way forward? Max Freedman: There are mixed views on that. It was discussed at quite some length before the last general election and some decisions were taken in principle to do that. I can see arguments for and against, not least because the key relationship is the relationship between me and my boss—the loyalty and trust that has built up over years of doing that. I would not want to do anything to displace that, so I cannot imagine switching one week to someone else. At the same time, though, you would have more certainties simply because, as I mentioned earlier, you have a range of different employment styles, to put it mildly, in here, from people who are absolutely expert, terrific and very professional in the way they do things, to people who have had no training or experience in management and who are frankly slapdash at it. If it were all done centrally, then presumably we could improve questions such as grievance and disciplinary procedures, which I still think are inadequate in this place, and measures such as that, which hopefully would improve the overall standard of employment in here so things would be less likely to go wrong.

Lisa Townsend: I do not think that is the answer. I completely agree with Max that there is a lack of grievance procedure. We are speaking with the House at the moment about the Respect policy. I do not think the answer is a pool, and I argued that before the last election. I think it would fundamentally change the relationship between staffer and Member. In some cases, that might not be a bad thing, but I think overall it would change it for the bad. Also, the answer to one thing we agree on about grievance is providing some HR for staff. It does not exist. That is part of the reason Unite and MAPSA exist.

Max Freedman: We are the only thing that exists.

Lisa Townsend: Yes, exactly. We are it. This is it. We meet regularly with IPSA, and when we have raised the issue with IPSA they say, “HR is not our business. It wasn’t in our remit. It wasn’t what we were set up to do.” MAPSA thinks IPSA is right. I do not think IPSA should take it on. I think we are all very quick to criticise to IPSA, so the argument that they should also take on HR when we are already criticising them for not doing a good enough job on other things does not work. I do think there is some room for the House, though, to provide HR. I think that is how we fix the grievance procedure, not through pooled staff.

Q29 Graham Evans: Isn’t PAS supposed to do that? Lisa Townsend: No, it is not supposed to support us. Max Freedman: No. PAS offers employment advice to Members, never to staff.

Graham Evans: All right. Can I just say they are not fit for purpose?

Chair: I am mindful that we are probably going to lose our quorum at this stage, with the meeting of the Parliamentary Labour Party. Can I thank you very much for that? This may be something on which we need to revert to you. Thank you for your contribution at this stage. Thank you, colleagues.
Monday 25 March 2013

Members present:

Sir Alan Haselhurst (Chair)
Karen Bradley
Thomas Docherty
Mr Kevan Jones
Mr Marcus Jones
Nigel Mills
Tessa Munt

John Penrose
Mr John Spellar
Mr Desmond Swayne
Keith Vaz
Mr Dave Watts

Examination of Witnesses

Witnesses: Andrew McDonald, Chief Executive, and John Sills, Director of Policy, IPSA, gave evidence.

Q30 Chair: Can I formally, on the record, welcome you, Mr McDonald and Mr Sills? We are very grateful to you for coming to see us this afternoon. You will be aware that we are looking again—it is not for the first time that this matter has been examined—at how we look after new Members of Parliament. It is a daunting experience for many people, having got elected, to then suddenly come up against the reality of organising themselves. Over my span of years in this House, we have moved from very little, possibly to too much, in terms of what we try to say to new Members at the inception. It is about trying to find a proper combination of things that perhaps need to be known at the early stages, and then things that follow up on that.

The situation has become more complicated over the years, with the huge weight of extra correspondence that Members now get compared with some decades ago, obviously supercharged by e-mail, plus the fact that the staff have had to increase to deal with that. There has been a movement over the years, from Members perhaps at some point in the past being hugely dependent on their sponsoring parties for accommodation in their constituencies, to a point where that level of voluntary support is now very patchy throughout the country, and that has put the weight on MPs to make their own accommodation and staffing arrangements, and so on. That has been a new complication.

Then, of course, there is the complication of the arrival of IPSA, as from 2010, and each side getting to know each other, if I may put it in that way. It has been accepted on IPSA's part that there are lessons to be learned from that initial experience. There will be a number of colleagues who wish to catch my eye, and I will start with Kevan Jones.

Q31 Mr Kevan Jones: Can I thank Mr McDonald for his presentation? It could not have been any worse than when it was started last time. You have answered one of the main points about cash flow for new Members, and existing Members. You left a lot of us high and dry with thousands of pounds' worth; I do not know whether you thought we had money sloshing around everywhere to doss out last time, so the idea of the £6,000 would be very helpful. Can I raise something in terms of the cash card? If you are a Member from the north-east or Scotland, £500 will not see you very far in the first few days, because that will take up your hotel. Could I suggest you look again at whether it would be possible to have a higher amount for constituencies further away?

An issue in terms of returning Members: will the cash card exist and have to be reissuued, or will it just be carried over? The other thing is about what IPSA are going to do about people’s accommodation during the election. Previously what happened was that you did not claim during the election period, but if you were re-elected you then reclaimed back that period. Have you given any thought to that? In my case, for example, I will be £1,500 out of pocket if I cannot claim for that if I get re-elected.

In the interim period—I know you did it for obvious reasons, to reduce the staffing problems with the phone line—would it be a good idea that during that first few months possibly the phone line could be open longer than the period it is now?

There is one final thing. I welcome what you have done on direct payments, because it has helped a lot, but why is it you cannot do direct payments for things like my photocopier, which every quarter costs me £400? I accept that you are now paying it up front to them and claiming it back later on, but are there any technical reasons why certain supplies cannot be set up on direct payments?

Andrew McDonald: Thank you very much for those questions. I think I have counted five, so I will make sure that between us, John and I will seek to cover them. A general point at the start, which is that we might in some ways see the 2010 experience differently; you will not be surprised by that. What I would like to do is to focus—

Mr Kevan Jones: You did not have your bank manager screaming down the phone at you.

Andrew McDonald: What I would like to do is focus on our planning for the 2015 election. I am happy to go back to 2010 and talk about the history, where we may have different views on it. What I would like to do, and it may be more helpful to the Committee, is focus on 2015. The amount on the pre-loaded card is not a fixed figure at this stage. The purpose of it is to help with the first few days. Regarding the £4,000 advance, which is to help with cash flow, once the request has been made we want to have that money available in MPs’ bank accounts within 36 to 48 hours. The pre-loaded card is literally only intended for the first few days. We think that around about £500
is the right figure, but this is not set in stone at this stage.

Q32 Mr Kevan Jones: Are there any tax implications on that?
Andrew McDonald: I will ask John to comment on that, if I may, and if there are points that we cannot take now we will write to you subsequently. I will ask John to comment on the arrangements for the existing payment card for returning Members, and arrangements for accommodation during the election.

In terms of the availability of the phone line, on which, as you know, we have taken the judgement that we can most effectively provide support, given the scale of our resources, by having the phone lines available in the afternoons between one o’clock and five o’clock: yes, in the weeks after the general election we will have longer opening hours running through the morning as well, because that would clearly be of assistance to new and returning MPs.

You are right to say that there has been a very significant switch towards direct payments: by value, in 2011, just 15% of expenses were paid that way; that figure is now 53% and rising. We have an open mind as to whether or not it would be appropriate in future to open up the payment card more widely.

Clearly, though, there are issues about making sure we get effective reconciliation of the cards; at the moment there is still some to-ing and fro-ing, and that is still a rather tortuous process at times. We would rather that was operating more smoothly. Also, there are some issues with some merchants who will not or cannot provide the sort of data that we need, so that we can show transparently the way in which expenses have been incurred. Perhaps I can ask John to pick up other questions.

John Sills: They are good questions; I am not sure I have got the answer today.

Mr Kevan Jones: I am glad to see you have survived, John, anyway.

John Sills: We will definitely have a proper look at it. I guess those who would object to it would probably say that we do not have the legal power to do so; if it is in that period where you are not regarded as the MP, once Parliament has dissolved. The second thing is some might argue—I am just stating the arguments here, because I am not sure I have got a view on this—that it would give incumbent MPs some kind of advantage against those who are challenging them. They are probably the objections, but I do not know what the answer is yet; we will certainly look at both.

Q33 Mr Kevan Jones: It would cost you more, because, if you do not do it, I intend to stop my lease a year before and stay in hotels, and I would advise all Members to do that, because then you turn it up straight away. If I stayed in hotels every week for a year that is going to cost you considerably more than it would to continue with my flat, so you need to look at this.

John Sills: Yes, we will definitely have a look.

Andrew McDonald: We just have the legal problem that John described, of the status of MPs during the campaign, but we will write to the Committee.

Q34 Mr Kevan Jones: You never got paid while you were in the election period. If you were re-elected, it was retrospective to cover that period, so you were not paid in advance for that period.

Andrew McDonald: I understand.

Mr Spellar: If so, when would the law have changed?

Chair: John, sorry, I have got a list.

Mr Kevan Jones: If you can let MPs know what you are going to do on that; we will have to get out of our flat arrangements very quickly.

Q35 Keith Vaz: Thank you Chairman. Can you just clarify what happens about staffing costs during the election period, because for all the elections that I have been involved with I have stopped paying my staff from the House of Commons, and they are taken on as party staff for that period. Is that what is going to happen?

Secondly, this concerns the first year’s budget for new Members and the second year’s budget. I have heard anecdotally, from 2010, that when new Members begin recruiting it is likely they will not be using their full budget for the first year, because they recruit later on after they settle themselves in—they advertise, etc.—whereas incumbent Members will probably have their same staff, and therefore their budgets will be higher. I do not know whether you have done any research into this, but it creates a problem for the year after, because in the second year your budget is limited to what you spend in your first year, so if you are not over your budget and you do not require a contingency, you cannot get a contingency for the second year. Whereas in the first year for new Members the amount is within the budgetary limits, it is likely that in the second year it will be beyond the budgetary limits. Does this make sense to you?

Andrew McDonald: It does.

Q36 Keith Vaz: My staff have been with me for 25 years, 20 years and 16 years, so they are at the top of the pay scale. Therefore, I will always be very, very high in my staffing allowances. A new Member next door—Jonathan Ashworth is next door; he has just been elected—will always have much smaller staffing allowances, because they have got new members of staff. If they are new Members they will have brand new members of staff. Does this make sense to you?

John Sills: Yes, it does. The answer to the first question is that your staff are still going to be carrying out parliamentary activities—helping the constituents, and so on. In that regard they should still be paid; that is certainly the working assumption on that one. There are obviously issues around what activities they are carrying out in that period, which you have to look into, but the basic principle is there.

On the second question, you are basically saying that the £6,000 start-up may be needed to some extent the next year rather than the first year, because it takes a while, and so on. Contingency is available; contingency, as you know, is for excess over the budget limits that should apply to everybody. An MP in that position, who find themselves still catching up, as it were, could apply for contingency in that second year.
Andrew McDonald: Should there be any doubt, the budget limits for staffing remain the same for new or returning MPs; the only variation is that £6,000 additional start-up.

Q37 Keith Vaz: That is irrespective of the length of service of your members of staff. This is the problem that we have, because a returning Member will have a member of staff who may have served five years and therefore be higher up on the scale than a new Member, who has employed someone on the £23,000.

Andrew McDonald: Yes. It is irrespective of that, hence, as John says, the possibility of contingency where appropriate.

Keith Vaz: Thank you; that is very helpful.

Q38 Karen Bradley: I am wondering if you could give any detail into thoughts you might have had about those first few weeks and temporary accommodation for new MPs. I remember in 2010 having to book my own hotel, which I could not get the parliamentary rate on. I was significantly out of pocket in those first few weeks, because there was nobody there to help me to say, “The hotel rooms are booked and they are at the parliamentary rate.” I was funding it out of my own pocket. I wonder if you had given any consideration to that.

Andrew McDonald: That is a good illustration of a funding it out of my own pocket. I wonder if you had booked and they are at the parliamentary rate”. I was significantly out of accommodation for new MPs. I remember in 2010 about those first few weeks and temporary give any detail into thoughts you might have had.

Q39 Karen Bradley: I am wondering if you could clarify what the view is you looking at what you can make a claim for? Are you considering making a pack available; something physically available to new Members, to be given either by the returning officer or via the party managers in the days after? I appreciate there is a danger we overload Members in that first slightly drunken weekend after an election.

I am slightly concerned to hear you say that you are not clear about where the line lies between House responsibilities and IPSA responsibilities. Would I be wrong if I was to suggest that pay and rations, and all associated with that, is IPSA? The physical accommodation in the building belongs to the Commons, but would you disagree that everything else is your primary responsibility?

My very final question: I welcome what you said to Mr Jones about the phone lines. Could I press you to think I counted five questions. Let me start off with a negative. I am sorry, Mr McDonald, but I do not know a single new Member from 2010 who has a good word—singular—to say about IPSA in 2010. If you can find me a Member who has a good word, who had a different experience to the one that Mr Jones has articulated, I would like to meet them. You cannot decouple this process. You cannot say that there are no further lessons to be learnt from 2010 when planning for 2015.

On a slightly more positive note—having got that rant out of my system—on the training for new Members, one of the huge problems that I had as a new Member was that you had what was billed as your IPSA training event, and it was a 15 to 20 minute thing where they gave you this little coupon thingy for your remote access. There was no training at all about what you could claim for, how to claim, what the thresholds were, and how long it would take. When you are looking at the training, are you specifically looking at the system itself, about how to make a claim, or are you looking at what you can make a claim for? Are you considering making a pack available; something physically available to new Members, to be given either by the returning officer or via the party managers in the days after? I appreciate there is a danger we overload Members in that first slightly drunken weekend after an election.

Andrew McDonald: That accommodation review, which John referred to, is going to run through the coming financial year, so well ahead of the election.

Q40 Thomas Docherty: I have got a couple of questions. Let me start off with a negative. I am sorry, Mr McDonald, but I do not know a single new Member from 2010 who has a good word—singular—to say about IPSA in 2010. If you can find me a Member who has a good word, who had a different experience to the one that Mr Jones has articulated, I would like to meet them. You cannot decouple this process. You cannot say that there are no further lessons to be learnt from 2010 when planning for 2015.

Chair: Yes, there was slight question inflation there.

Thomas Docherty: It was a bit boom and bust.

Andrew McDonald: I will seek to deal with them in turn. If I may, I will just respond briefly on your observations about 2010. I did not say that no lessons could be learned from 2010. I am absolutely clear that lessons can be learned from 2010, and have been learned from 2010. I am quite clear that there were elements of our service in the summer of 2010 that
fell below a level that we would want to deliver. That is why I wrote to you and to all MPs in September 2010, to make that clear and to apologise for those shortcomings.

While saying that, I would also say that the only independent examination of the experience of the establishment of IPSA and its early running—独立 examination—was by the Office of Government Commerce, which observed that the impossible had been asked of IPSA at its establishment, and the impossible had been delivered. That is not my assessment; that is the assessment from the Office of Government Commerce. It is important that any shortcomings there were in the summer of 2010 be understood in that context. Look also at the broadly positive assessment made by the National Audit Office in its report of 2011—an assessment that dealt both with the early services and with the establishment of IPSA. We may just be in a different position in terms of our perspective on 2010. Let me turn to your questions. In terms of the scope of those two training induction services, yes, we want to cover the scheme itself, as well as how a Member goes about claiming. It seems to me important we do the two alongside one another. As you say, there are attractions to delivering a pack, but we are also conscious that one of the pieces of feedback that we received in 2010 was, “We get so many pieces of information coming to us, whether electronically or in paper form; please judge carefully how much you provide, otherwise it is just going to get lost in the great mound of paper that is delivered to us.”

Thirdly, I did not quite say I was uncertain about the boundaries between IPSA and the House, more that there are some instances—the question raised earlier was one of them—where it could be that either the House or IPSA could step forward to pick up a role. In terms of the current distribution of roles, there is clarity between us. It is important that we work together—that is the point I was making—so that whoever picks up the responsibility, the service delivered to Members and to their staff is seamless. Relations with Commons authorities are good, we collaborate closely, and I think we can achieve that.

The fourth question was about dedicated phone lines for Members. It certainly has to be clear that a Member of Parliament standing for re-election has initiated correspondence right up to the point of dissolution, and, frankly, beyond. A lot of people approach the person they recognise as the Member of Parliament, even though they may not intend to vote for that Member of Parliament in the subsequent election, but go to him or her during the campaign and expect to get the usual service. You are working very hard keeping that part of your life separate from the fact that you are seeking re-election. John, did you wish to come in? I was not sure whether you were trying to come in before and I cut you down.

Mr John Spellar: No, I was just following up.

Chair: Relevant to the question about the division of responsibility between the House service and IPSA’s, one of the difficulties that has been thrown up is the provision of certain types of equipment. Up to now, all matters such as computers and so on have been provided by the House service, either on issue or, in the case of mobile telephony, as that became a regular need, as a legitimate expense. Some candidates for election made their own decision, it is true, to say that there were certain things they would not claim, because they did not wish to be criticised in the press for so doing.

That has led to an uneven situation, so when it has become the practice of the House to have paperless systems, and to have tablet computers, we have found in some cases that IPSA regarded that as a legitimate expense; it was a tool of the trade that was necessary alongside a mobile phone. At the same time, if someone had committed themselves to not making any claim on IPSA, and the House was not prepared to play ball, this was a very difficult situation.

For a Committee that decided to go paperless, and therefore all Members were expected to be reliant on a tablet, and some of them virtually denied themselves having it, there was pressure on the House service to do something, and that led to an overlap with what IPSA might do. Do you see any hope that that can be clarified into the future, so that there would be no stigma attached to a newly elected Member seeking that equipment?

Andrew McDonald: I will ask John to comment on the specifics in a moment, but I will make two general points, if I may. First, we are very keen that there

Q41 Mr Kevan Jones: Including our pay?

John Sills: I cannot remember whether you do or not. Do you?
should be no stigma associated with any legitimate claim within the system, and that is something that IPSA has worked hard at, not least by renaming the scheme as the Business Costs and Expenses Scheme, making it quite clear that legitimate claims within the scheme are about reimbursing Members for legitimate business costs.

Second, there is a broader strategic conversation that we and the Commons authorities are now beginning, about how MPs are supported in respect specifically of IT equipment. As the nature of IT equipment changes, with a greater emphasis on ever more sophisticated mobile technology, it does raise questions as to where the boundary should be in future. Those conversations are just beginning, so I cannot tell you how they are going to end up, but we both recognise that this issue needs to be resolved for the longer term. John, I do not know whether you want to comment on the short term?

**John Sills:** I would simply say that IT equipment is a completely legitimate cost that you can claim out of the office costs expenditure budget. IPSA would not be turning down purchases of that nature. We all know that the media still gets a bit excited about iPads and reports them from time to time, but they are rapidly becoming a very important business tool. Again, we do not make judgements about that. We get asked about it, of course, but we do not make judgements.

**Chair:** It is very helpful that you have put that on the record.

**Q44 Thomas Docherty:** On this issue about mobile devices, tablets, iPads; can you just clarify for me what discussions you have had at a senior level with House officers? For example, I am aware that the House bought 300 iPads; do you do a similar bulk buy? What do you do about software? Is this something that you see a “There is the House and there is IPSA”?

**John Sills:** Andrew might know more about this than I do, but the House provides MPs with a basic level of IT, does it not? A certain number of stations and things like that. Where MPs need more then they can claim within the system, and that is something that

**Andrew McDonald:** We are absolutely conscious of that speed of change, hence the need for this exchange with the Commons authorities.

**Q46 Tessa Munt:** I have a few general questions that I would like to ask. I was going to ask for your comments about the tacit encouragement of MPs to base their staff in Westminster rather than in the constituency, because it is much more effective cost-wise for me to do so. As I understand it from my accountant, the £4,000 float that I have—which I had to have, because I have no income other than what I do here—is a taxable benefit. I wondered about the loans in advance, when you get interest-free stuff like that, the arrangements for repayment when one is approaching an election. Am I going to be required to return the float a month before the election? How am I meant to deal with the taxable benefit side of that, which places me at another disadvantage?

A more general point is that, as I understand it, as a public servant I am going to get a pay rise of 1%, and yet my staff, who appear not to be public servants for some peculiar reason, are not going to get a pay rise, which is something I resent hugely. It is totally inappropriate. I do not understand how, if we are public servants, those who work for us and execute the duties in reality that we do cannot be considered public servants. Have you done any work to look at how that might be dealt with?

As a general request, I was going to ask if there is a schedule of salaries and expenses claimed by members of staff for IPSA, and whether those grades are available for the staff in IPSA, and the numbers of staff employed on each grade by IPSA. That is not something I would expect you to magic out of the air now, but I would be amazed if you are paying your staff what we are required to pay ours, and I would be quite interested to know the number of people who are involved in looking after the 630 of us.

**Chair:** I think that latter point is stepping outside the scope of the inquiry.

**Tessa Munt:** It may be; I want to place it on the record.

**Chair:** Yes, you were lucky to get away with as much as that.

**Andrew McDonald:** I will take the questions about the pay rise and I will deal briefly with that final point about staffing, and then I will ask John to take the point about any implicit incentive to base staff here, and the taxable status of the advances.

In terms of the pay rise, you are right that Members will receive a 1% pay rise come 1 April this year, and then 1% again next year, in line with the broader public sector pay policy. The board of IPSA has consciously chosen to follow that policy; it has a free choice as to the course it chooses.

As for a pay rise for Members’ staff, that is ultimately a matter for Members, because Members are the employers of those staff; IPSA is not. In the staffing budget for last year, you will be aware that we made a 20% increase in the amount of funding available to Members. In the current year, we are forecasting that the staffing budget, taken as a whole, will be underspent by 13%. Were MPs to choose to pay a pay rise of 1% for their staff then there would be scope,
as a general point, for that payment to be made. Clearly, there may be some MPs who are right up against the maximum of the budget, and they may wish to consider an application for contingency. I cannot predict what the outcome of that will be, given that each case will be taken on its own merits, but ultimately a pay rise for MPs’ staff is a matter for the MPs as the employers.

In terms of availability of information about our own staffing and expenses claimed, I would refer you to our website, where we are very open about the expenses that IPSA staff claim, and about the staff pay ranges as well. We are very happy for you to visit our website. John, do you want to take the other two points?

John Sills: On the 1% pay increase, our new version of the scheme of costs and expenses, which becomes operational at the beginning of April, does refer to that; it suggests that Members may wish to take that into account. As Andrew said, the vast majority of MPs would have the leeway in their budgets to do so, if they wished to do so.

The question about tacit encouragement does come up quite often, but to some extent it rather depends on how MPs run their operations, and everyone does it differently. There may be some MPs, particularly if they are based in the London area, who may wish to use facilities here more than a constituency office. We provide a budget of getting on for £25,000—around that amount—in London and £22,000 to £22,500 outside of London for office costs, including rent and so on. Again, that has proved on the whole to be enough for MPs to cope with. I do not think, in terms of our budgets, we are particularly providing an incentive for more staff to be based in Westminster, but I know it is an issue for the House; it is something they are looking into, so we do talk to them about that.

The other question was about the loan and its taxability. This is something I used to know off by heart, but I have not thought about it quite so much recently; we can confirm it in writing if you would like. I do not think that it starts to look at notional interest rates, the sort of thing the Government use. I think it is 4%, or something like that, and it is that 4% of the excess that gets taxed. In the end it is a relatively small part of the loan. What will not happen to you is a 40% tax on the full £4,000; that just will not happen, but we can confirm the details of that.

Q47 Tessa Munt: Am I required to return the £4,000 a month before the general election?

John Sills: We will have to think about that. I would guess so, yes.

Andrew McDonald: We will be recovering loans and advances before the election.

Q48 Nigel Mills: In the written submission you talk about how we can get loans for deposits once we have submitted a draft lease and various things. One of the issues I remember from May or June 2010 was that you wanted draft leases sent to you for approval, and if there was anything unusual in there that could take quite a long time. My own office lease comes including business rates and energy costs, which was quite unusual at the time; even staff had not seen it, although it has probably been quite a good deal for the taxpayer given what has happened since.

I urge you to be careful about exactly what you need to have signed off before we can sign, versus what resource you put to that, because that delayed me signing my office lease for quite a while, which then slows down everything else that you can do. Okay, yes, I can get the money once the lease is approved, but if you cannot approve the lease that does not take us anywhere forward.

Andrew McDonald: I take that point. One of the pieces of learning from 2010 was that our requirements for documentation were probably more onerous than we would want them to be in future, so one of the things that we are going to do over the coming months is to look at documentation requirements, including the requirements as they relate to leases, to see whether or not there is any streamlining we can do there, so as to speed the process. It is a point of learning; I take it.

Q49 Mr Marcus Jones: I have a couple of points.

Going back to this point of potential tax liability for loans, I got into that situation just after 2010, because I took a £4,000 loan and about a £1,900 for a deposit for accommodation. Would it be possible to advise Members going forward, when they are taking these loans, that there may be a liability at that point? I do not think that was ever explained. It was probably in the IPSA guidance, which was obviously a huge document, but it was not explained at the point that you took the loan. If that had been explained to me, I possibly would not have taken the whole £4,000 at the time, because I did not need it. I have since repaid a substantial amount of that, but that is something it would probably be good to advise Members of.

The second thing is a general point about claims. Quite often you put a claim in for goods or services that you have procured, and even where the invoice has not yet been settled with the particular supplier, sometimes it seems to take quite some time to receive a payment. The Government are trying to prompt payment to SMEs and so on and so forth. I use several SMEs, and sometimes it can take two months or so to pay an SME for goods and services they have provided to you as a Member of Parliament. If the Government and Members of Parliament are trying to set an example to industry in relation to paying promptly, and we are not able to do that, it does not set a very good example. Would it be possible to do something about that?

Andrew McDonald: Thank you. I will take both points in turn, and John may wish to add to each of them. On the advice, your recollection is correct; the information was there at the time, and this is a point when we are very much open to advice from current Members of Parliament about how we can target the information best, so that it lands with new Members. We are conscious, as I was saying a few moments ago, that new Members are receiving information from all directions; we are one of many who are seeking to get new Members’ attention. We have somehow got to
find the sweet spot where we provide just the right information to attract MPs’ attention, without drowning you with too much information.

I am sure the advice was there; we need to, and we are going to look at how we provide focused information. One thing we will have the opportunity to do this time round—it did not happen last time around—is to do some trialling of that information on existing Members. Should there be any volunteers in this room who are willing to have a look at some of the sample information packs, we would be very keen to have that sort of advice.

Andrew McDonald: That may well be easily done. I think it is quite simple. All it requires is a note on the claim form saying, “Please be aware that this is the tax limit in relation to loans; please check our guidance notes if you think you are going to exceed the claim form saying, “Please be aware that this is the tax limit in relation to loans; please check our guidance notes if you think you are going to exceed the tax limit.”

Q50 Mr Marcus Jones: Chairman, just on that point, I think it is quite simple. All it requires is a note on the claim form saying, “Please be aware that this is the tax limit in relation to loans; please check our guidance notes if you think you are going to exceed the tax limit.”

Andrew McDonald: That may well be easily done. I can assure you, though, that in other cases where we were seeking to get information to MPs, or get information from MPs—for example, to get bank account details so that salaries could be paid—that proved far more difficult than one might initially have expected. There were three requests for bank account details in May 2010, and we still had 50 MPs who had not provided the details at the end of May, and we still managed to pay everybody, although 50 through cheques. There is an issue there that I would be keen that we got on top of.

We are absolutely focused on speed of payment. Our target for the current financial year is that we pay reimbursed claims within 12 working days. We are currently ahead of target. From the point at which we get a claim with the relevant information, through to the money reaching the bank account of MPs, we are paying in an average of 9.4 working days in the current year. We are absolutely focused on delivering speedy payment.

Q51 Mr Marcus Jones: Chair, could I just ask another question out of that? Would it be possible to have an individual breakdown for my claims on how quickly they have been paid from the system that you use? I am not sure that that is the case with my claims?

Andrew McDonald: What I am talking about here is an average, so there will be variations from the average.

Q52 Mr Marcus Jones: I appreciate that. I think that 9.4 days is quite interesting, because, for example, if you put a mileage claim it is paid within about five minutes. Now, that is completely different from having hundreds of pounds outstanding to a stationer, for example, where you are waiting 60 days for the payment. If you average it out in that sense, you are always going to come up with 9.4 days. The point I am making is, where either substantial sums are being paid out by the Member up-front, or you are relying on the good will of a supplier, I believe that most of those claims are not settled within 9.4 days.

Andrew McDonald: We look not just at an average but at a distribution curve, which shows those claims that are either side of the average, and we are not paying at 60 days, we are paying much closer to the average. The curve is much more closely grouped around 9.4 working days, but if you want an average in your case I am happy to provide it.

Mr Marcus Jones: Thank you.

Chair: I think we are straying a little way from induction here, although there may be a point to be learned from it.

Q53 Mr Dave Watts: I was not going to raise anything, because I think we have covered most things in some depth in other venues. I was taken by the fact that you said that the decision on an increase in pay is a matter for individual MPs to make a decision, and yet when it comes to redundancy pay for staff, it is not left to the MP to make a decision to bring it in line with the public sector. Can you tell me what the rationale is between, on one hand, saying that the MP has freedom to set the pay, but on the other hand that he or she does not have the ability to set the redundancy pay in line with everybody else’s?

John Sills: As you are aware, we doubled the redundancy entitlement for staff on IPSA contracts. The issue is, of course, for staff who are not on IPSA contracts. I know that is a difficult one, but if they moved on to IPSA contracts then they would be entitled to it. That will only be an issue for staff whose pay is above any of the limits of the pay ranges, which IPSA contracts apply to. I do not know how many people are affected in that way, but my guess would be that it is relatively few.

Q54 Mr Dave Watts: That may be the case, but I am still looking for the rationale as to why pay is left to the MP, but the redundancy payment is not left to the MP. It seems to me that once you have made the decision that the employee is a member of the staff for the MP, it is up to the MP to set the pay; I do not understand why it should not be left to the MP to set the redundancy, providing it does not go above the IPSA scheme. I am not seeking to have a more generous scheme, but if someone does remain, for one reason or another, on an individual contract outside of IPSA, and it is within the budget, there is a case for allowing individual MPs to make that choice.

Andrew McDonald: What we are keen to have is clarity as to the contract, and the IPSA contract establishes a certain redundancy deal; that is a contractual term, whereas the level of pay is not. What we do not want to do is to have a hybrid contract where staff have an amalgam of old terms and new terms; that ultimately would cause confusion for MPs and for their staff.

Q55 Mr Dave Watts: If you do not mind, Chair, I will have just one last go. What I am advocating is that this element of it would be brought into line with the IPSA scheme, because all I am seeking to do is to allow MPs to pay the same level of redundancy pay as already exists within the IPSA scheme for IPSA employees.

Andrew McDonald: Not IPSA employees, but those on IPSA contracts. That would then be creating a hybrid contract somewhere between the old terms and
the new, and we are very happy for staff to come across on to IPSA contracts, but it should be a wholesale move rather than a cherry-picking of particular terms.

Q56 Mr John Spellar: It would not necessarily be cherry-picking. What I find slightly odd in all of this argument is that it would be quite proper for IPSA to go back and say, “These people are being paid over and above the IPSA rate”. If, however, that is not the case, why are IPSA insisting that they are only entitled to half the redundancy pay of those who have gone on to the IPSA contracts. There is a very real concern amongst Members of Parliament and, indeed, staff that ultimately IPSA’s intention—and this is a surfacing thing even before IPSA, with the House of Commons—is that they will become employees of IPSA and not employees of the Member of Parliament, because ultimately their contract will then be with IPSA. That is a real concern: that they will effectively start to move into becoming public servants, as opposed to employees of Members of Parliament. If there is no loss to IPSA—in other words, no extra expenditure incurred—why are IPSA so stubborn on this point?

Andrew McDonald: Perhaps I can provide reassurance on what seems to be the core concern underlying this: we have no intention of moving employees of MPs—

Q57 Mr John Spellar: I have to tell you, in political terms “no intention” means “not this week”. I have to tell you that that is a well-known coded term for, “We are not doing it immediately”.

Andrew McDonald: Perhaps I can reassure you that I am not a politician; I am a mere public official. I am just saying that this is not part of IPSA’s plan at all. Why should IPSA want to take all MP staff on to the IPSA payroll as IPSA employees?

Q58 Mr John Spellar: Because then they are your employees; you control them.

Andrew McDonald: They are not our employees; they are your employees.

Mr John Spellar: They would not be.

Andrew McDonald: Why should we want that sort of control? That is not at all what we want.

John Sills: Because it is sometimes put to us, especially by some MPs’ staff, that we should do this, we consulted on it last year. We did, as you might recall, a pretty in-depth review of MPs’ staffing requirements, which was what led to the 20% to 25% increase in the budget. The issue was raised, it was considered, and we said quite clearly we would not do it. That is the end of it.

Chair: We are going to have to move quickly, because we are getting into a quorum situation.

Q59 Mr Kevan Jones: Can I say that it is not just about levels of pay for staff? Some might have different holiday entitlements. Most of my staff are on the IPSA contract, but one is not, and the reason for that is that she does not want to go on to the IPSA contract, because of the holiday entitlement that she had under the old contract. I cannot understand why she should be treated any differently in terms of redundancy from the other members of staff who are on IPSA contracts, because it would not cost you any more. Short of me saying to her, “I demand you go on to this contract”, which I cannot do without giving her proper legal notice, she is not going to. I have asked her. I just do not understand what the problem is, because it is not costing you any more.

Andrew McDonald: We are not requiring anybody to move across.

Q60 Mr Kevan Jones: I know you are not, but you are treating them differently in terms of redundancy from somebody who is on one of your IPSA contracts, and I cannot see why that should be the case.

Andrew McDonald: We are saying that that is a choice, and the choice has been the same since IPSA’s establishment—either to move across to the IPSA contract, or we said that we would honour existing contracts.

Mr John Spellar: No, but the choice is your redundancy—

Chair: Order. We are really flogging this one to the edge.

Mr Kevan Jones: No. I am sorry, Chairman, I do not think we are, with respect.

Chair: There is a difference of opinion.

Q61 Mr Kevan Jones: No, there is not, because it is about the way you are treating our staff just because they are on an existing contract. It is not about me saying it to my secretary; that is her choice. I cannot understand why you are treating her differently in terms of a redundancy situation from somebody on your IPSA contract. To be honest, it is not costing you any more.

Andrew McDonald: There is just a basic difference of view here. We have offered a choice between a contract established by IPSA that we take the view from somebody who is on one of your IPSA contracts, because it would not cost you any more. We are not requiring anybody to move across.

Q62 Mr Kevan Jones: Could an employee go onto the new contract and change, for example, the holiday entitlement and things like that?

Andrew McDonald: The contract is the contract.

Q63 Mr Kevan Jones: Yes, but that is the point. You are telling her to give up her different holiday entitlements, as opposed to getting redundancy; that is the trade-off, is it?

Andrew McDonald: There is a choice.

Mr John Spellar: Why—

Chair: Order. This is meant to be about induction, and we are getting way away from it, and I do not think there is progress being made on the point; there is a difference of view. I cannot see any further point in pursuing it in this way in the scope of this inquiry.

Mr Kevan Jones: There is. This is about if people are retiring, and members of staff are then finishing, it will affect especially some older Members possibly, who have got staff on different contracts.
Chair: An answer has been given, and I do not think we can—
Mr Kevan Jones: We get the usual we get from IPSA, which is, “We have decided, and that is it”.
Mr John Spellar: Yes, that is—
Chair: Order.
Mr Kevan Jones: I had two questions.
Chair: You have had one bash.
Mr Kevan Jones: It was actually fair, Chairman—
Chair: We were on a particular question—ask the question.

Q64 Mr Kevan Jones: It is about 2015. We talked about the pay position. Can I ask a question about when will IPSA be in a position to say what the pay is going to be for MPs post-2015?
The other issue is about the living in London allowance, which this year you have increased by £100, not on the rental side, but on the cost side, even though for most people the electricity bills have gone up more than that this year. We are now finding a situation where a lot of Members are subsidising their London accommodation. I do not know what mechanism you use to get to that figure, because my rent is going up 5% this year, which will mean that I will be paying out of my own pocket. The alternative is to move, which obviously involves more cost. Are you going to review that properly, rather than what you have done this year in just pegging it? Otherwise what is going to happen—it is increasingly happening with Members, and one of my colleagues has moved three times now—is that each time Members move, they incur a lot of cost, because they cannot claim for the proper industrial cleaning that landlords insist upon. That colleague is out of pocket by nearly £2,000.
We have got to take a realistic view about this; otherwise you are going to have Members constantly on the move, which is not good not only in terms of making our life easy, but also in terms of costing you for administration.
Andrew McDonald: I am sure that you will understand that I cannot comment on individual cases, but I will, if I may, take the two general questions that you raise. First, on the question of timing for MPs’ remuneration, the timetable for this year is that we plan to publish in May the second of the two consultation documents—essentially a White Paper in character, rather than the Green Paper that was published in the autumn of last year—then to consult through to the summer. The board will then take its view in the early autumn and the decision will be published in the autumn.
Prospectively, the timetable is for remuneration to come into effect from the first day of the new Parliament. That is the overall timetable. I will ask John to comment in detail on the London rental question, but I would refer you back to the earlier answer about the accommodation review, which will be beginning in the new financial year and will pick up these questions amongst others.
John Sills: As I mentioned earlier, we are going to be looking at MPs’ accommodation in some depth this year. We will be looking in even more detail at some of the issues around that. What the board decided this year was that we should have an inflation-based increase for what we call the associated costs—utilities and things like that. That is what the £100 figure is based on. On London rents, we are aware that some MPs pay some of the rent themselves—that is clear—but we did some pretty detailed research this time around, with the Valuation Office, about rents across London. With the exception of Kensington and Chelsea, the City of London and pockets of Westminster—but only pockets—the rental amount is adequate to find accommodation as required.
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a level that fits in with what, at the moment, is your scheme. It would be helpful to some new aspiring Members not to find themselves trapped into declarations, which then, when they get here, they find are very uncomfortable.

Thomas Docherty: It is a ludicrous rule that the House has got to sit beyond 7.30 pm. Mr Sills, you said you worked in Paris. I imagine that when BP were working out whether or not you had a subsistence requirement, you did not have to watch the clock and not leave the physical office until 7.31 pm, which is what we have here. Would you look at that as well? You are either away or you are not away from home, if that makes sense.

John Sills: Yes. I often worked beyond 7 pm when I was at BP, and I am not sure I did claim for meals afterwards, but that was my choice. As you know, we have the £15 subsidy—up to £15 for a meal. Currently we have said that is after 7 pm; that is something we can look at again. In areas like taxi claims, you will recall in the first year of the scheme we did have a timing put on that, and in fact we moved away from that and said that it was up to MPs themselves to decide what did and did not constitute lateness. We have the 7 pm rule—is it 7pm or 7.30 pm?

Thomas Docherty: 7.30 pm.

John Sills: We have the 7.30 pm rule at the moment; like most of the scheme we are always willing to look at it again.

Q68 Chair: What about the point that I made, about the fact that the prices may have to go up?

John Sills: Obviously we then have to make a judgement about whether £15 is enough. A lot of claims are well below that. Some MPs make a straight £15 claim; maybe it is easier, and so on. Many claim far less than that, at the moment. Again, we just have to look at that in future.

Andrew McDonald: It is a while since I saw the average claim figure, but I think it was well within £15 the last time I saw it.

Chair: We are between a rock and a hard place, the rock being the public perception of subsidised food in the workplace, which is common in other organisations, and the fact that then there is a limit on what anyone who wishes to claim can claim.

Q69 Mr Kevan Jones: On that, I never claim the £15 full amount, but what you have now stopped doing, which I cannot quite understand, is if, for example, I choose at lunchtime to have a meal and then have a snack in the evening, you will not pay for the one at lunchtime. You will perhaps pay for the snack in the evening, even if it all comes to less than £15. Why is that?

Andrew McDonald: Simply that that provision in the scheme relates to the additional costs that MPs would incur if the House is sitting late.

Q70 Mr Kevan Jones: Yes, but I might choose to have my large lunch at lunchtime, and perhaps have a sandwich at teatime, and that is how I choose to eat. You do not allow me to claim now for the lunchtime costs.

Andrew McDonald: Just as we would not make any provision for your lunch through the rest of the week. I do not think that that is inconsistent.

John Sills: There might also be a tax issue here. There are some very strange rules around tax in this area. You may or may not be aware that, according to the tax rules, where you consume your food, either on the House estate or off it, determines whether or not it is taxable.

Mr Kevan Jones: Look at comparable rates; for example, civil servants, when I was a Minister, I think claimed £24 a night for receipted food. Another example is £29 for serving soldiers.

Mr Desmond Swayne: I would just say you need to remember that a number of Members are in hotel accommodation; they do not have the opportunity to cook breakfast, lunch or their dinner at all. Therefore, whether they choose to have it at lunchtime, which is frankly healthier than the evening meal, is something that you might properly take into account.

Chair: We are just about to lose our quorum. I am grateful to colleagues who have hung on. I am also grateful, indeed, to you, Mr McDonald, and you, Mr Sills, for spending some time with us. I have tried, as far as possible, to make sure everything was induction-related, but I think the temptation has gone a little wider, and I may have even been partly guilty myself, but we are very grateful to you for coming to help us with this inquiry. Thank you very much indeed.
Monday 3 June 2013

Members present:
Sir Alan Haselhurst (Chair)
Karen Bradley
Thomas Docherty
Mark Hunter
Mr Marcus Jones
Nigel Mills
Tessa Munt
John Penrose

Examination of Witnesses

Witnesses: Joan Miller, Director of Parliamentary ICT, and Matthew Taylor, Director of Operations and Members Services, gave evidence.

Chair: We are now in public session. May I, as a courtesy, welcome the Secretary General and officials from the Iraqi Council of Representatives, who will be observing our proceedings.

Q71 Chair: I hope they will find that a beneficial experience. We are conducting an inquiry into the induction of new Members of Parliament, and we have in front of us the Director of PICT and the Director of Operations and Member Services of PICT, which provides the service of IT to both Houses of Parliament. We are trying to learn lessons from the past, and whether we can improve the reception of new Members who will be elected in 2015. Joan, is there anything you would like to say by way of opening, or are you content to face some questions?

Joan Miller: We are content to face questions. We have given a full report.

Q72 Chair: Thank you very much. May I ask you then the lead question, which is what lessons you believe can be learnt from the last encounter in 2010?

Joan Miller: Some of the lessons were good. Getting the laptop to Members quickly was appreciated, and getting the email accounts set up on the first day they arrived at Parliament was appreciated, so some things went well. The availability of the wifi in the rooms that were allocated to Members who did not have a room when they initially arrived worked for many Members. Where we perhaps needed more time was to get rooms set up when they were allocated to Members. One of the ongoing issues is that the equipment we provide is pretty standard equipment, and there is not much choice available, so one of the big things that we aim to do by the time of the next election is to allow more flexibility in the choice of equipment.

Q73 Chair: Maybe more Members will be coming with their own equipment.

Joan Miller: That may also be true.

Chair: Are you capable of dealing with that?

Joan Miller: We are not at this minute capable. By the time of the next election, we would hope and expect to be capable.
Administration Committee decided they would try that, and I note that there are much less papers than there were in those days in 2010 when we first made the suggestion. We are able to provide iPads with a security wrapper that makes it possible for Members to receive email and documents. What we are not able to do is provide full access to the office environment at the minute, so being able to access your stored files and folders is not available on an iPad at the minute.

Moving to Microsoft 365 in a cloud environment, we would expect that to also be available to Members by the time of the next election. We believe that the first piece of equipment being an iPad would allow Members to have documents they could read; emails they could read; to be able to see files in their folders that they could read, and to be able to see the documents and papers for the first meetings that they have. That might be an adequate first step for the first few weeks, and then we would take a longer time to talk through with the Member what their constituency and their office and they themselves would need available for things like creating documents: iPads are not that great for creating documents. We would probably be talking through the range of options that they may wish to take up for the allocation after the next election. That is for all Members, not just for new Members.

Q77 Nigel Mills: There is, of course, another player in this field, given that we may purchase extra items through IPSA. I think IPSA have some views on where this line will be between how many you provide and how many we can claim through them. Have you got any thoughts on how that is going to work after the next election?

Joan Miller: Not really. I think we can make good plans about what Parliament will provide in loan equipment. We have very little management control or advice for IPSA.

Q78 Nigel Mills: There has been discussion, has there not, about a much broader choice? I will not just have one of your standard desktops; I can pick a desktop of any spec that suits my needs within the budget. That would be a big step away from your pretty small list of choice on loans and closer to me choosing something within a budget, which is kind of what we have IPSA for. Can you foresee that your five allowance would just get rolled into an IPSA claim?

Joan Miller: We think that is probably not what will happen. Certainly in the short term—and I include the next election in that short term—we will be providing an allowance that would allow Members to have a wider range of choice of equipment. Matthew can tell you about some of our thinking in that area and some of the investigations we have done with companies that can provide a catalogue, where Members can choose what equipment they wanted from that catalogue, up to perhaps a capped allowance that is equal to the current cost of five pieces of equipment. We would make sure the catalogue had the right specifications so that it was compatible with the systems that we will provide. Matthew can give you more detail on that.

Matthew Taylor: I am not sure there is very much more to add, apart from that we are looking at companies that could create the framework that Ms Miller just described and provide it in an Amazon-type style, so you can go on and do a lot of self-service, order stuff yourselves, and have that equipment delivered directly.

Q79 Nigel Mills: That sounds encouraging. I just think we will be in a situation where I have an IPSA budget and a PICT allowance, and they will look very similar to me, because I will be choosing what I want and claiming it from somewhere. Are you sure you can manage to support all these different brands and styles of device? You will not just be having the ones you are used to; you could have every brand of laptop and tablet chucked at you by a Member at nine o’clock in the morning, saying, “It’s stopped working, help.” Is that something you could feasibly deal with?

Joan Miller: The choice would of course take with it some responsibility for Members. We would advise that they bought a warranty with it, and the warranty would act very much as the warranty on the equipment we supply at the minute, where the supplier provides the first line of support if something breaks. What we would be looking at in a catalogue is not every range of equipment, but a safe range of equipment. Our focus would be on what equipment is safe and secure, rather than the current one model that you get at the moment.

Chair: Would colleagues allow me to take Karen next, as she has Bench duty?

Karen Bradley: No, it is fine. It was the point about PCs and equipment. That was why I wanted to come in now.

Chair: Oh, I beg your pardon.

Karen Bradley: I can wait until later. It is fine.

Chair: We will slip it in later, then.

Q80 Mark Hunter: I would like to turn to the subject of broadband services briefly, if I may. The installation of broadband in constituency offices has often been cited as one of the main frustrations—for newer Members particularly but also for those of us who have been here for some little while as well—due to the long timescales involved and the disruption. What are your views on how the system might be improved, if you have any?

Joan Miller: We are very reliant on suppliers for the supply of broadband, but we are sharing much of your frustration as we interface with the suppliers to try to get the deliveries made to different offices. Matthew, have you got specifics?

Matthew Taylor: A particular frustration for new Members is that they are taking on new accommodation, which often will need to have a telephone line installed first before we can start commissioning a broadband service. That takes time in itself. After that period of time, we then commission the service from a supplier, and that takes time. Unfortunately, we are in a position where it can take several weeks before a new Member gets a BT-based broadband service. If you go for a cable service, which we also offer, that can take longer. It requires a site survey; often, there are some minor building
works that are involved in routing cables from the street to the premises, and unfortunately that takes time. There are certain circumstances where we can intervene and make things work a bit more quickly, but to try to do that on the scale of all Members really would not be manageable. On the odd occasion when a Member truly has had a problem with some unexpected delay to the installation, we can offer a 3G dongle—which is a sort of mobile wifi—and we have used that successfully in a number of cases whilst people are waiting. That is something that we could look at a little bit more for the next election, to help new Members.

Q81 Mark Hunter: You seem to be suggesting that you sympathise with the problem that Members have with this, but that at the end of the day it is largely to do with the suppliers. Surely, with your involvement in this side of the business and having to deal with the frustrations of Members on such a regular basis, representations are presumably being made to the suppliers by yourselves. Have you made any progress with any of those?

Matthew Taylor: Yes, we have raised this several times—more times than I can recall—with the suppliers, and we have regular supplier meetings with them. We have truly looked at the process and the arrangement we have in place to see how sharp and crisp we can make that process. I think the way it works at the moment is pretty much as good as it can be. Clearly, sometimes issues arise, and sometimes installations go more smoothly than we expect. There is a sort of irreducible period of time that we cannot get by in terms of that initial setup. Unfortunately, the same often occurs when a Member moves office; if they move constituency office we have the same issues arise there. I think the 3G dongle is a means by which we can help people who are really in a predicament to get up and running.

Q82 Mark Hunter: So within the functionality of the system that we have at the moment you do not think there is anything else that can be done from your perspective to try to improve these matters above and beyond what you have already done?

Matthew Taylor: As of today, I think we have done really all that we can, but that does not mean to say that we cannot keep plugging away at this and see whether anything else can be done in the future.

Joan Miller: It might be helpful to say that we have asked Chairs of Committees to write to the suppliers before. It has only limited effect.

Q83 Mark Hunter: On a slightly different note, you have also questioned the current broadband service being provided to Members’ homes, and the suggestion is that that might well be removed. What impact would you foresee if that particular service were to be removed? Have you done an analysis of the impact that would have?

Matthew Taylor: We have looked at it, and at the moment Members are entitled to three services. Only 476 Members actually take a service in the first place; there are quite a lot of Members who are making their own broadband arrangements. Of that, 300 take one service—so by far the majority of those who take the service only take one service at present—and 48 Members take the full service, all three services. This raises the question, in relation to the thinking we have about the ubiquity of broadband, of whether it is still the case that it is really necessary to provide it to homes. The allowances were originally set up in the early 2000s when broadband was not generally available, was far more expensive, and you had to have combinations of ISDN lines and other things. It did not extend across the whole country and was a far more difficult situation. We are just raising that point in a fairly neutral way, and asking whether it is still valid.

Q84 Mark Hunter: Have the numbers of Members using the full three broadband services that they are entitled to gradually declined over time?

Matthew Taylor: I do not have that information. We could find out, but I do not know that today.

Chair: I take it, where a home has an office within it, as it were, then that is a different matter from a home that is just entirely separate. Nigel, you wanted a supplementary?

Q85 Nigel Mills: I was just going to ask, Matthew, about the issue of setting up a constituency office. One of the problems I had was that it was not entirely clear who I was meant to be ordering what from, and how. Could you produce a process or some advice about what I am meant to ask who of when, and what on earth some of it means, because it was a bit technical for me? One policy PICT had, which made things worse, was that you would not deliver any IT equipment to the constituency office until the broadband was up and running, which meant that my secretary had to keep using her own personal laptop and we had to try to piggyback wi-fi off the Wetherspoons pub down the road or the nearest BT OpenZone thing that someone may or may not turn on each day. If you had actually given us the equipment all we had to do was wait for the wifi. At least we would have had a proper computer and a proper printer to use, rather than our own personal stuff that we were having to try to bodge into an office. That, surely, is a policy you can change for next time.

Matthew Taylor: It is certainly something we can look at. The reason why we wanted to do it after the broadband was set up is that we can then create the office network. Without the broadband we cannot create the network; it is more difficult to establish that, so that is why we had the delay. Now that we are hearing that that caused difficulty—and we probably did hear it at the time as well—we could certainly look at that sort of thing in the future.

Joan Miller: One of the things that did go well after the last election is that we completed the refit of all new Members’ offices and constituency offices, and also existing Members’ offices and constituency offices, within a six month period. Previously, it had taken us a lot longer than that to do that, and of course that is about the efficiency of numbers of visits we make to the constituency offices. It may have been
that we delayed some of your services because of trying to be efficient and quick. We will have to work out a better balance for that.

Q86 Keith Vaz: The issue of printers is very similar to the issue of computers. I must say that I am not in favour of giving us an allowance to buy our own equipment, because others may be experts in knowing the difference between a computer and a printer, but I am not. I think it is much better to have the system that you have at the moment. The trouble is the deal you have struck on printers, which is extremely expensive, and the consumables can only be purchased from the company that sells us the computers, which means that you have locked us into a deal—not you personally; you may not have been here—that means that we can go in there and order. I have never had a problem in ordering computers, and PICT staff have been extremely helpful, but we then have to buy the toners, which are expensive and which come separately, which then come out of our allowance, and also the cartridges, which are, very, very expensive. The key thing on procurement is securing a deal that will mean that the consumables are not going to be a burden on our IPSA account. You can get everything you want free—you can get your five computers and laptops—but then it is the on-costs that are so expensive.

We do need these printers. I need a colour printer in London and Leicester, otherwise I find myself having to email stuff out to Leicester. It then comes back again, printed here and printed there. MPs could save a lot of money if we were entitled to a heavy-duty printer that would allow us to produce surgery leaflets ourselves, rather than using our allowances in order to go to printers who will charge us a very large amount of money.

However, I did want to say to both of you that I find the PICT service to be superb. As someone who, as I have admitted, does not know much about computers, you can ring them up day or night and they will talk you through things, including, “Why don’t you switch on the device?” You do not feel embarrassed, because they do it so politely. I do not know how much it costs the House, but whatever it costs it is worth it, because you do provide a huge amount of service. Please pass my thanks on. I know there are individual complaints about individual things, but I certainly have had only good feedback from the work that they do.

Joan Miller: Thank you very much. That is certainly something we will take back to the staff.

Mr John Spellar: I think you will get your upgrade, Keith.

Joan Miller: There are several ways that we can help. After the next election, we will have a different kind of service that we will be offering Members. This may help you, particularly if you are not certain of what equipment to buy. The service that we will have will be able to sit with you, ask you what you use your IT for, and help you to choose the right kind of equipment for you. If it is something that is easy to use, easy to plug in, and light and transportable, then they will be able to point you to the kinds of equipment that will be a better choice for you than other kinds of equipment. We will provide that personalised kind of service.

Q87 Keith Vaz: Sorry, but the problem is not the equipment; it is that the consumables are not compatible with other machines and other printers. That is the problem that we have.

Joan Miller: I was going to come on to that. I think we did underestimate the cost of the cartridges and the printers when we chose the range of printers that we did. Of course, the whole range of printers has very variable uses of cartridges. We have, however, been investigating a better contract for cartridges over the last couple of years, and we can now purchase for you cartridges at a much lower cost than the ones you had originally. We will come and talk to you about a different channel of buying cartridges, and I think we can halve your costs in that area. We have been aware of that and are looking at it. They are refurbished cartridges, but they do work really well and they are much cheaper to use.

We would like to test with the Committee our thinking on the ability to have very big floorstanding printers, scanners and photocopiers that might be used for whole sections of areas of the floor. Instead of having one big clumsy printer per office, it could be that we could very cost-effectively make bigger printers available that would do large rooms.

Q88 Keith Vaz: I think it has to be providing added value. I would not want my printer out of my office. You can provide additional support, but it should not be taken away from the allocations of Members. We have, however, a very big photocopier at the end of our corridor where we can go and photocopy material—I think we can still do this, we could when we first arrived—but we have to have our printers. They have to be attached to our computers. I would not support anything that meant we were going to lose our printers.

Joan Miller: I think we will come and talk to Members specifically about this possibility. It is not about replacing or removing a printer; although some Members do not wish a printer, and we could do that for them. It is about a cheaper, lighter printer for the office, with a heavy-duty printer a little way down the corridor where you could do very heavy runs.

Q89 Keith Vaz: I know no Member who has said to me that they want to give up their printer in exchange for a bigger printer along the corridor. I would be astonished if any Member of Parliament said to you, “I want to give up my printer. I would like something bigger down the corridor.” Has anyone said this to you?

Joan Miller: We will go and ask.

Keith Vaz: So nobody has.

Joan Miller: We have not asked yet, but we will test this.

Q90 Mark Tami: Just very briefly on this point: how would that work in terms of the toner and the paper? Would you put your own in, or would that be provided? If you shared it, and it was your toner and someone down the corridor just rolled off 20,000 copies, what would happen then?
Joan Miller: It would be a cost per page to the user. We can identify who is printing on the printer by the user number that you put in. The cost is somewhere in the region of a third—or maybe a bit less than a third—of the cost of printing through your own printers.

Q91 Karen Bradley: If I could just go back to the allocation of equipment at the beginning of the Parliament, I certainly had no idea at that point what staff I would need, or what the balance between my constituency office and my Westminster office would be. It is only now, three years down the line, that I feel I have any sort of feel for it. Have you considered having transitional arrangements where Members could maybe have a loan of a piece of equipment for a short period of time, until they find their feet and say, “Actually, what I need now is a tablet, not a mobile PC or a desktop”? Also, would that be something that could be available throughout the Parliament? For example, if you get an intern in, you do not want them to have to go and buy a whole computer but you need something for them to work on.

Joan Miller: Being able to deal with the quantity is one of the issues. We do have the ability to provide loan equipment to people when something is broken, and we have used that ability. Also, when there is a temporary arrangement, we can do that and have done that in the past. It is very difficult to keep up with technology, too. Over a five year period, technology changes dramatically. For instance, the iPads came in after the election. They were not available to Members of Parliament until June 2010, and people would already ordering equipment in May 2010. It is quite difficult for us to keep up with technology over five years. We think that if we allow, encourage or permit a free choice for Members at least gives Members the flexibility to pace their own procurement.

Q92 Karen Bradley: I think the problem is just knowing what you need. If you enter into something at the beginning of the Parliament you can end up stuck with something that does not work for you. I now have the mini iPad, which is my own personal one, because that works better for me than a big iPad.

Joan Miller: I do agree.

Karen Bradley: That is a personal choice, and you have no idea. Could you perhaps think about some ways of giving some flexibility to Members at the beginning? I would have found that quite helpful at the time.

Joan Miller: We will take that on board.

Q93 Karen Bradley: On constituency offices, I know that logging in from my constituency office is an absolute nightmare. It took forever to get sorted out, and they still have to go through Citrix rather than being able to just go straight onto the network. Is that something you are looking at?

Joan Miller: The new services will change the way you access them completely. As long as you have internet access it will be much easier to get into email and your office services. One of the big attractions of moving to the cloud services is that you are not punching through all of our firewalls to get on to the Parliamentary network before you get to your email. It will be better.

Q94 Karen Bradley: That is very helpful. Thank you. Going on to casework databases, at the moment PICT do not support casework databases. Is this something you would consider doing for the next Parliament, or perhaps even sooner than that?

Joan Miller: It is quite difficult, because Members have very many different views about casework systems. There is not one casework system that would satisfy every Member. Some of them are particularly favoured by some of the political parties, too, so we have not to date interfered in the choices that Members make about casework databases. Of course, if the Administration Committee asked us to look at the options, we could come forward with some proposals around that.

Q95 Karen Bradley: That is helpful, thank you. Finally, if I could move on to the Westminster offices—so away from constituency offices—we will all remember the hotdesking experience at the beginning of the Parliament, eventually getting an office allocated, and then waiting for services to be delivered to the office. Is there anything that could be done on either side that would help, once the office has been allocated, in speeding up the actual installation of IT in that office so that it is up and running? I had about a week and a half where was I still having to hotdesk, even though I had an office, in order that I could get to a printer and to the right equipment that I need. I am way over in Norman Shaw North, so I am a long way from the world.

Joan Miller: From civilisation. I think that was an unusual experience, because mostly we got offices up and running within two or three days of the allocation being known by us. One of the things that we could consider is when we move equipment, because when equipment is decommissioned at the general election we could perhaps consider leaving it there until the Member has made their choice about what equipment they want for their offices. We can consider these things that could make it easier.

Karen Bradley: If you were going for some sort of pooled arrangement—

Joan Miller: It would be old, though; it would be very old.

Q96 Karen Bradley: I do not think that would matter, actually. It is just a case of having something that works. I do not think the age of it matters at that point, as long as you know that at some point in the life of the Parliament you can change things. Just on the point of pooled printers: if that was to be the case, would you need offices to be allocated in such a way that it was done on a party basis? I am sort of seeing a problem there. Is that going to give a problem for Accommodation Whips?

Joan Miller: I do not believe it would have to be, because you would use your own private code to make the printer print.

Karen Bradley: So you would have some security?

Joan Miller: There would be confidentiality.
Q97 Karen Bradley: I feel like I have had lots of questions, but I put them all together. When your staff come to help in the offices and set up these new offices, what do you tell them about awareness of offerings? For example, I had no idea there was an opportunity to have broadband in my home. That was not something that had ever been explained to me, or that anyone had mentioned. What are you doing to make sure that there is full awareness of the different options available when Members’ offices are set up?

Joan Miller: I am going to refer that to Matthew. He has a whole project on training staff.

Matthew Taylor: We are hoping to do more things at the next election, but at the last election we sent out a welcome email that described what we had, and there is material available on the intranet. I understand that, in the busy few weeks of Parliament, maybe that does not get the full attention. It is a problem getting this information out to Members. We do try lots of different ways, and sometimes the information sticks and sometimes it does not. We would welcome any suggestions you have got about that.

For the next time, Ms Miller has talked about how we are going to deliver new services, and we are looking at a different way in which we will deliver support. We are actually doing a considerable reorganisation of our teams at the moment, which is blending a lot of the teams to have a wider range of skills. Hopefully the people who come out and see you at the next election—I should say not hopefully—by the time of the next election they will be coming out fully confident about the full range of services, and will be able to talk to you about that, discuss the full range, and make sure you are getting access to the services you need.

Q98 Mr John Spellar: If I could just come back to printers, Chairman, I am not sure if I am alone in the experience of just having one disastrous Dell printer after another. Is Dell, quite frankly, very good at making desktops and not particularly good at making printers? The impression I get from the service engineers is that I may not be alone in this.

Matthew Taylor: I can tackle that. Certainly the majority of the printers we offer now are not by Dell; they are by another company, HP, and the default printer that every new Member got was an HP multifunction printer. It turned out to be one of the higher-consuming toner printers, but it actually meets a lot of needs. The Dell printers are reliable, and they work well. You may have got some feedback from engineers. Their very first generation of printers were actually rebadged and they are a different model. They were not designed and made by Dell. They are now, and we get more than reasonable reliability out of them, but most people opt for the HewlettPackard products.

Q99 Mr John Spellar: I am not sure that that was necessarily the one on offer. In order to have Hewlett Packard you have to have a colour printer, is that right?

Matthew Taylor: No, we do a standard black and white.

Mr John Spellar: There is a standard black and white HewlettPackard?

Matthew Taylor: Yes. There is a range of six printers that Members can choose from.

Q100 Chair: Thank you. Can you tell us what your current plans are for the ICT provision in temporary accommodation following the 2015 election?

Joan Miller: We have improved the wifi availability across the estate. Members will be able to attach to the network in many more locations than they could in 2010. Most of the Committee Rooms, and a few other rooms where Members are located, are fitted with wifi now. It is now available in every Member’s office. There is more availability.

Q101 Chair: Thank you. Finally, could I ask you what training is offered on issues such as data protection and data sovereignty?

Joan Miller: Those are not strictly responsibilities of PICT, but of course the SIROs have put on some training courses and are thinking very hard about what other training they will be providing for Members and new Members at the Election on any of those issues. They manage the data protection and the other areas, like data sovereignty. We have some specific legal guidance on data sovereignty issues that we can help Members with.

Chair: Thank you very much. If my colleagues have no further questions, I thank you very much indeed for spending time with us. We appreciate your answers. Thank you.

Examination of Witnesses

Witnesses: George Mudie MP, former Accommodation Whip, James Robertson OBE, Director of Accommodation and Logistics Services, and Fiona Channon, former Members’ Accommodation Manager, Department of Facilities, gave evidence.

Q102 Chair: We now move on to the provision of accommodation services to new Members. I welcome our colleague George Mudie, who had responsibility for this at a previous occasion, with James Robertson and Fiona Channon. Are you happy for us to pile into questions?

George Mudie: That is fine, yes.
Whips. I myself, and particularly the Members’ Accommodation Manager—which Fiona was at the time of the last election—are responsible for carrying out the instructions of the Whips in order to make the moves happen. The Accommodation staff control the resources that are being used to move Members out of offices and into offices, but it is very much on the instructions of the Whips.

Q104 Chair: How many actual units of accommodation are there? We all know how many Members of Parliament there are and they have a variety of needs, but how many actual spaces do you have to give you flexibility to shuffle around according to decisions that are made?

Fiona Channon: There are 997 rooms, Sir Alan. There are about 1,000 rooms for Members on the Estate, but not all rooms are the same. Some have more than one Member in them, and some have Members and their staff together.

Q105 Keith Vaz: Mr Robertson, do you not think that this power to allocate rooms should actually be something given back to the House, rather than given to the Whips on a party-political basis? I say this in the presence, of course—

Mark Hunter: What an appalling prospect.

Keith Vaz: I say this, of course, in the presence of our current Whip, and the former Whip, who was always very—

Mark Tami: The boxes will be delivered to your room.

Keith Vaz:—who was always very, very charming to me, as I remember, when I was asking for accommodation. I have always had a fantastic service from Fiona and colleagues, but there is the potential for frustration: “I’m sorry, I can’t connect your phone because the Pairing Whip has not sent me an email.” Of course, this did not happen under Mr Mudie, but when I first got elected—way back in 1987—if you fell out with the Whips or voted the wrong way and you perhaps wanted a larger room, you did not get it.

Mark Hunter: Well, that is the moral, then, is it not?

Keith Vaz: I know you cannot express a view on whether you should be given this, but would there be a logistical problem at the start of a Parliament if the allocation of offices should be left to the House authorities? This would be on the basis of seniority, of course, so that those who have been here for a longer period of time would automatically get bigger rooms.

Mark Tami: Or the Chairmen of Select Committees would get bigger rooms.

Mark Hunter: You still would not get the jacuzzi, Keith.

James Robertson: I think, just in terms of manipulating the numbers, there would be no problems. In terms of some of the other associated issues, we would have significant difficulties.

Q106 Nigel Mills: Such as?

James Robertson: We sometimes find it very difficult to get to the bottom of some of the Member issues, which the Whips are possibly better placed to do than us. As far as moving an entrenched Member into or out of an office, we sometimes find it very difficult to achieve levers that are going to make the result actually happen.

Q107 Keith Vaz: The other issue that comes out of that for new Members is knowing what offices are on offer. For example, I am in Gwyneth Dunwoody’s old room. Until I visited Gwyneth Dunwoody one day and saw her office, and realised that my ambition in life was to have Gwyneth Dunwoody’s office, I did not know what the sizes of offices were. Until I visited Anthony Steen when he was here, I did not realise the size of his office. I think one of the problems is that it is not like going to Foxtons, where you can see the office and you can make a decision, because sometimes you do not actually get to see the office until after you have got it. Do you think, at the very least, the House authorities could have a little picture of the office or even a floor plan, so people knew the size? At the moment, that seems to be something that is just kept in the hands of the Whips, lovely though they are.

James Robertson: We certainly have floor plans. I am not sure whether it would be possible in the time to do it. We could have a look at it.

Keith Vaz: I mean, you have got two years.

Mr John Spellar: Are you full of territorial ambitions, Keith?

Q108 Chair: I do not see this as a matter of Members being able to pick through a catalogue somehow, with great respect to Mr Vaz. I wonder if you could say whether you have had or would think to have discussions with IPSA about the question that you face of pressure on accommodation of Members and the amount of staff they may have. There is a feeling that Members, in some cases, would prefer to have all or part of their staff accommodated in their constituencies, but have found that they have had difficulty—which is certainly in the early days—of getting the necessary finance put together for that to happen. The consequence is that there is increasing pressure on this estate. Is this something that you feel you could tease out?

James Robertson: Yes, Sir Alan. We are in fact having discussions with IPSA about staffing. They are currently carrying out a review of Members’ accommodation; not specifically on the estate, but they may, in due course, get round to looking at all the factors that tie together. The possibility that Members may want to put staff here rather than into constituencies is one of the things that we have raised with them, and they are thinking about it.

Q109 Chair: Is it right that Members can have any number of members of staff?

James Robertson: Theoretically the accommodation policy says two. The Accommodation Whips have written to Members at the time that the IPSA allowances went up and said that Members should not expect to have more than two staff here. Some Members’ accommodation is more than capable of taking more than two staff, and many of them take advantage of that, not unnaturally. Quite often, there is quite a lot of pressure from Members who want to
bring more staff on to the estate for more accommodation, and that is very much a matter for the Accommodation Whip concerned.

Q110 Thomas Docherty: I am really happy with what you got me in 2010, George, and I am happy where I am, Mark—who does a great job, it says here. Could I ask George to just explain in a couple of minutes what that process is like? You had about 65 new Members to find rooms for and a whole bunch of ex–Ministers who lost their patrimonial suites. You had quite a cross section of people to shift around. How does it work from your point of view, and what did you pick up from the Government Whips about how they were finding it? What is that process like?

George Mudie: This time was difficult, as Mark would confirm, because there was a gap whilst the negotiations went on as to who was in Government. It was also made more difficult, from our point of view, by Labour waiting until September when they elected a new leader before they formed a Shadow Cabinet and shadow Ministers. That made it more confused and harder work for the staff. I think Mark actually had to pick up the second part of the exercise, the September part. I simply sent a letter to existing Members from a Labour point of view who were fighting elections and expecting to come back—all Labour Members who were not retiring—saying, “Are you interested in moving, and if so, give me your preference.” I made it clear that if they did not respond they would stay where they were.

That was very helpful, because for those that responded you could work something out. Getting them was the first thing, and then the second thing was to meet Members and new Members and find out what they were interested in and then try to work something out. We had all sorts of side problems with ones that had more staff and ones that wanted this. Ones that were prepared to share in the first instance were very helpful, and they got help quicker, because if they were prepared to be that flexible it helped the exercise. You took care of them as quickly as you could to encourage others to do the same.

Q111 Thomas Docherty: It is like a big moving around of things. You would begin, therefore, by saying, “I have got 200 and something MPs in the group. Who is going to stay where they are? That is fine; they do not move. Who wants to move?” Then you sort them out, and then you deal with what you are left with. Is that a fair assessment?

George Mudie: That is more or less fair.

Q112 Chair: Taking your point that you just made, and whilst respecting the fact that the Queen’s Government has to go on, is there a case for encouraging the governing party to keep a certain gap between the date of the election and the actual formal summoning of the new Parliament?

George Mudie: I do not think it is worth holding up the machinery of Government for the inconvenience to the new Member. By the time they arrive here and actually start working a lot of time has passed, and if the Whips have got together and there are no complications, the division of the offices—the exchange of offices between the parties—should have taken place. I would ask you to be much harder on Members who are here and are expected to come back and are asked to be made aware that their office is going to be refurbished. There is all sorts of business of being gentle with them—or with Members who are beaten and come back. A Minister does not go back of being gentle with them—or with Members who are beaten and come back. A Minister does not go back of being gentle with them—or with Members who are beaten and come back.

Q113 Chair: Can I just say that I did it in 1997, and because of some of the personalities involved—none sitting at this side of the table now—it took six months. This took six weeks, and it is James and above all Fiona who did it. It took six weeks, and it would be useful to make clear that if they expect to come and get an office immediately, it would almost be impossible. If we are putting forward expectations, Members should be warned that they are not likely to get it—I think the Committee took the view that, after 2005, they wanted it done within a month. I think Fiona did a magnificent job, with the staff actually doing it within six weeks. Considering the date of the election, the day we come here, and the day we actually start work here with the Queen’s Speech, etc., they all really got in very quickly afterwards, and I do not think that was unfair on them or created any real hardship.

George Mudie: I discussed this with James and Fiona. I think we were insufficiently specific on accommodation the last time. They did not see any of the difficulty or were aware of the choices. I think it would be good to give new people when they are elected some choices of locations and ask them to list them in order, but also to explain that certain places on the estate are more popular than others. It is like choosing a council house, if you like. Everybody wants one of the best estates, but they will wait longer and maybe even be unsuccessful. It is just very pragmatic, based on the relationship and dialogue between the Whip and the people he or she works with.
their stuff is in boxes awaiting collection whenever they are ready. Government goes on as Ministers go on, and so should Back Benchers. We should take every step we can possibly do, but to start interviewing when Parliament restarts—why?

Chair: Thank you.

Mark Tami: As someone who has the pleasure of doing this, along with Desmond, I wanted to return to the point—because I do not think we should lose sight of this—that there are not spare offices all over the place. We are really up against it in terms of juggling what we have. I know that IPSA has been mentioned, but from a Labour point of view there are an increased number of London Members and Members from various parts of the country where rents are very high. These people often cannot afford to maintain their office under the current system, and therefore they are bringing staff here. With interns as well, the pressure is getting more and more. Fiona and Liz do an excellent job in trying to help ways that we can juggle what we have, but there will become a point where that is just not going to work anymore, and I think we have to recognise that. I know that was a statement, more than a question.

Thomas Docherty: Do you not agree?

Q114 Nigel Mills: I think the reason why this matters is that our constituents, quite rightly, do not accept it is going to be seven weeks before we are fully effective because we cannot get an office to have any proper resources. Frankly, I think it is a little disappointing that we are sitting here saying, “Well, actually, six weeks is really quite good.” In any other job that you started, if you did not have a desk and filing cabinet and a phone reliably, you would be outraged if it took six weeks. I do think we need to find ways of making it better. It would be baffling to people if we told them that what happens is that some guy is made a Whip, who has never done this before and then gets the job of allocating 300 people into an office over a few days while doing all their other duties as well. It cannot be a sensible way of doing it. Surely it should be done by somebody who has skills and training and the time to actually achieve that.

James Robertson: In practice, a lot of it is done by somebody with exactly the characteristics you are describing. It is the Members’ Accommodation Manager whose job it is to provide the Accommodation Whip with the sort of information they would need to make those decisions. However, in practical terms, you do have to prepare as many offices as you can for Members who are standing down. As Mr Mudie says, I suspect we need to be harder and to move some people out quicker to get those offices ready so that we are well placed to do the moves when the House returns. We need to deal with the Members who are defeated, and clearly that is a double edged sword. We and the new Members would like them out as quickly as possible. A defeated Member—not unnaturally—feels rather hurt about the whole process, and many are not particularly keen to move out, but we do need to get them to move as quickly as possible. Then there is all the juggling around, and the issue about swapping the Ministers if a new Government is formed, and so on and so forth. There are practical difficulties in doing it. What we are starting to look at at the moment—and it would be very interesting to hear the Committee’s view—is whether we would look at putting new Members into serviced accommodation for a short period immediately after the general election. The costs of this are potentially quite high. The cost of a desk is about £700 a calendar month. We would probably need to take the accommodation for something like three months in order to get it set up, get people in, and then clear it down at the end, so there would be a cost. It is difficult to say until you get to the date what the cost would be, but say £2,000 a desk per Member. If we were looking at 200 Members, you might be looking in the order of £400,000. Would it then be worth it? Is that just for the Members, or is it for the Members and their staff? We do get Members who arrive with a fully kitted set of four or five staff. It is managing the expectations.

The current plan is to repeat what we did last time, which was, from our point of view, reasonably successful. The pledge we made was to move the new Member into their accommodation within a week of their being allocated that accommodation by the Whip. We heard what you were saying to Joan Miller and Matthew about the issues of getting the IT in, I think there were some lessons learned at the time. We did not then have the offsite consolidation centre up and running in the way we have at the moment. We are now in the position—should PICT so decide—to put quite a lot of IT straight into the offsite centre and to then just ship it in as it is called off by the PICT staff. We could do that better, but it seems that we ought to be able to do some of those things, possibly to shorten down the time from the allocation by the Whip. However, the Whip is eventually going to take some time to make his or her mind up about who is going to move in where.

Q115 Nigel Mills: I found the hotdesking Committee Rooms quite a helpful procedure at the start, because you got to know some people, having come here completely fresh. I think where it got particularly difficult was that, once people got staff, there was nowhere for them to go or nowhere that they could work with their staff. That did become quite a strain after five or six weeks. From distant memory, I think it was about seven weeks when I got my office. If there is one learning point, I think it is that hotdesking works for a while for the Member, but when staff got involved it became a nightmare.

Fiona Channon: If I could add one thing, Mr Mills, it is almost as if there are two streams of work, especially when there is a change of Government. There are Members that are in the previous Government coming out of Government accommodation, and then all those new Members of the Government going into Government accommodation, and that is happening in parallel with new Members trying into get into accommodation that is vacated. Frankly, if you have been in the Upper Committee Corridor South for five years in the 2005 Parliament and you get the opportunity to move into Portcullis, the Whip does that, and then you are
offered the Upper Committee Corridor South. Those choices are how it works. Honestly, I am really aware that your constituents want you to be able to be effective the day after polling day and want you to be working from your office. The only way to be able to do that is if we had separate accommodation purely for new Members. New Members would have it allocated in the way that the temporary lockers were, or something like that. We would have X amount of new Member accommodation for X amount of new Members plus their staff, and they would go in there, and then new Members would have to be prepared to move out of that after two months or three months when the accommodation on the estate is ready. It would be at a cost. 

Keith Vaz: I think that that is a very good idea. I would be against the idea of serviced accommodation, because there would be a tendency for people to hang on until they got something they wanted, and it would cost a lot of money. My sister used the hotdesk method, and I actually think it is a good way of knowing who other Members are. Even those of us who are Norman Shaw North know each other, but actually I have no clue who is in Norman Shaw South apart from Ed Miliband, because you do not tend to meet the new Members. If you could expand that idea and perhaps have a hotdesk for one member of staff at least in one of the large Committee Rooms, then at least people will know they have got somewhere. That is a big improvement on what we had, which was literally wandering around without anything. If is down to six weeks, George, that is incredibly fast compared to the six months it took someone like me to be allocated. However, for new Members, it is a terrible, terrible thing. You have got to set up your own office in your constituency. You have got to get to grips with this place. The more that we can do in advance, the better, but the starting point is that when Members announce they are retiring and you know they are going, they should be encouraged to leave as soon as the election is called. If that happens, and they pack up and go, at least you know that the first strand of all that is worked out. Of course, you know already that a number of Members have announced they are standing down. You obviously cannot get them out until after the election, but you at least know that. The crucial point is, Alan, that we do not know who the Pairing Whip is going to be after the next election, and we do not know who the Accommodation Whip is. That is very important.

Q116 Mark Hunter: Just picking up where Keith left off, I do not see any reason why the Pairing Whips in the current Parliament could not—as the general election approaches—contact those colleagues of their own that they know are retiring at the next election and try to prepare some of the ground in the way in which Keith is saying. At least one strand is then being developed in advance, rather than waiting until the day after the general election before we start this in any way. I am sympathetic to what Nigel says. I think there would be an expectation amongst the public at large that Parliament can surely organise these affairs that bit better, but that applies to so many aspects of parliamentary life. I speak as the person who is responsible for the Lib Dems as Accommodation Whip, both at the time of the new Government and still now. It was George, myself, and Mark Francois, who was dealing with it before Desmond. It does take time. We had an unusual situation at the start of this current Government of two parties forming a Government. I do not believe it delayed the process very much at all, frankly, but clearly Mark—as Desmond’s predecessor—had a larger number of senior people who had to be offered that full range of senior offices. I am not just saying Ministers; the more difficult ones are the ones that did not get into government jobs, because they feel they should be still looked after as well. It does take time. My experience of this, for what it is worth, is that it is very often not the colleagues you expect to be most precious about the size and location of their office, but the people who are some way down the hierarchy that perhaps say, “I am better than him, because I signed in 10 minutes before.” This is why it cannot be done as quickly as Nigel and others would aspire to, because it all depends on seniority. If you have 100 new Members come in at a general election, the person who took the oath first will forever be 100 places above those others that come in at the time. It is very difficult to explain that to Members of Parliament, let alone to members of the public. I do think George was right when he said 20 minutes ago that six weeks was, given the complications of all of this, probably not bad going. Then again, I would say that, because I was one of the people responsible for it.

George Mudie: I think there are three things you could do. One is that Members who are going should either pack their stuff up and take it, or collect it when they like from the boxes that the staff fill. We could store that. That is Members who are leaving; there is no reason why, if they are leaving, they do not do the normal thing of packing up and taking their stuff, or asking for it to be stored and pick it up later. For the Members who lose—tough. I am really sad for them, but if they were Ministers we would think nothing of it. The staff should have the authority from the Committee to pack their gear up in boxes, very civilised. It is done, stored, and ready for collection when they are ready to come back and collect them. The other thing that you could do to strengthen the Whips’ hands and the officials’ hands is make it clear to any new Member who is coming with five staff that we are only providing—as a rule backed up by this Committee—two secretarial spaces. If they wish more they will have to negotiate with their new colleagues to take up empty spaces, because they do turn up with five or six and demand this room or that room. It is unfair on the other colleagues who are coming in and playing the game.

Q117 Tessa Munt: I think that sounds very sound. I have some experience from many, many years ago of having done some accommodation booking for a large college with 8,000 students. I find it completely incredible that we are where colleges were 20 years
Tessa Munt: As far as I am aware all APPG staff come in here as because we do not know who, in fact, is APPG staff.

James Robertson: movement or whatever.

900 rooms you have referred to, how many of those about additional staff—APPG staff—and what the completely obscure way of going about things.

be done by the House and just sorted out. I find it a all this hooha. I just think it is something that should be done by the House and just sorted out. I find it a completely obscure way of going about things. Nonetheless, I had two particular questions. One is about additional staff—APPG staff—and what the rules are about that. I also wanted to know, out of the 900 rooms you have referred to, how many of those are fully accessible for people with difficulties of movement or whatever.

James Robertson: I wonder if I can take the one about APPG staff. We have difficulty with APPG staff, because we do not know who, in fact, is APPG staff. As far as I am aware all APPG staff come in here as a Member’s staff.

Q118 Tessa Munt: That is extraordinary. I find that completely extraordinary. Surely we have a list somewhere of people who are truly staff and people who are hosted?

Thomas Docherty: No, there is a list. The Speaker’s office publishes the list, but they do not have offices as a rule of thumb.

Tessa Munt: They have desks in some people’s offices, do they not?

George Mudie: Yes, but that is the Member’s allocation. If the Member is Chair or Secretary they will make one of their spaces available. That is the theory. You do not get it as a right. You use up your two secretarial spaces for the APPG. Of course, this is where all the difficulties arise, because that is ignored by so many people.

Q119 Tessa Munt: I would suggest, Sir Alan, that maybe we should address that point, because I do not think that is acceptable. People who have Parliamentary staff who are working for the Member should have utter, absolute priority over hangerson and interested groups, in my view. Could I ask about disabilities and people who have access problems?

James Robertson: That would be quite helpful. Thank you.

Fiona Channon: Certainly before the 2010 election, via the Whips’ Office, any Member’s mobility issues, hearing issues or whatever were raised with the Accommodation Office. We looked at specific areas—either Portcullis House or ground floor offices—to be able to facilitate those Members.

Q120 Tessa Munt: I think it is probably something we should know. I appreciate there are difficulties with the building, but it is something we should absolutely know, and I would be quite interested in knowing what the numbers will be in 2015, 2016, 2017 and 2018, and how your programme is to move forward to make sure that we do make more offices more accessible.

James Robertson: The work that is going to be done to do that is being considered as part of the work being done on the R&R at the moment, which is the big opportunity to do the development and to address some of the more difficult issues in the Palace. We can certainly provide the numbers that are currently accessible, which we will do.

Tessa Munt: That would be quite helpful. Thank you.

Q121 Thomas Docherty: If this responsibility was taken from the Whips and given to you, Mr Robertson, and you, Fiona, would it fundamentally change how this operates, or is it because of the nature of a general election and a churn? Secondly, relating to speeding up things, we have a fixed term Parliament now. We know when the general election is going to be. Why do we not actually require all Members, prior to prorogation in 2020 to pack up their offices? Even if they are coming back, all they have then got to do is unpack. I take George’s point; why can we not require all 650 Members to, on the date of prorogation—because it is fixed—have packed everything away?

George Mudie: On the latter point about everybody packing up, I would not impose that, because it is quite clear that a fair proportion of Members will come back. Electoral history teaches you that. If you had a majority of 20,000 and I came and said, “Pack your bags”, you would not want to, unless there was a good reason like Fiona wanting to spruce the place up. That would be fine. There is good reason for saying to people who are leaving, who have been defeated, or whose offices you want to spruce up, “Pack up or we will do it for you, and you will have to unpack, etc.” However, to impose it on the likes of you, Tessa, would be unfair.

Tessa Munt: I disagree.

Chair: Tessa, do you want to come back on that?

Q122 Tessa Munt: May I? I actually think it is not unreasonable. Again, if I go back to my life in a further education college, the summer holiday was the time when you had six weeks during which you could decorate every room, do all of the work that needed to be doing, and make sure there were enough boards and God knows what else. Noone should assume. I realise that, in practicality, there are safe seats, but unless somebody is absolutely specific about not requiring any decoration to that room, I do not think it is unreasonable. If they want to stay in that room for the next five years and they do not want it decorated at any point in the next five year Parliament, then fair enough, they might stay, but I do not think it is unreasonable at all for everybody else. I think Thomas has got a good idea there.

George Mudie: I would agree with you if Fiona wanted to decorate the 900 rooms. If that is not the programme—if the programme is 200 or 300—then it is different. That is the point I am making: if you have a good reason for telling someone to pack their bags, I would back you all the way. But if there is no good reason—

Tessa Munt: Forgive me, but I think there is a very good reason, because you have come to the end of a Parliament and that is a good enough reason. Frankly, you should be able to put your stuff in a box. I would rather pack up and unpack boxes briefly to facilitate a
swift movement into an office, rather than faff around waiting for people to sort themselves out. I am right with you on your comments about people who are retiring or people who have lost. I think we should be far more brutal and it is perfectly all right to get everybody to pack up their baggage.

Chair: The point is on the record, and the Committee will decide what it wishes to say.

Q123 Thomas Docherty: Am I right in thinking that fundamentally, if this was handed from the Whips to yourselves, it would not particularly speed things up? It is the same challenge of “There is a general election, there is a churn, and we do not know who the Government is or how many of each party”. Is that correct?

James Robertson: Fundamentally, I think that is correct.

Fiona Channon: I actually think it may be more difficult.

Chair: Thank you very much indeed. We appreciate your time and your evidence.
Written evidence

Written evidence submitted by the Institute for Government

The Institute for Government submission is concerned mainly with the part of your inquiry about training in parliamentary procedures and activities. Our views are based on the important Institute programme on Learning and Development which involves working with MPs, ministers and potential ministers, and is run by one of the authors (Zoe Gruhn, who has long experience in mentoring and advising). In particular, both of the authors of this submission were involved in helping with the induction of new MPs, as well as ministers, after the May 2010 election (Zoe Gruhn at the Institute and Peter Riddell, both at the Institute, where he was then a Senior Fellow, before becoming Director at the end of 2011, and as chair of the Hansard Society, which he was until June 2012). The Institute and the Hansard Society have collaborated on this work.

1. Our starting point is that MPs, both new and existing ones, do not receive sufficient access to high quality development and mentoring support on a continuing basis of the kind that they would have, and expect to receive, in other organisations in the public, private and voluntary sectors.

2. There is widespread evidence—from various Hansard Society reports (“A Year in the Life” after the 2005 and 2010 elections and the 2001 report of the commission on parliamentary scrutiny) and the 2011 book on “Parliamentary Socialisation” by political scientists Michael Rush and Philip Giddings—that new MPs are often ill-prepared for their parliamentary duties, notably what is involved in scrutinising the executive on a select committee.

3. The induction activities organised by the House authorities in 2005 were much better than after previous elections thanks to the preparatory work by various departments. This ensured that when new MPs arrived after polling day, they were helped with quickly obtaining security passes, orientation on the parliamentary estate, advice on the employment of staff and there was an excellent session in the Commons chamber with senior MPs from the main parties and senior clerks. There were some problems—most obviously over the introduction of the new expenses regime with IPSA. This produced loud complaints from new and old members alike in the summer of 2010. This should not be repeated in 2015. And there were familiar complaints over the length of time to get offices for members and staff.

4. The Institute and Hansard Society organised some briefing sessions focussing on scrutiny work and select committees. The aim was to add value to the core package of induction support provided by the House authorities, avoiding duplication of effort.

5. The quality of these sessions was high—with perceptive and valuable advice from a number of senior MPs, as well as the current Clerk of the Commons and the Deputy Speaker, and staff of the two organisations and outside speakers. But while those members who did attend found the sessions useful—as reported back in comments made at the time and subsequently—attendance was not high and fell over time. So later sessions were cancelled. This reflected understandable induction fatigue in the summer of 2010 by busy new MPs—already stretched and tired after intensive campaigning running up to polling day and then all the stresses and demands of arriving at Westminster.

6. From this experience and subsequent discussions with the House authorities—and looking at how other legislatures around the world deliver induction and development support—we have drawn a number of conclusions:

   — induction should not be regarded as a quick one-off process in the first few days and weeks of a new MP’s arrival at Westminster but as a continuing process, recognising the many, competing calls on any MP’s time. After the initial induction, it makes sense to have a session six weeks or two months later after new MPs have formed their first impressions in order to focus on how MPs can be more effective at Westminster;

   — specific induction/preparatory sessions should be organised for new MPs elected to be member of select committees; and

   — further sessions should be held at regular intervals throughout the parliament at which experiences of Westminster work could be discussed—these have proved to be particularly valuable with ministers.

7. The Institute for Government’s core mission is to improve the effectiveness of government. In Westminster terms, this covers scrutiny work, especially on select committees, and support for ministers and potential ministers (both on the government and opposition sides). This excludes both the constituency and specifically party sides of an MP’s work. We can use the experience built up from our extensive work with ministers and civil servants in Whitehall and with select committees to provide support for new MPs. As a non-parliamentary organisation, we offer a detached viewpoint and an ability to bridge the worlds of Whitehall and Westminster. This is reflected in our close relationship with the Liaison Committee which has twice asked us to host seminars on the work of select committees which has involved both civil servants and MPs.
8. We have already started discussions with the House’s General Election Planning Working Group about what contribution we could make to sessions after 2015. These include:

   — making an impact as a new member—using experienced current or recently retired members passing on lessons/collective memory—setting a series of questions for new MPs to consider as they decide their priorities/approach;

   — an introduction to Whitehall—exploring the relationship between MPs and the civil service, seeking to increase understanding of the machinery of government, of the extent of change within departments and of the links with the work of backbenchers and, especially with work on select committees. This would also cover the House of Lords which is little understood by members of the Commons;

   — the scrutiny role of MPs—how to make the most effective use of time on select committees as well as through other procedures; and

   — financial scrutiny—explaining the budget process, public spending controls and financial management.

9. Our intention would be to involve outside authorities, including academics, consultants and Institute staff, as well as current and recently retired MPs, senior civil servants and parliamentary staff.

Zoe Gruhn
Director of Learning and Development

Rt Hon Peter Riddell CBE
Director

February 2013

Written evidence submitted by Members and Peers Staff Association (MAPSA)

At the request of the Administration Committee MAPSA asked its members for their feedback on the arrangements put in place for new Members of Parliament following the 2010 General Election.

Below is a selection of the responses we received.

From a Constituency Caseworker who has been with her Member since May 2010:

It was not until December, so three months after I arrived, that I managed to get to the House of Commons where I received my “How to Work for an MP” books. It would have been so helpful to have had these from day one as they start with what you should do during the first week, etc. It turned out that we were running our surgeries totally illegally but hey ho, we got by and I soon sorted it all out, but it was not easy.

I think there should be someone who runs “How to be a caseworker” courses or be on the end of a telephone to help when a new caseworker with a new MP starts work. It is very difficult when you have a new MP with not a clue about how things work and a new caseworker as well.

I deal with literally life and death issues and a lot of not life and death things like “can you get me a bus timetable please” as well as getting benefits paid in twenty minutes and being a caseworker is an important job if done properly, we can really make a difference to people’s lives.

Something should really be done to help new caseworkers to do their jobs properly from day one, not wing it for a few months.

From a Secretary who has been in the House for a Number of Years and seen many new Members come and go:

They arrive “bright-eyed and bushy-tailed” and then are confronted by two miles of corridors and a 1,000 rooms in the main building. I think they should be given a guided tour but not just of the main bits but “behind the scenes”.

From a Secretary to a New Member:

I was with a new Member and we were supposed to be “hot-desking” in Committee Room 18 for over a month, clearing everything into small lockers. Provision needs to be made for people to have proper space where they can leave things overnight, only locking away confidential papers. Rows were breaking out when some of us were trying to run a vaguely professional operation for constituents, without even dedicated phone lines.

From a Researcher to a New Member:

There was no IPSA training for staff when I started. I know IPSA had only just come into being in 2010 but training for staff was really essential. Most MPs don’t do their own claims—most nominate a proxy.

Offices/desks for staff—there seems to be a total lack of thought regarding this. MPs are able to badger whoever is responsible but they forget about their staff. If the staff have nowhere to operate from how are they supposed to make arrangements for IT amongst other things.

There is a total lack of co-ordination all round regarding staff training and where they work from.
From a Parliamentary Assistant to a New MP:

I thought that the provision for staff and Members was very good and the Attlee Suite in particular was well set up. Part of the reason I thought the set up was good, is that there was plenty of time for Members and their staff to settle in—and indeed to hire staff—because the coalition agreement was being negotiated. I suspect it would not have been so good if we had gone straight into the Parliament.

Many of the responses received by MAPSA made the same points regarding the provision of space although MAPSA appreciates that various factors in the run up to the 2010 General Election resulted in an unusually large intake of new MPs and that many of the problems cited by staff were in fact a result of this.

No comments were received regarding the provision of IT and I think the general feeling was that PICT, although under enormous pressure, coped well with the demands placed on them by such a large intake of MPs and staff.

13 March 2013

Written evidence submitted by Unite the Union, Staff Branch

1. We appreciate the opportunity to contribute to the Committee’s review of induction requirements for new Members after the next election. As staff of MPs, many of us go on to work for new MPs after an election, either seeking a promotion, or often being effectively “inherited” by the successor to their former employer.

2. New MPs frequently rely on experienced staff to help them settle into their role, which is of course a culture shock on election. There are a number of specific areas, however, where we feel that the House authorities could assist in inducting new members.

Training as Employers

3. We do not know how many MPs have had management experience before being elected, but this is certainly not a requirement for election, and large numbers of MPs do not have this background. We are in favour of mandatory training for all new intake MPs on how to be a responsible employer and how to manage staff effectively. This would include matters such as all their legal obligations to their staff, the need to have a bullying and harassment policies in place, the need to send staff on a data protection course, and the merits of annual appraisals, as well as other topics.

4. Annual appraisals, for example, are very effective to review the year past and also set out objectives for the next year. They also encourage MPs to think about career development for their staff, promote active discussion of what skills their staff have and what might need improvement, and how to go about that development through relevant training for example. Although some MPs hold appraisals, many do not, and this should be a concept that is raised when members are first elected and recruit their office.

5. For quite some time, new MPs and staff were not allowed to activate their parliamentary email accounts until they had completed an afternoon IT course, but MPs are given a staffing budget of over £100,000 to spend without having needed to demonstrate any experience in managing staff, which seems strange!

6. There is written guidance available in the HR handbook but that will mostly stay in offices on a shelf until needed, so we believe that something like hour-long sessions would be preferable, so that MPs can take as much in as possible verbally and be pro-active about being good employers.

7. We would hope that such training would not only lead to more productive and efficient offices, but would prevent some of the breakdowns in work relationships that lead to the trade union getting involved in grievances and disciplinary cases. In addition, it would be interesting to know what proportion of MPs have relevant experience of managing staff before their election, and this might be something about which the committee may wish to enquire.

Accommodation Standards

8. One of the early tasks for a new MP is to set up their constituency offices. However, according to our members, this accommodation is often substandard and we think some would not pass an occupational health and safety check. It is important for MPs to know that these checks are available through billing IPSA, and that they should be conducted after taking on a new office.

9. In particular, MPs need to realise that they are legally responsible for the conditions and safety. Elements like fire doors are not an optional extra, and IPSA maintains a specific budget to improve security measures, which are especially important if surgeries are to be held there. Attached as an annex are some of the comments that our members made in our staff survey last year that detail security concerns working in a number of constituency offices. These are the sort of matters that should be addressed, and the MP should know how to do that.

1 As the comments made relate to security, the annex has not been published.
Other Areas

10. There are a number of areas where MPs can claim assistance from IPSA to help their staff in their jobs, including eye tests, reasonable adjustments for disabilities, alarms and security cameras for constituency offices, overtime procedures, and so on. It would be helpful if MPs can be briefed on this by IPSA when elected so that they are aware that these are wholly legitimate options to improve their staff’s service.

11. MPs should also be made aware of the training options that are available for their staff, particularly as there has been an issue in making this available for constituency-based staff. Working with Capita, in the past year, we have succeeded in getting training courses on data protection held in Bristol and Greater Manchester, but with greater awareness, we would hope that the House would become more proactive in organising this.

12. We also believe that it would be beneficial if new MPs were made aware of staff organisations like us and the Members And Peers Staff Association, so that they can point staff in our direction if they wish.

Max Freedman
Chair
UNITE 1/427
Representing Staff of MPs
1 March 2013

Written evidence submitted by the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority (IPSA)

Introduction

1. We welcome this opportunity to put forward written evidence to the Committee with our plans for providing financial support to new MPs and to make the induction process as informative and straightforward as possible. This submission draws on our experiences from the 2010 General Election, lessons learned, and our plans for the 2015 General Election. It focuses on the financial support and training that we will provide to new MPs in relation to the business costs and expenses they incur in carrying out their parliamentary functions. It provides an indication of how we plan to approach the next general election and financial assistance which we will offer new MPs.2

2. We understand that new MPs face considerable challenges upon entering office and we will seek, insofar as we can, to make appropriate financial and information resources available to new MPs in 2015. In doing so, we will also need to bear in mind our general commitment to deliver value for money and our specific commitment to deliver savings to the taxpayer across the period of the comprehensive spending review.

3. There are some issues that affect new MPs that are outside IPSA’s control, such as high costs of running an election campaign and sourcing accommodation in the Palace of Westminster. Similarly, there are some issues where our responsibilities and those of the House interrelate, and we are working with House officials to ensure a smooth interface in such cases.

General Election 2015

4. IPSA has begun its preparations for the new intake of MPs, building on its experience of the 2010 general election, the 14 by-elections since, and the bedding-down of the Scheme itself and the online expenses system. MPs need near-immediate access to financial assistance and they require effective, informative training, both on the MPs’ Scheme of Business Costs and Expenses (“the Scheme”) and the online expenses system. Since May 2010, IPSA has introduced a range of improvements to help MPs with both cash flow and information. These have included the introduction of direct payments to a number of suppliers, the extension of the payment card to a wider range of expenses and the introduction of advances to help with cash flow, as well as improved online guidance and a more effective approach to induction. These improvements, along with some additional measures planned specifically for the General Election, are reflected in our election planning and will help to ensure that we provide MPs with the support they need in 2015. We have developed a draft General Election Handbook with our initial plans for 2015 and we are represented in the House of Commons General Election Planning Group to ensure that new and existing MPs’ needs are met and handled in the most efficient way possible. In the following sections we set out our plans for the General Election expected in 2015, which we will continue to develop in the intervening period.

Financial Assistance

5. As in 2010 we plan to attend the New Members Reception Area (NMRA), which usually runs for two weeks from the first Monday after polling day, to induct new MPs. At the NMRA we will gather the information (such as bank details) we need from each new MP so that we can pay their salaries (at the end of May), request payment cards from Barclaycard and set up accounts for them on the online expenses system and direct payment websites.

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2 This document assumes that the next general election will take place on 7 May 2015. Arrangements are being put in place to offer similar facilities and support to that described here in the event an election taking place earlier than this.
6. We understand that one of the most significant issues facing new MPs is cash-flow. Election campaigns can be expensive and put pressure on personal finances. Setting up a new constituency office and recruiting staff can be daunting tasks, and regular travel between the constituency and Westminster can be costly. Since 2010, we have introduced a variety of provisions designed to assist MPs with cash-flow and the initial costs of starting up their offices, and these, with some additional financial support, form part of our election planning for new MPs. A summary of the financial assistance which will be in place for MPs joining parliament in 2015 follows.

Pre-loaded payment card and the Barclaycard

7. Since 2010, we have extended the range of expense types payable onto Barclaycard payment cards to include (in addition to travel) utilities such as gas, water, electricity and heating fuels, council tax and business rates, office waste collection, insurance, hotels, TV licences, stationery, and constituency office telephone landlines. We plan to provide each new MP with a payment card to pay for a number of their business costs and expenses. At the NMRA, we will gather the necessary data required by Barclaycard and the Financial Services Authority to generate the payment cards for new MPs, such as their date of birth, nationality and home address.

8. In the interim while Barclaycard are producing their cards, we intend to provide new MPs at the NMRA with a temporary, pre-paid payment card for charging initial travel and hotel expenditure (as claimable under the Scheme) so that they have instant access to funding and do not have to pay these expenses from their personal funds. This is a new provision which we are introducing for MPs for the General Election. MPs will be able to use the temporary pre-paid payment card for charging these expenses until they receive their payment card proper.

Interest-free cash-flow and deposit loans

9. To further assist with cash-flow, we also propose to offer MPs an interest-free advance of up to £4,000, repayable at the end of the Parliament. We introduced these loans shortly after the last election, in response to feedback from MPs. When we meet new MPs for the first time following a by-election, we collect their bank details and help them to complete an advance application form. Funds will be paid into their account that day if possible, or the following working day. We will also complete this process with new MPs during their induction at the NMRA, and pay the funds into their accounts as soon as we can following that meeting.

10. We also provide MPs with deposit loans for their residential or office accommodation. Once MPs have identified their rental properties and provided the details and a draft lease to us, we can provide a deposit loan. This becomes repayable when the tenancy comes to an end, or when the MP leaves Parliament (whichever is earlier). As advances and deposit loans are repayable they are not deducted from MPs’ annual budgets: they are an additional facility to help with cash-flow.

Start-Up Budget

11. In response to feedback we received from new MPs in 2010, in 2011 we introduced a Start-Up budget for new MPs. This budget, currently set at £6,000, is designed to help meet the costs of setting up one or more constituency offices and it is available to all new MPs for a year following the date of their election. It is intended to meet the costs of “big-ticket” items, such as computers, desks, office redecoration, or any additional IT not provided for by the House Authorities. MPs may make purchases against this budget using the online expenses system, or, where appropriate, pay for items directly using the direct payment websites for office suppliers.

12. The Start-Up budget is therefore a new budget since May 2010, in addition to the regular annual budgets. By providing a dedicated Start-Up budget, we are ensuring new MPs can claim additional financial support to assist them with the one-off, but often significant, business costs and expenses associated with setting up an office from scratch.

Direct payments

13. Since 2010, IPSA has introduced a range of direct payments to a number of suppliers on behalf of MPs. These remove the need for MPs to pay, claim, or provide evidence, and are charged against the applicable budget in the Scheme. Direct payments currently include: train travel, where MPs can use their IPSA account on the Trainline website; office supplies from Commercial, Banner, and QC Supplies; residential and office rent; pooled staffing resources; and the costs of employment practice liability insurance.

Training

Inductions for MPs at the NMRA

14. Based on our current election plans and our experience of inducing new MPs following by-elections, we propose a two-stage approach to inductions in 2015 to ensure we provide immediate support on cash flow, as well as effective information and training. Both stages of the induction will be carried out by an experienced member of IPSA’s staff to ensure that questions can be answered immediately wherever possible.
15. At the first stage of induction, at the NMRA we will provide new MPs with an initial half-hour briefing. At this session, we plan to:

— ensure they have access to funds without delay by giving them a pre-paid payment card and helping them complete an application for their advance loan;
— collect the information we need to pay them and to set them up on the expenses system and for direct payments;
— provide MPs with a copy of the Scheme and answer any urgent questions they may have about their expenses;
— advise MPs on the relevant processes for placing staff on IPSA’s payroll; and
— advise them on next steps.

16. New MPs will also require thorough training on the rules in the Scheme, along with training on claiming business costs and expenses on the online system. As the second stage of induction, we therefore plan to offer all new MPs a second, longer one-to-one training session with an IPSA staff member on the Scheme and online expenses system.

One-to-one training

17. The proposed one-to-one sessions will last for approximately 90 minutes and the MP will receive training on the Scheme, how to claim and any other issues they want to cover relating to their expenses. During this time MPs will be assessing their staffing needs and this session will include information on the various provisions in the Scheme for employing staff, contracts and putting staff on the payroll. We are also in discussion with the House Authorities to ensure that our induction process provides joined-up provision of information to MPs and data-sharing where appropriate: for example, on staffing and employment issues which may relate to both IPSA and the House of Commons Personnel Advisory Service (PAS).

Wider training to support parliamentary functions

18. Some new MPs may wish to undertake training on a variety of subjects to assist them in carrying out their parliamentary functions. Where this training is not provided centrally by House Authorities or another source, MPs may claim for the costs for training courses, and any necessary travel and subsistence, from the applicable budgets in the Scheme.

Training for MPs’ staff

19. Many MPs choose to delegate authority for their business costs and expenses to a staff member or “proxy”, although they retain the responsibility for all claims submitted on their behalf. To ensure that these proxies have an understanding of the provisions in the Scheme and are familiar with operating the online expenses scheme, we intend to carry out a number of regional training sessions for MPs’ staff. Assuming a May 2015 election, these sessions will be planned to take place from June onwards, once MPs have recruited their staff. Locations, dates and venues will be decided upon after polling day, once the geographical spread of new MPs is known. A booking form for the sessions will be made available on the IPSA website for staff to request a place. The sessions will be free to attend and the costs of any necessary travel and subsistence may be claimed from IPSA. We will also run staff training sessions on the Parliamentary estate for those staff based in Westminster or for those for whom a London-based session would be most convenient.

20. Written guidance on the Scheme and “how to guides” on subjects such as making claims or using direct payments and the payment card are always available on the IPSA website for MPs and their staff. We also provide additional information where this might be helpful through our email bulletins; more specific guidance or updates to cover improvements and end of the financial year deadlines and processes; and drop-in sessions for MPs and their staff.

Accommodation Review

21. Later this year we intend to commence a review of MPs’ accommodation (both residential and office) to explore the budgets for accommodation and related issues. We know that locating suitable accommodation within budget and providing the necessary documentation to IPSA are challenges for new MPs and we will look at ways to help MPs to make this process as efficient as possible.

Conclusion

22. In 2010 Parliament experienced one of the largest turnovers of MPs, with 233 new MPs entering office at a time of immense public scrutiny. New MPs, mindful of the experience of the last Parliament, had to get up to speed with their new roles as elected MPs, and returning MPs had to become accustomed to a new system and set of rules. Three years since the previous general election, Parliament and IPSA alike have a better understanding about being accountable for business costs and expenses and the support required for MPs carry out parliamentary functions, respectively.
23. Alongside our General Election Planning for MPs, we are putting processes in place for those MPs who choose to stand down in advance of the General Election and for those that are re-elected.

24. We will require additional funding to prepare for and implement measures for the election and this will be reflected in our 2014–15 and 2015–16 Estimates to the Speaker’s Committee on IPSA.

25. Finally, the Committee may wish to note that we will be announcing, later this year, details of the new remuneration package for MPs. This revised package will be implemented from 2015.

20 March 2013

Supplementary written evidence submitted by the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority (IPSA)

When John Sills and I appeared before the Administration Committee on 25 March, to give evidence on IPSA’s preparations for the General Election expected in May 2015, there were a number of issues where we said that we would write to you with further information. This information is set out below.

Payment of Salaries during the Election Period

There are two aspects to this issue: MPs’ pay and that of their staff.

With respect to MPs themselves, you will recall that they have previously been paid up to the date of the election. I would not expect us to alter this arrangement.

MPs’ staff will continue to be paid during the election period, on the understanding that they are supporting MPs in the conduct of their parliamentary functions. If staff wish to support their MP on campaigning activity, they must take either paid or unpaid leave, depending on their circumstances. Paragraph 10.17 of the 5th edition of the MPs’ Scheme of Business Costs and Expenses covers this point.

Accommodation Costs during the Election Period

MPs can continue to claim accommodation costs in accordance with the rules in Chapter 4 of the 5th edition of the MPs’ Scheme of Business Costs and Expenses. Paragraph 10.15 of the Scheme addresses this point.

Taxation of Interest Free Loans

If an MP’s loans exceed £5,000 at any point in a financial year, then all what HM Revenue and Customs (HMRC) calls “beneficial loans” become taxable in full. The taxable amount is the cash equivalent of the benefit of the loan. The cash equivalent of the benefit is the difference between (a) the interest that would have been payable if the borrower had been required to pay interest at the official rate (currently 4%) and (b) the amount of interest actually paid by the borrower. In the case of loans from IPSA (b) is zero, so 4% of the value of the loans would be taxable.

HMRC provides guidance on taxation for MPs, which can be accessed via the IPSA website at http://www.parliamentarystandards.org.uk or directly from HMRC.

Subsistence Payments

At the 25 March meeting there was some discussion about the £15 subsidy for late evening meals. It may be helpful to note that when MPs are away, overnight, from London or their constituencies, on parliamentary business, they can claim up to £25 per night for food and non-alcoholic beverages. Paragraph 9.31 of the 5th edition of the MPs’ Scheme of Business Costs and Expenses covers this point.

Speed of Payments to MPs

Marcus Jones MP asked if he could see a list of his claims in the past year and how quickly they were processed and paid. We have provided him with this information separately.

Further Decisions ahead of the General Election

There were a number of points made by members of the Committee which will be addressed well in advance of the General Election. These included the amount of money to be put on the pre-paid payment card, the arrangements for existing payment cards, the possibility of a dedicated phone line for new MPs and the nature of training and information that will be provided to MPs (and their staff). We will consider these issues carefully as we take forward our preparations for the next General Election. We will, of course, continue to
work cooperatively with MPs, their staff and the House of Commons authorities to ensure a smooth and effective transition to the new Parliament.

Andrew McDonald  
Chief Executive  
18 April 2013

Written evidence submitted by Parliamentary ICT

Purpose of Paper

This paper is submitted by Parliamentary ICT, the cross house department responsible for ICT services to Members and the Administrations, as part of the Committee’s evidence gathering for their inquiry into “First Weeks at Westminster” for new Members after a general election.

Background

Parliamentary ICT (PICT) has a wide range of responsibilities at general elections. These include:

1. Preparation for dissolution and the management of arrangements for when Members cease to be Members at 5pm on the day of dissolution.
2. Support to Members not standing for election.
3. Reinstatement of services to Members who are returned at the election.
4. The replacement of returned Members’ equipment and the delivery of new services.
5. Support to those Members who are not returned at the election.
6. Support to the office changes that the Accommodation Whips decide are needed, and of course.
7. Support to new Members.

Members ICT Allowance

The House provides, on loan, Members with the following ICT equipment and services:

- Up to five computers, three of which can be laptops and one can be an iPad.
- Up to two laser printers from a choice of six, which include colour, black and white and multi-function models.
- Up to three broadband services (cable and ADSL).

The equipment is delivered and installed by PICT approved engineers, and fully supported by PICT. All equipment has a four year next day onsite support agreement. PCs and laptops are provided with Windows 7 and Office 2010, remote access and anti-virus software. Members have access to support 24/7 with the exception of Christmas day and Boxing day.

If a Member requires more equipment than is provided centrally they can purchase additional items via PICT. All equipment purchased from PICT will be supported in the same way as loan equipment. This equipment is owned by Members.

Arrangements for New Members at the Last Election

New Members Reception Area

For a new Member their first experience of PICT was at the New Members Reception Area (NMRA). The NMRA, located on the 1st floor of Portcullis House and centred on the Attlee Suite and Macmillan room, was designed to ensure new Members had access to key services as soon as they arrived without being deluged with too much information to digest or so many hand-outs that they had too much to carry. The NMRA therefore focused on security passes, IPSA registration and from an ICT perspective the setting up of a network account (with an .MP@parliament.uk email address), issuing of a telephone number, and the issue of a laptop. The laptop counted as part of Members central allocation of equipment. The NMRA formally opened on the Monday after the election, but was available for the very few Members who decided to visit Parliament on the previous Friday. For those Members who brought their own equipment they were shown how to connect to the network using the PINSafe method of remote access. The NMRA included an ICT advice room where Members having received their laptop, user account and telephone number could discuss the range of equipment available to them and what they suit their needs best. Members were discouraged from making decisions about the type of equipment they wanted until they had seen the accommodation allocated to them and they had a clearer view about where their staff would be located and in what numbers.

In our view the NMRA worked well. Members got the essentials quickly, and had an advice centre they could come back to if they wanted to discuss things further.
Temporary Accommodation

Whilst accommodation decisions were made by the Whips temporary accommodation was provided to Members in a number of Committee rooms in the Palace and meeting rooms in 1 Parliament Street. PICT provided Wi-Fi to the rooms so Members could use their laptops. A small number of PCs were also provided as well as a multi-function printer/fax/copier to each room. Floor walking trainers and engineers from PICT were available to provide assistance if needed.

Westminster Offices

As offices were allocated to Members an initial set of equipment was provided to get the office up and running. This included a PC and multi-function printer (MFD). Desk phones were also provided. The PC and MFD counted towards a Member’s central allocation and could be exchanged for an alternative product if a Member wished to do so. Very few Members chose to do this.

The agreement with the Whips offices was that an office would be ready for occupation five working days after it had been allocated. In reality offices were available far sooner than that, and often the day after they had been allocated. The point will be made in other evidence that the perceived delays to occupying an office are to do with the complexity and nuances of the process for allocating the offices in the first place and not with the logistics of setting the office up. Having a team of staff ready to respond to the unpredictable run rate of office allocations is expensive and if alternative approaches exist they should be explored. The movement of phone lines on our current telephone system is labour intensive and because of the volume of changes could only be completed with the assistance of contractors. This was a particularly expensive exercise.

Deployment of Equipment to Westminster, Constituency Offices and Home Locations

Once a Member has a Westminster or Constituency office they then select what additional equipment they need. From the choice available PICT helped Members to select the equipment most likely to meet their needs. Given the limited range available the decisions were largely straight forward. Print and mobility requirements tended to be the most important consideration. Equipment was supplied to any location in the UK. To complete a full off-site office set-up it is necessary to have the broadband connection in place first. For cable services this can take time to install since site surveys are normally needed and minor building works undertaken to route the service from the street to the premises. For ADSL services a BT line needs to be available before the ADSL service can be ordered. In both cases the delay that is inherent in the commissioning of the service was often disruptive and confusing for Members and their staff.

Feedback about ICT Services at the Last Election

The survey of Members and their staff commissioned by the Administration Committee after the last election was generally complimentary about ICT services for all Members after the election, as has been the Committee. The ICT Forum, a group of Members and staff representing Westminster and constituency staff, covering all parties and chaired by a Member of this Committee, when asked to reflect on the general election from a new Members perspective have said:

- Issuing new Members with a laptop at the New Members Reception was good so they could start work immediately.
- The biggest frustration for new MPs was having a constituency office without any ICT equipment, or a working broadband connection, for up to 8 weeks after the Election.
- The new MPs induction pack should include an “idiot’s guide” and provide advice on what to look for from ICT and Telecoms services when choosing accommodation to rent as a constituency office.
- Remember a single printer for a Member in Westminster is not sufficient when their staff can be in an office in a different building.

Comments made directly to PICT confirm that new Members generally felt well supported.

Areas where improvement could be made included:

1. Ensuring Members are aware of what they are entitled to and the services that are available. There does not seem to be a sure way of getting key information out to all Members, despite using multiple communication channels we still fail to engage all. Perhaps we have to accept that this will always be the case and at some point the additional effort needed to reach everyone would not warrant the time, or the irritation to those who have engaged when weighed against the actual disadvantage to those who have not.
2. Accessibility: Wi-Fi, remote access, mobility.
4. Kit limitations in particular for Apple and Android users (the greater flexibility of choice for smart phone devices was appreciated).
5. Toner costs.
6. Direct payments to IPSA.
7. Dependencies between BT and Broadband providers and the time delay between ordering and receiving these services.
8. Five items of computing equipment (PCs, laptops and a tablet) is insufficient given the number of users in a Members office.

Parliamentary ICT Strategy

The Committee has been briefed on the Parliamentary ICT strategy several times in the past, and endorsed the approach being taken. The strategy is progressing well and some important milestones in its delivery have been passed. Most recently the business case for the deployment of Microsoft’s Office 365 has been approved and early technical pilots are now underway.

At the core of the strategy is the adoption of cloud based (hosted) computing. As well as delivering many business benefits for the Administrations, for Members it will also help to address many of the limitations mentioned above. For Members the cloud approach will allow:

1. More Mobility.
4. Reduced costs.

ICT Suggestions for New Members after the Next Election

The ICT arrangements for the last election were successful and so any changes need not be driven as a reaction to criticism but by the new opportunities that will exist five years on.

The ICT strategy will offer new and better ways of consuming ICT services, not just for new but for all Members. The text that follows reflects what we expect to be available by a 2015 election and also some of the service options that the House will be asked to consider in the lead up to it. The Administration Committees inquiry is most timely in that respect and its views on the suggestions will be most helpful.

Our suggestions are grouped under the following sub headings:

Election night and up to arrival at Westminster

We have considered whether there is any more that we can do between a Member’s election and their arrival at Westminster. We will, as we have done in the past, set up their Parliamentary network account, ready to be activated when they first arrive and we have considered whether this could be made available to new Members before they do arrive. If this was possible it would allow the House to communicate directly with Members sooner. However, securely conveying user account details to new Members and asking for a signature on the security Acceptable Use Policy without doing so in person would be difficult and not an assured process. We are cautious about pursuing this. We do believe that the information contained in The Clerks letter that returning officers are asked to pass to all new Members is an important first introduction to Parliament and might also be a means of directing Members to a publicly accessible website with useful new Member information, much of which already exists, collated on it.

Members’ first hours at Westminster

The New Member Reception Area should be repeated and PICT proposes to have a similar presence as last time. From the ICT perspective new user accounts will be ready for Members as they arrive. We will be able to amend standard email addresses to reflect people’s personal preferences before they are activated. All new users will receive a welcome email from PICT in their inbox providing essential ICT information and links to other material that they might find helpful. Prior to their account being activated Members are required to sign an Acceptable Use Policy (AUP). The current policy will be reviewed and updated prior to the next election. The move to cloud services will place greater emphasis on Member responsibility for data security as data owners and the conduct of their staff in this respect.

The current tablet computer Committee trial which seeks to make information more accessible and to reduce printed paper costs is progressing well in terms of adoption. To date 18 Committees have asked to join the trial. The tablets are not counted against a Member’s central allowance and are not funded from the Members Estimate since for the purposes of the trial they are supplied to allow participation in a Parliamentary process. If the evaluation of the trial proves that the use of tablets is successful then Members may be encouraged to use tablets in the future. If so, rather than issuing a laptop to Members on day one, as we did at the 2010 election, the House authorities may suggest that a tablet device is issued instead.

PICT currently offers a Smartphone to those Members that want one. Members are responsible for meeting all their running costs and to date only 141 have been requested. The majority of Members prefer to make their own arrangements since this allows them to choose the model, mobile carrier and package of bundled calls, texts and data that best suits their needs. It is clear our offering is not very attractive to Members and in the fast moving market of mobile technology it is not possible for us to match the deals that are available on
the internet or in the high street. We intend to cease offering Smartphones after the next election and propose to start winding down the current service in the run up to the election. PICT will assist Members, if they need it, with selecting a device that will connect to our services and meet their needs. The views of the Committee are sought on this suggestion.

Temporary Accommodation

At the last election Wi-Fi was available in all Committee and bookable meeting rooms as well as committee corridors, the libraries and other communal areas such as Portcullis House Atrium. Since then Wi-Fi has been extended to all Members offices. By the end of this year Wi-Fi will be available throughout the estate. The dependency on having access to temporary accommodation to get connected will therefore be greatly reduced at the next election since Members and their staff will be able to connect and work from many more locations. New Members will more easily be able to share a returned Member’s office for example if they wished to do so.

There will still be a need for temporary accommodation however and PICT will equip the spaces assigned to this use with the equipment that will be most appropriate at the time. Our staff will be available to offer support where needed and importantly to offer advice about the ICT choices and decisions that Members will need to make.

Setting up your new office(s)

The ICT strategy will enable far more diversity in terms of the equipment that Members can use. At present to gain full access to the Parliamentary system a standard laptop or PC is required that has a Parliamentary set of software preloaded on it. This approach has served us well in the past, but Members understandably want more choice and to use equipment that they already own. By the next election the restrictions of the current set up will no longer be present and any device, providing it is capable of connection to the internet and has a contemporary operating system will be able to connect to Parliamentary services. This will have a significant impact on the service PICT offers and the flexibility it will give Members.

In practical terms Members will be able to use their own equipment for Parliamentary work and to source equipment directly without having to go via PICT. From PICT’s perspective we will be able to offer a wider range of loan equipment and at present are considering how this might be done. One option might be to set up a framework with a supplier who can maintain a catalogue of equipment that includes a range of models using different operating systems and at different prices. Members would be able to select items against a pre-determined allowance or purchase items directly from the supplier. There may be scope to receive more than the current set of 5 items if cheaper products were selected. Members ICT allowances were determined by a resolution of the House back in 2001 and amended after the Senior Salaries Review Body report on allowances published in 2004. Changing the basis upon which ICT is provided needs to either reflect that resolution or seek amendment to it. The Commission is due to consider the matter in due course.

The Administration of the House of the Commons is currently moving from using local printers to making more use of the high volume photocopiers that are located on the Estate. These photocopiers are capable of scanning and printing and are currently only used by Members for photocopying. The print costs per page are much lower than the printers currently in use. “Follow me printing” with the use of a PIN allows any copier to be used and for usage to be charged directly to the appropriate cost centre. The photocopiers are fully serviced and will be kept stocked with toner and paper. This might be a welcome additional service to Members in the future and allow cheaper smaller printers to be used in Members Westminster offices.

By 2015, and possibly already, we would expect any new Member’s home address to have broadband. The current allowance of three services dates back to when broadband was not ubiquitous and varied enormously in quality. In order to ensure all Members had access and were using a suitable provider the current allowance was introduced. We question whether it is necessary to provide broadband in home locations and suggest that consideration is given to Parliament only funding one business quality service to each constituency office. For most Members this would mean in future they received one service only, for the small number of Members with multiple constituency offices because of their constituency geography they would receive more. The views of the Committee are sought.

At the next election PICT will ensure that our staff are ready to provide advice and support on the new ways of working that will be needed in the future. Our aim will be to help Members make the best decisions for them based on their own circumstances and to provide support to them though out the Parliament.

Joan Miller
Director of Parliamentary ICT

Matthew Taylor
Director of Operations and Member Services

May 2013
Written evidence submitted by the Department of Facilities

Purpose

1. The purpose of this paper is to inform the Committee’s inquiry into the induction arrangements for new Members of Parliament following the next General Election. It covers the provision of accommodation for Members and their staff.

Background

2. Following the 2005 General Election the then Administration Committee inquired into post-election services. Its report and the commitments made in the House’s response formed the basis on which plans for the 2010 General Election were made. The relevant recommendations and responses are in Annex A.

Actions in 2010, Lessons Learned and Future Intentions

3. Requirement for speed in moving new Members into permanent office accommodation:

   (a) The Committee recommended that all new Members should be in their permanent accommodation within one month of the General Election. The House administration appreciated the importance of moving a new Member into his or her permanent accommodation as quickly as possible after polling day and provided additional resources (porters, telecommunications engineers, IT equipment and the staff for its installation) in order to achieve this. This was fundamental to the success of the plan. However, as envisaged in the House’s response, the main constraint, particularly with a change of government, was the time required for the Accommodation Whips to consider and discuss options with the Members concerned before making an allocation. There was also a need for the three new accommodation whips of the major parties to understand the estate. In the event, almost every new Conservative and Labour Member was moved into permanent accommodation within one week of the office being allocated.

   (b) Given the constraints on the Accommodation Whips the allocation process is likely to remain the same. This means that if there is a change of Government allocation subsequent moves will probably take broadly the same time as in 2010. If the Government does not change then it is expected that the allocation and moves will be completed more quickly. The target is to move new Members into permanent accommodation within one week of the Accommodation Whips agreeing the necessary moves with the Members concerned.

   (c) A key element of the post election accommodation plan was some 272 Members’ and Members’ staff offices, principally in Portcullis House, which had been refurbished during the dissolution period or immediately after the election. This required pre-planning and working with Members who were standing down, and a few who had been defeated, to move out as quickly as possible in order to give contractors full access. A similar process is being planned for 2015 and initial project funding has been put in place.

4. Co-ordination of accommodation and IT to ensure that the provision of IT and telecommunications equipment and support dovetail as neatly as possible with that of office accommodation:

   (a) A process was put in place to co-ordinate the ordering, delivery and installation of IT equipment into new Members’ offices. On allocation of an office Members were informed that a telephone would be installed as soon as possible and that PICT would make contact to arrange installation of any desktop PC or multi-function printer required. To ensure that resources were concentrated on moving new Members into offices as soon as possible after they were allocated Members were asked to refrain from requesting changes to the layout of their office while initial moves were ongoing.

   (b) The process was successful and will be used at the next election. However, it was resource intensive and so will be subject to funding being available.

5. Provision of suitable temporary accommodation with associated locker space:

   (a) The post 2005 plan envisaged providing 68 workstations and 150 lockers in the Upper Committee Corridor. As the 2010 election approached it became clear that this was unlikely to be sufficient. The final plan was for 173 desks and 350 lockers. All new Members were allocated a temporary locker and key at the new Members’ reception area; and the Door Keeper conducted induction tour was intended to show new Conservative and Labour Members the location of the temporary accommodation. (The Liberal Democrats operated a buddy system). In practice, new Members did not use the temporary accommodation provided in 1 Parliament Street and this was soon re-allocated. IPSA used Room C as an on-site briefing and induction area. The other rooms were returned to use as meeting rooms. Use of the other temporary accommodation was monitored and the rooms reverted to meeting rooms as soon as they were no longer required.

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3 HC 777 Published on 9 January 2006
4 HC 1027 Published on 28 April 2006
Ev 44  Administration Committee: Evidence

(b) This is the most practicable and cost effective way of providing temporary accommodation for new Members, and current intention is to repeat it in 2015. However, given the increased planning certainty fixed-term parliaments provide, it might be possible to hire serviced office accommodation for a short period after a general election. However, this would add to the cost of the post election period and location and availability could not be guaranteed.

6. Priority access to spaces for meeting constituents:
   (a) The original plan was to allocate unoccupied rooms in the Upper Committee Corridor for new Members to meet constituents. In the 2005 Parliament the pressure for Members’ staff accommodation increased and it was agreed with the Accommodation Whips that all rooms should be occupied. There were thus no additional rooms to allocate for meeting constituents. From the feedback received after the election this did not appear to have been an issue.

7. Allowing defeated Members longer to vacate their offices:
   (a) At the 2010 General Election Members who were not returned were given until the second Sunday after the election to clear their offices.
   (b) Extending the current time will inevitably delay the availability of those offices for new Members. Given the Committee’s view in 2005 that a priority must be to have all new Members in their permanent accommodation within one month of the election, it is not practicable to allow a general extension. However, as happened in 2010, it is usually possible to accommodate individual special cases and the House Service will continue do its best to do so.

James Robertson
Director of Accommodation and Logistics Services
14 May 2013

Annex A

ADMINISTRATION COMMITTEE’S ACCOMMODATION RECOMMENDATIONS AND HOUSE RESPONSES 2006

Committee Recommendation 1

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

We agree and this remains the House of Commons Service’s intention. Discussions following the 2005 election to achieve a more even split of the available accommodation delayed this by about three weeks (see Ev 23, paragraph 11). The major issue was an attempt to achieve a more equitable split by moving a number of returning Members to new offices. This proved difficult and time consuming. Should the Whips wish to rebalance the accommodation at any future election, any advice offered by officials will focus on achieving this aim while minimising the number of moves of incumbent.

Committee Recommendation 2

Lessons need to be learnt to ensure that the provision of IT and telecommunications equipment and support dovetail as neatly as possible with that of office accommodation. (Paragraph 14)

The objective of the House Service must be to move a new Member into an office that is properly set up to allow that Member to begin productive work immediately. Experience shows that moving Members and their staff into offices which are not fully configured only leads to frustration on the part of the occupant and extra pressure and disruption for the staff engaged in setting up offices.

The House Service has learnt lessons about the delivery and support of IT equipment to new Members. It is essential that those providing IT equipment and support should be familiar with Members and their requirements. This means that any planned change to the contract for the delivery of Members’ IT should be timed to avoid periods when an election is likely; but there must also be contingency plans to allow the existing contract to continue in the event of an unexpected election.

One significant cause of frustration and delay is when a new Member moves into their permanent accommodation only to find that the layout and equipment of that office does not meet their expectations. In order to prevent this in future, furniture, telephone and IT requirements will, whenever possible, be fully discussed and agreed in advance with incoming occupants.
Committee Recommendation 3

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

(i) ensuring that places to work can be made available after an election for up to 150 new Members awaiting an office, together with sufficient fax and printing facilities, either within the space already provided for temporary accommodation, or by increasing the space available;

(ii) ensuring that for an initial period of weeks new Members have adequate priority access to spaces which are sufficiently private to be used for confidential meetings with constituents and others; and

(iii) lockable storage space for new Members close to their workstations. (Paragraph 20)

We could implement the Committee’s recommendation for temporary work spaces for up to 150 new Members following a General Election by using the rooms on the Upper Committee Corridor as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area</th>
<th>No of Work Stations</th>
<th>No of Adjacent Lockers</th>
<th>Approximate Cost</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Committee Room</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>£7k</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Committee Room</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>£6k</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Committee Room</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>£6k</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Committee Room</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>£6k</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Committee Room</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>£7k</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>68</strong></td>
<td><strong>150</strong></td>
<td><strong>£32k</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note:* The cost is for a period of 2 months hire. Costs of labour and cabling are in the order of £10k.

This arrangement provides 68 workstations and 150 lockers for laptops and papers. Experience in 2005 shows that 68 desks will be sufficient; it is most unlikely that even half of the new Members would wish to use desks at any one time. Individual storage for 150 Members is provided adjacent to these rooms. In addition we intend to provide drop-in spaces for Members to work from in the Chess Room, House of Commons Library and the e-Library. The demand for temporary workspaces will be further reduced once wireless networking facilities have been installed in public areas (see paragraph 11).

Fax and printing facilities are provided as recommended.

The best method of providing computing in temporary accommodation has still to be settled. If an election were to be called in the next few months, it is likely that PICT would have to provide networked PCs at temporary workstations. We recognise that there are advantages in providing new Members with wireless network access (either for their own portable equipment to access the internet or with the laptops provided by the House to access the Parliamentary Network (PN)) and plans for providing wireless access are outlined in paragraph 11. Wireless access would remove the need to cable temporary accommodation for PN access and printing.

The Committee also recommended that, during the initial period of weeks, new Members should have priority access to spaces which are suitable for private meetings with constituents. There are insufficient Committee and meeting rooms to allow any of these to be dedicated in this way without impacting on all Members. However, there are a number of less desirable windowless Members’ rooms in the Upper Committee Corridor which might be made available for new Members’ private meetings. A booking system would need to be used to control allocations. In future, we will include a list of available meeting rooms across the Parliamentary Estate in welcome packs; such rooms could be included as part of a guided tour for new Members.

Committee Recommendation 4

*Speeding up the allocation of offices and providing adequate temporary accommodation is a better solution to new Members’ accommodation needs than allocating them vacant offices on a temporary basis.* (Paragraph 23)

We agree.

Committee Recommendation 14

*We recommend that the House Service should investigate whether defeated Members could be allowed longer than a week after polling day in which to clear their offices without delaying the allocation of accommodation to serving Members.* (Paragraph 42)

Extending the current week will inevitably delay the availability of those offices for new Members. Given the Committee’s view that a priority must be to have all new Members in their permanent accommodation within one month of the election, it is not practicable to allow a general extension. However, it is usually possible to accommodate individual special cases and the House Service will continue to do its best to do so.
Written evidence submitted by Kate Green MP

Many thanks for the invitation to offer views on induction arrangements for new MPs.

These are entirely personal views, and in no way intended to detract from the very warm welcome I received from staff everywhere I went. Everyone seemed pleased to see and meet new members (!), keen to get to know us, and anxious to help us in every way they could. I really want to place on record my appreciation for the friendliness and patience I encountered everywhere I went.

But in 30 years of working life, I have never found myself in such an alien working environment. Not having an office for the first several weeks left me totally disoriented, unable to focus on getting to grips with the job, and very stressed. Emily Thornberry very kindly accommodated me at first, but without her kindness, and had I not inherited experienced and very competent staff from my predecessor, my constituents would undoubtedly have suffered, as I simply wouldn’t have been able to deal in any sort of systematic way with their issues, queries and problems, and would have been left with a terrible backlog. I appreciate the complexities of office allocation, but if anything could be done to speed that up, it would help.

A map of the estate would be useful!

I understand that IPSA have confirmed that, in future, new MPs will not be left ludicrously out of pocket while awaiting reimbursement for accommodation and office set-up costs. This didn’t greatly affect me, but I am conscious of the pressure it put on colleagues. It was frankly intolerable. I hope the committee will ensure the new processes operate effectively so that no new MP is left ever again having to fund set-up costs out of their own resources. It is particularly disastrous for those who don’t have private means.

On staffing, I found, and still find, an exasperating mix of micro management of my staffing decisions (why does IPSA dictate job titles, for example?), complexity (the guidance for MPs section, though improving, is still quite hard to navigate—finding even something as basic as pay scales usually takes me a few minutes to unearth), and poor service design (why can we only call IPSA in the afternoon, and why does it take 24 hours to get an email response to the simplest staffing query). Every time I recruit a new staff member, it takes a huge chunk of my and my office manager’s time to sort the paperwork. Anything that could streamline the process would help both new MPs, and now when coping with changes to existing staff teams.

My fault entirely, but I missed almost all of the early training sessions because I didn’t realise they were happening until too late (a result of living in office chaos, see above!) More advertising of these events, including by personal email to new MPs, would help. The session I did attend (the initial welcome session in the first week, held in the Chamber) was excellent. I especially welcomed meeting the senior staff. The security briefing was useful.

I understand I should have been presented with some sort of information pack by the returning officer at my election. I wasn’t. That’s not the fault of Parliament, of course, but drawing together an essential pack of information, in one place, unfailingly delivered to every new MP, would be invaluable.

Finally, I recommend a process is established for gathering very early and systematic feedback from the 2015 intake. I still think it’s an alien working environment. But a lot of my early impressions have begun to fade. Asking new MPs in their first few weeks about their experiences would I’m sure offer an interesting and useful perspective. It would be great if the Committee could put this in hand.

26 January 2013

Written evidence submitted by Nicky Morgan MP

Many thanks for your invitation to comment on induction arrangements for new MPs after General Elections.

I feel very strongly that MPs are completely unprepared (particularly those who have never worked in Westminster and we do want those types of MPs!) that they are, in effect, about to start running a small business especially in terms of employing staff. Accommodation needs to be sorted out much more quickly—I have never arrived in any job where I did not have a permanent desk and a telephone on the first day.

There is absolutely no training on how to employ staff. There should be much more guidance and training on how to set up our offices and employ people (including guidance on the contracts and job descriptions to be issued)—in fact, I think all candidates should be written to once the election has been called and they should be invited to be considering these things during the course of the campaign. I believe that the House of Commons should provide a secretarial pool for the first 6 weeks—one of our first tasks is trying to deal with a mountain of correspondence and invitations. This is not political and could be handled by any efficient secretary on a temporary basis. I also think this sort of pool arrangement would avoid a lot of the hasty employment of staff which results from the sheer panic to get sorted—these arrangements then have to be unwound as it turns out that the staffing relationships don’t work at all well.

Office costs also have to be addressed. I know that IPSA now have a budget for initial office costs but no doubt that relies on making claims in the normal way so the MP has to pay out for stationery etc. for themselves and their London and constituency staff putting a huge financial pressure on MPs who have probably earnt
nothing for at least the previous month if they have given up/taken leave from their previous employment in order to fight their seat. IPSA must ensure their credit card has sufficient credit to cover all necessary start-up costs for all office and London accommodation.

31 January 2013

Written evidence submitted by Adam Afriyie MP

Thank you for your letter regarding the Administration Committee’s inquiry into induction arrangements for new Members after the next general election.

May I recommend that a series of short sessions on science and statistics be implemented as a formal part of the induction process in 2015. These sessions needn’t be more than one hour in duration, and I would suggest that there would be just three main sessions:

1. The scientific approach to life and policy-making—testing hypotheses against data.
2. The proper use of statistics. I am certain that the Royal Society and the Royal Statistical Society would be keen to be involved in some capacity.
3. A one hour session subdivided into a series of short, snappy sections on the topical scientific policy issues of the day. These might be led by eminent writers on science with excellent presentation skills such as Ben Goldacre and Simon Singh.

As Chair of the Parliamentary Office of Science & Technology (POST) and former Shadow Minister for Science & Innovation, I am keen to see science literacy training established as a core component of the induction programme. Evidence-based policy-making will help deliver the jobs and economic growth that our country needs, so it is vital that the value of a scientific approach to policy-making is engrained from the very start.

Please do contact my office if you think that POST might be of assistance in developing these proposals for the purposes of your inquiry.

30 January 2013

Written evidence submitted by Therese Coffey MP

Office accommodation—the shared offices were very good. It helped to share knowledge. Printers etc from memory worked well and stationery kept filled up. Lockers were difficult to manage. There were paper bins there but it was very difficult to manage so much stuff coming in.

Security information—fine.

IT—generally OK in Westminster. However, the constituency was a different story. It was not made clear in any way that there was a contract with Virgin Media to connect constituency offices.

I don’t recall any advice on training or employment of staff.

Orientation—I think I found my own way around but overall information was fine.

IPSA induction was a disaster. I know that’s not your responsibility but worth stating again. No test system available, just handouts and no capability in answering any questions. It started getting better once they had some full-time staff to help.

Parliamentary procedures—this was covered in the Chamber but not in any great depth...enough to get us going I think.

I would have liked some more training on aspects like libel, Data Protection Act and coverage of Freedom of Information Act with regard to our work.

11 February 2013

Written evidence submitted by Alex Cunningham MP

Thank you for your letter of 15 January and I apologise for not responding before now. I hope I am not too late.

Addressing each of the matters you raise on induction in turn.

The hot desk system was great on arrival with fellow new MPs working together getting to know each other and learning from each other too. It would have been helpful to have known just how offices would be allocated—I found out by chance it was through the accommodation whip. No-one from Parliament or Labour Party told me this.
I had one staff member in place and two others very quickly and once I understood the system it was straightforward though IPSA were extremely slow in processing stuff. Something up front in an induction pack would have been helpful.

Excellent induction and quick action from PICT to get my offices up and running in both the constituency and Westminster.

I was at one stage owed some £5,000 by IPSA whose service was appalling when it came to processing claims and eventually came up with an advance to help tied us over. It needs to be made available immediately. Not everyone had the means I had to ride out a £5,000 shortfall for what proved to be months. IPSA have got better but a system where it costs more to process some claims than the value to the claim needs to be looked at very seriously. IPSA need to do better to prepare for new MPs arriving.

I never had any training on parliamentary procedures and training and wasn’t aware of any available. A seminar and guide would have been most helpful.

Information services were fine—but you don’t know what you don’t know.

The parliament staff person who took me on a tour was excellent—everything from the toilets to the Commons chamber was covered and this one to one was extremely helpful—that said I am still orientating myself discovering new routes and places I never knew existed.

I hope my comments are useful.

18 February 2013

Written evidence submitted by Duncan Hames MP

Thank you for your letter dated 15 January regarding the support for new MPs.

I appointed temporary staff in May 2010 and ran a full recruitment process for permanent staff shortly after. For the recruitment of my permanent staff I made full use of the House of Commons Personnel Service throughout the process and found their support to be invaluable. Based on this experience, I would have made use of the Personnel Service even earlier.

In order to enable the service to provide this level of support to a potentially large number of new Members, it may be necessary to temporarily increase the resources available to it at the start of a new Parliament.

As a new MP in a newly formed constituency there was no infrastructure in place to support me with my constituency business, including casework. For office accommodation I had to use my party’s campaigning office until I was able to source office accommodation and move in. PICT would not supply IT equipment before this move happened. My staff therefore had to use their own and the party’s IT equipment until August 2010.

New MPs could therefore benefit from assistance from the House or IPSA in searching for accommodation, who could present them with potential options. This may in turn aid the more timely provision of services to constituents.

I hope that this is helpful. Please do not hesitate to contact me if there are any issues you would like to discuss further.

15 February 2013

Written evidence submitted by Paul Blomfield MP

Thank you for getting in touch and giving me the opportunity to provide some insights from my experience as a new MP in June 2010. Overall, while there was a considerable amount to learn in a relatively short space of time, I found much of the induction formally provided to be very helpful.

To look at the specific aspects you identify:

— Induction programme in general—it would have been helpful to have had a clearer programme in advance of arriving—maybe from the Returning Officer at the Count? I know I missed some very useful sessions because I was not sufficiently clear well enough in advance;

— Office accommodation—I was fortunate in being offered space in another MP’s office which I found to be a more useful interim solution than the hot desk facilities offered. However it did seem to take an inordinate amount of time to resolve individual office accommodation even appreciating the huge changes at that election.

— Advice and training on employment of staff—I did not take advantage of this as I have had previous experience of employing staff and HR in general as had the person I had employed to undertake this function alongside me, but for colleagues without experience this is essential;
— Financial support and the relationship with IPSA—induction into these arrangements will I assume be more straightforward in the future as many of the practical elements have been simplified and key budgets combined. However it would have been useful had me and my proxy had the opportunity to do the training together rather than separate training for MPs and staff, particularly those based in the constituency. And to have training which focussed more on the “rules” rather than the operational processes would have been helpful;

— Training in parliamentary procedures and activities—I would have appreciated more training in these areas although I probably didn’t take full advantage of all available due to not having a sufficiently detailed programme in advance.

I hope my comments will be helpful.

20 February 2013

Written evidence submitted by Susan Plimmer-Clark, Parliamentary Office Manager for Nicky Morgan MP

One of the most pressing issues developing seems to be the urgent need for a data base system, backed up and properly funded by the Commons.

Hundreds of Members are on CMITS, but a promised upgrade has not happened and there is a sense that these things should not be left to chance. Much is simply done by email now, but records still need to be kept. Constituent problems, complaints and comments need to be tracked. There is a working group looking at this, so I expect those results will feed into your enquiries?

22 January 2013

Further written evidence submitted by Susan Plimmer-Clark, Parliamentary Office Manager for Nicky Morgan MP

Here are some further points for your survey into the best arrangements for new offices, from my colleague in the Loughborough constituency office for Nicky Morgan MP.

The space for constituency work is rented from the local Conservative Association, which has a small office in a street in an urban residential part of the town. There is complete separation of the work, but some basic facilities are shared of course.

Immediately after the 2010 election, Nicky appointed her caseworker who was able to start by the end of that first month, but she did not have kit and she notes that it would be useful to be able to start a proper office operation for constituents rather quicker.

Here are her points for your consultation:

— We took a room in the Association building and they happened to have a computer spare. I used this until about July when the Parliament one arrived. We would have been lost without that.

— Similarly with phone lines, we took over the Association fax line which meant that we could advertise the number from Day 1. Ideally a phone line needs to be available immediately in all new constituency offices.

— I either did not know about it, or it wasn’t available at the time, but instead of being given an email address and remote access, I didn’t get a Parliamentary email address until the PC arrived. I therefore used my own email address for a few months. As a consequence, I still receive emails every now and then from constituents on my personal email address.

— PICT were at the time (and still are) always very helpful. We had some significant difficulties in getting the printer to talk to our computers in the constituency office and in the end we were dealt with by someone working for Hewlett Packard in India, but PICT kept in touch throughout to make sure all turned out well. The printer itself is superb (Hp Color LaserJet CM2320fxi MFP).

— I understand that Parliament has a telecommunications agreement with Virgin, so our broadband is with them. I have BT at home in a village about two miles away from the office and it seems far quicker than Virgin. The speed of the Virgin line reduces a great deal during school holidays, on Friday afternoons and for some odd reason on Tuesday’s we regularly have a problem and have to switch off and on again.

— We had a huge number of constituent cases at the beginning who had already been to the previous MP and came to Nicky for another try. We had no paperwork from the previous MP and had to start again in many cases. There will be data protection reasons for this, but if there is any way to address that for other constituencies in the future, it would be most helpful, mainly for the constituents themselves.
The benefits of a constituency database should be promoted from Day 1. I had worked for the Citizen’s Advice Bureau, so I set up an excel spreadsheet and filing system along their lines. It would have been impossible to keep track of all the cases without it. We now have CMITs which is excellent in many ways. They have let themselves down slightly by offering to make the system web based and then failing to do this, but the actual database is very user friendly and I wouldn’t be without it. It is equal to, if not better than the CAB system.

In addition to these points, I would like to say:

— Members really need five PC’s and probably two laptops as a basic start up.
— They need a database service, properly funded and IT supported and preferably universal in its supply to all offices. As of this morning, after 32 months in office, Nicky Morgan and her caseworkers have 2,910 cases.

24 January 2013

Written evidence submitted by the Royal Society of Chemistry

The Royal Society of Chemistry (RSC) welcomes the opportunity to respond to the House of Commons Administration Select Committee inquiry into induction arrangements for new Members of Parliament after the next General Election.

The RSC is the UK Professional Body for chemical scientists and an international Learned Society for advancing the chemical sciences. Supported by a network of over 49,600 members worldwide and an internationally acclaimed publishing business, our activities span education and training, conferences and science policy, and the promotion of the chemical sciences to the public.

This document represents the views of the RSC. The RSC’s Royal Charter obliges it to serve the public interest by acting in an independent advisory capacity.

RSC Response

The RSC urges that an induction to the sources, and application, of scientific evidence and advice in government be included within the induction process for new Members of Parliament. Over the last century, science has played an ever increasing role in meeting the challenges of modern society. Ageing, environmental change, food security, energy, the digital revolution and security are just a few of the great challenges of today. Moreover, science performs a central role in the developed economies of the world.

In the UK, it is widely accepted by the Coalition Government and main Opposition that investment in scientific research is critical to both economic growth and the maintenance of the UK’s competitive position in the global market. This leading position can only be sustained if investment in scientific research is maintained and improved and the Government commits to actions based upon science and evidence-based policy making.

Modern governments are ever faced with conflicting demands for allocations of financial resources from stakeholders in various domains such as health, education, housing or transport. Perhaps, therefore, it is not surprising that a scientific background is not deemed to be an important consideration for the selection of MPs. In the current coalition government of 650 MPs only approximately 10% can be said to have a background or interest in science, technology, engineering or maths (STEM).

In one respect, this lack of parliamentary expertise is not uncommon since MPs deal with a whole host of issues in which few MPs, if any, have specialist knowledge. Nevertheless, an understanding of science and evidence-based policy making is, in the RSC’s opinion, an essential requirement to effective decision-making in Government. This has been recognised in the prominent position given to evidence for policy making within the civil service reform plan, and the recent report from the Behavioural Insights Team in the Cabinet Office on using randomised controlled trials in policy making.

The RSC too works to meet this knowledge deficit by running a Parliamentary Links Scheme—providing MPs with details of a named RSC member in their constituency to whom the MP can turn to for advice on chemical science issues. Currently, the RSC has 100 or so of its members “linked” to MPs.

In a report commissioned last year by the Parliamentary and Scientific Committee, Lord Oxburgh spoke of the wealth of resource available to parliamentarians seeking knowledge on STEM issues, whilst stating that “not all the existing resources are as well known or as accessible as they could be.”

5 http://sciencecampaign.org.uk/?page_id=1543
8 Science & Technology Advice For Parliamentarians, 2012 http://www.vmine.net/scienceinparliament/OXBURGH%20REPORT%20FINAL.pdf
The RSC supports calls from Lord Oxburgh and Adam Afriyie MP to offer new parliamentarians information sessions on sources of scientific advice within Parliament. Incorporating these sessions as a recommended component of a Member of Parliament’s induction to the House, and offering them periodically for current Members can only serve to assist them in their new roles and help maintain a high quality of policymaking.

The RSC would be very happy to help and support the provision of science induction sessions for MPs or indeed to discuss this submission or related matters with the House of Commons Administration Select Committee.

5 February 2013

Written evidence submitted by Dr Emma Crewe, School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS)

Challenges Facing New MPs and Implications for Induction

Members of Parliament report difficulties in adjusting to their new roles (see Hansard Society reports and p4 for a summary of my research methods). The process of MPs developing expertise is complex and changing because:

1. MPs are diverse, especially in their level of education, age, gender, and past work experience, so different aspects of learning are easier for some than others. MPs who have already worked in Westminster in another capacity (eg, as a researcher for an MP) have an advantage but will have seen the work from a different perspective.

   The skills required to be a good backbench MP (or PPS) are varied: public speaking (chamber, committee, TV, radio, huge audiences, smaller groups); chairing and questioning; debating and negotiating; drafting and amending text; counselling, social work and advocacy; remembering briefings, speeches, rules, people etc.; maintaining good relationships with whips, local party, officials, constituency groups, other MPs; managing staff and the House of Commons administration; marketing, campaigning and canvassing; assess security risks; setting up and maintaining information systems (database/filing/IT); writing blogs, tweets, articles, books, policy papers etc.; policy development; to name a few in no particular order. But not all MPs undertake all these activities and some do still others (eg, frontbenchers whipping or working in government). Despite (or perhaps because of) this range some MPs have talked about a deskilling that can take place as a Member.

   Members interests vary greatly and change over time, with some more interested in committee work while others focus more on legislation, policy issues, party politics or constituents’ concerns at different times in their career.

   — Induction, training and continuing professional development (CPD) provision need to take account of the very different needs, skills, interests and priorities of MPs over their whole career. The content, form and timing need to be flexible and varied. This might include events (including debates) but also mentoring, peer group learning, mentoring, virtual learning, videos, and teaching.

2. Any politician has to give the impression of confidence, as their work is about winning support from various audiences, but some feel insecure, lonely or uncertain. It can be difficult to be seen attending induction or training courses as MPs are expected to be proficient in all things at all times, which may partly account for low attendance at induction sessions in the past.

   MPs do not share good practice as much as they might partly due to their highly competitive environment and also because there is a pressure to behave as if they are already expert. Most rely on guidance from Commons’ officials, some seek advice from those in other parties, while others rely on neighbouring MPs from the same party. On the other hand, learning about some aspects of all the roles (in Westminster and in constituencies) can only be done within political parties.

   — Consider avoiding words like “training” and “induction”, if likely to conjure up ideas of learners be lectured at by experts. Name the sessions according to content and make it plain why it will be invaluable. Encourage more discursive and varied sessions—both in party and cross-party (see suggestions below).

3. Media scrutiny and expectations increase by the day. MPs have to spend a huge amount of time on communication and publicity (in the broadest sense). Women can sometimes face particularly abusive or trivialising scrutiny (especially from certain journalists, bloggers and internet “trolls”).

   — Consider a session on dealing with the media led by MPs, probably in parties and/or by gender, led by MPs with outside experts invited to contribute.
4. The pressure on MPs’ time is considerable and growing. Constituency work is becoming far more demanding. This is the immediate and urgent concern for brand new MPs. New MPs have to deal with a backlog of constituency correspondence before they have even had time to set up offices.

MPs are under intense pressure to win and maintain support, including with their electors, within their constituency as well as in Westminster. Many MPs report that for some of them it is extremely difficult to prioritise, turn groups away or assess their own effectiveness and impact. The way they delegate work to staff varies considerably.

— Early advice about setting up a constituency office is vital especially when the seat switches political party. Consider also a highly discursive session on time management, prioritising and measuring effectiveness led by MPs with outside experts invited to contribute.

5. MPs’ staff in Westminster share knowledge and advice but staff in constituency offices have fewer opportunities to do so. The latter can feel isolated and under-appreciated.

All staff depend on their MP to value, invest and plan staff training and continuing professional development but some neglect this role. This is part of a broader need for more guidance for MPs on management. Although the HR advice service in the House of Commons is highly rated, poor managers do not always recognise their management failings. This is not just important for running effective offices, and ensuring good management practice for the benefit of MPs’ staff, but is a reputational risk for parliament if not addressed.

— Induction, support and training in both constituencies and in Westminster should be as much (or more) for MPs’ staff as MPs themselves. Strongly encourage management guidance and training for new MPs and provide more support to MPs’ staff, including their organisations (MAPSA and UNITE).

Suggestions for Induction 2015 and beyond

The world of induction and learning is a fast changing one. Experts have realised that conventional didactic training events can often be dull, abstract and too generalised (the 2010 Commons sessions were none of these things, according to MPs; they were much appreciated). The result can be a disconnect between the training and what you need to know and learn at a given time. Passively receiving information is not usually effective as a teaching/learning method although lectures can be useful in combination with other methods that respond to diversity of needs as well as different types of learning.

Different types of learning in the work of MPs include:

1. Rules, procedures and conventions—easier than other types of knowledge to learn from books, web, apps, videos, Commons officials when the information is needed and less useful to learn/discuss in groups because they are less contestable. Flexible timing is important.

2. Processes and management—scrutinising a draft bill or setting up and running a constituency office are examples of this type of learning. Some early induction into the key roles would lend itself well to induction, but it also means learning on the job for which on-going advice, mentoring and peer learning are useful. Sharing and discussing experiences with other staff/MPs may be helpful.

3. Knowledge acquisition—knowledge related to a particular government department, select committee or region of the UK, are examples of this type of learning. This happens mainly by learning on the job, but sharing and discussing experiences with other MPs, academics and others may be useful.

4. Expertise and skills development—whether becoming a good manager, performing in the chamber or being good at asking questions in committees, these mostly skills are learned through doing. Discussion with established MPs, and outsiders (actors, managers, speech therapists, memory experts, lawyers, media trainers), or even some role-play, could be useful early on.

MPs have a unique job and what they do is up to them and their electorates. Ideas about the various roles within the job of MP are inevitably political, so induction and CPD should not involve telling MPs what to do as if it was uncontested. The work of politicians cannot be detached from politics. For this reason it makes sense to take an even more discursive approach to induction and training than usual. Rather than listening to lectures, MP-led events and processes—where various conflicting viewpoints are put—would be livelier and better reflect the political nature of MPs’ work.

So if planning induction as part of a longer-term process of continuing professional development, in the first few weeks the House might consider producing a flexible programme of events, apps, videos and mentoring. The information about this programme could be handed to new MPs when they collect their pass. Some of these could be open to MPs’ staff:

— Session in the Chamber, as in 2010, with the Clerk, the Serjeant-at-Arms, the Leader of the House, and the Shadow Leader. This was extremely popular with new MPs.
— Other sessions with clerks and other officials so that MPs have an early opportunity to develop relationships with those working in the Commons.
— Apps and videos about rules, procedures, IT and where to go for clerky or other advice.
— A directory explaining where/who to go to for advice about different aspects of the work.
— Suggesting that the whips establish a mentoring system taking account of the party and type of constituency.
— Suggesting that the whips establish a peer group learning process taking account of the party and type of constituency. Groups of 8–12 MPs or MPs staff could meet regularly to exchange good practice and ideas about how to be effective with a professional facilitator. At the most intensive end, it could even be done as a doctorate in management, eg, at the University of Hertfordshire, http://www.herts.ac.uk/courses/DManMA-by-Research_details.cfm).
— A half day workshop on public speaking with former MPs, established MPs, actors (Kenneth Branagh?), and top after-dinner speech-makers.
— A workshop on performing in the chamber with small groups of new MPs (possibly within their own party only) with a clerk, speech therapist, voice coach and skilled MP giving them the opportunity to practise speeches or question and answer sessions.
— A session on dealing with the media with MPs, former MPs, peers, bloggers, tweeters and journalists (eg, Caroline Quinn, Mark D’Arcy and Nick Robinson, BBC).
— A session for new MPs and staff on navigating IPSA with both members of the Speaker’s Committee and IPSA.
— A seminar on chairing and sitting on public bill and select committees with chairs, MP members, committee clerks, academics, lawyers and witness reflecting on what works and what wastes time.
— A two-hour discussion with Chair and Members of the Backbench Business Committee, and some prominent backbenchers, on how to make the most of this committee.
— A two-hour discussion about managing staff—strongly encouraged—led by an MP with substantial experience in this area and supported by external experts.
— A two-hour discussion about how to set up a constituency office (data management, security, local media etc.) and how to prioritise when representing constituents within parties led by long-standing MPs.

It might be worth consulting existing MPs with a range of options to see what they think would be most popular and useful. It is also advisable to get feedback on events, IT and processes to see what works for which MPs/MPs’ staff.

The Research

These observations are based on findings produced by a Leverhulme Trust-funded research project carried out by Emma Crewe. The aim of this project is to explore the nature of MPs’ work, how it is changing and how and why it varies between MPs. To get beneath the surface appearances of social life, anthropologists observe, converse, interpret and make sense of multiple views. Between October 2011 to March 2013 I conducted 79 formal interviews (including 40 MPs, 11 MPs’ staff and 11 officials); carrying out informal interviews and observing the chamber, committees and other meetings; followed press/TV/web stories and social media (especially twitter); visited seven constituencies (during which I talked to more staff as well as MPs and constituents); tracked pre-legislative and legislative scrutiny of one bill; and followed the Eastleigh by-election with MPs and activists from the three major parties. In addition to interview notes, I have recorded the observations in a log of 318 pages. I also interviewed 18 peers who were former MPs during an earlier study (1998–2002).

Dr Emma Crewe
Leverhulme Research Fellow
4 April 2013