ADMINISTRATION COMMITTEE

PUBLIC NOTE OF THE MEETING HELD ON TUESDAY 28 FEBRUARY 2006 AT 3.30 PM
IN COMMITTEE ROOM 16

Members present:

Mr Frank Doran, in the Chair

Mr Bob Ainsworth  Helen Jones
Janet Anderson  David Lepper
Frank Dobson  Peter Luff
Mr Brian H. Donohoe  Mr Andrew Robathan
Mr Eric Forth  John Thurso
Mr Neil Gerrard  Pete Wishart

Apologies: Derek Conway, Mr Mark Harper, Mr Kevan Jones.

In attendance: Sue Harrison (Director of Catering Services) (for item 6)
Morounke Akingbola (Business Development Manager, Refreshment Department) (for item 6)
Helen Irwin (Clerk of Committees) (for item 7)
James Robertson (Assistant Serjeant at Arms) (for items 7 and 8)
Malcolm Hay (Curator of Works of Art) (for item 9)
Jill Pay (Assistant Serjeant at Arms) (for item 9)
Matthew Taylor (Director of Operations, PICT) (for item 10)

1. CONSIDERATION OF DRAFT AGENDA

The Committee agreed to the draft agenda.

2. INFORMAL NOTES AND MATTERS ARISING

The Committee agreed the informal notes of the meeting on 14 February.
3. **ACCOMMODATION**

The Committee considered how to proceed with its inquiry.

The Committee agreed to postpone its discussions originally scheduled for 14 March until more detailed plans of the Estate had been made available.

The Committee agreed that its initial discussions (at a date to be arranged) should include the Accommodation Whips, the Serjeant at Arms, the Director of Estates and HoK, the firm of consultants involved in the Accommodation Review. It was likely that additional dates would need to be set aside for further discussions with representatives of various occupants of the Estate.

The Committee agreed to visit Members’ offices and other accommodation on the Estate.

4. **DEVELOPING VISITOR FACILITIES FOR PARLIAMENT**

The Committee agreed to appoint a sub-committee to conduct an inquiry with the following terms of reference:

To consider the viability of a parliamentary visitor centre, with particular reference to the Abingdon Green site.

The Committee agreed that all Members of the Committee should be Members of the sub-committee and that the Chairman of the Committee should be the Chairman of the sub-committee.

The Committee delegated to the Chairman the power to set the date and time of the first meeting of the sub-committee, which it was hoped to hold concurrently with the House of Lords Information Committee.

5. **MEMBERS’ POSTAGE AND STATIONERY**

The Committee considered further how to respond to the House of Commons Commission on this matter.

As responses had not yet been received from all of the main political parties, the Committee agreed to postpone further discussion of the item until its next meeting.
6. REFRESHMENT DEPARTMENT TRADING FORECAST 2005-06
AND BUDGET PROPOSALS 2006-07

The Committee considered Refreshment Department subsidy and pricing options for 2006–07.

The Director of Catering Services noted that the budget proposals for 2006–07 did not take account of recommendations made by the Committee in its report on Refreshment Department Services, as the proposals had been drawn up during January when the Committee was still deliberating on its inquiry. The price of items for sale at under £1 had been frozen for the last year following two consecutive above-inflation price rises, and the Director recommended that they should continue to be frozen for a further financial year, as the minimum price increase on any item was 5p. The General Election in 2005, and the impact that had on the number of sitting days, made it difficult for the Refreshment Department to assess accurately whether the previous year’s price increases had had an adverse affect on sales, but the Department had received very little customer feedback on the price increases. Any decision on pricing would be coupled with efficiency improvements within the Department, which would help to reduce the subsidy.

Issues arising during the discussion included the gross profit margin on House of Commons souvenir goods sold to visitors in Westminster Hall and the fact that this differed from the profit margin applied by the House of Lords to their goods on sale in the same outlet; and the projected increase in the cost of late-night travel for staff because of a likely rise in taxi fares.

The Director also asked the Committee for its views on the future of a late-night cafeteria service for staff in 7 Millbank.

The Committee agreed to make the following recommendations to the Finance & Services Committee:

- That Refreshment Department menu prices for 2006–07 should be increased by 2.5 per cent on items costing more than £1;

- That a more practical and less costly solution for the provision of refreshment for late-night staff in 7 Millbank should be sought as an alternative to the continuation of the trial evening service in the Portcullis Cafeteria.
7. **SURVEY OF SERVICES**

The Committee considered a proposal from the Board of Management for the next Survey of Services of Members and Members’ staff. The Clerk of Committees explained that a separate survey of House staff would be conducted.

Views emerging during the discussion included:

- That it was important to take measures in reaction to survey results and to communicate these measures if the response rate was to be improved.
- That it was important to ensure that the survey covered all important services for Members and their staff while remaining sufficiently focussed and not too lengthy.
- That the survey should seek comment on issues rather than merely asking those surveyed to fill in tick-boxes.
- The preference for providing the survey in hard copy rather than on-line.

The Committee agreed that Members of the Committee and their staff should provide the pilot for the survey.

The Committee nominated Janet Anderson to sit on the Survey of Services Project Board, and agreed that the Project Board should provide periodic updates to the Committee on the progress of the survey.

8. **SOFAS IN MEMBERS’ OFFICES**

Further to the Committee’s discussions on 18 October 2005, the Committee considered how the remaining sofas in storage should be allocated to Members.

The Committee agreed that the remaining sofas in storage should be allocated to Members on a first come first served basis.

9. **EXHIBITION IN PORTCULLIS HOUSE**

The Committee considered and agreed to a recommendation from the Advisory Committee on Works of Art for the design of an exhibition to be held in Portcullis House atrium between 18 September and 26 October 2006 marking the bicentenary of the deaths of Charles James Fox and William Pitt. The recommended design option involved mounting displays above the water features in the atrium, which would be drained. The Curator noted that the exhibition structure could be reconfigured and reused in the future. Issues raised during the discussion included the loss of the water features during Open House weekend, balanced against the lack of the usual display space in Westminster Hall this year owing to ongoing works.
10. MEMBERS’ IT REFRESH

The Committee discussed the progress of the Members’ IT Refresh with the Director of Operations (PICT). Issues raised included:

- The amount of paperwork that Members were being asked to complete.
- The length of time being taken for delivery, installation and problem resolution.
- The need for engineers to be available at weekends, when Members were in the constituency.
- The suggestion that peripherals might more sensibly be bought by individual Members rather than provided centrally.

The Director of Operations noted that his report already covered some of these points, and told the Committee that the Refresh was being rolled out to Members’ constituency offices and homes in tranches which would be completed by July 2006. Equipment was only purchased once orders were placed, and orders could only be placed once a site survey had been arranged and carried out and once details of existing equipment and network configuration had been provided. This might appear bureaucratic and time-consuming, but was essential to enable successful data transfer and to re-establish local networks and other arrangements. The equipment being rolled out was upgraded by the supplier over time, so those Members in the later tranches would receive more modern equipment than those in the earlier ones.

PICT was also undertaking a separate project seeking to improve IT support in the constituency. A detailed questionnaire had been sent out to Members in relation to this, and 22 constituency offices had been visited. This had produced a lot of very useful information, but some Members seemed mistakenly to have associated this exercise with the IT refresh and as a result might have thought it unnecessarily complicated. The Members’ Estimate Committee had recently agreed to greater flexibility in the allocation of desktop and laptop computers and this would apply initially to those tranches which had yet to be delivered.

11. ANY OTHER BUSINESS

The Committee agreed to seek a progress report on the works in Westminster Hall.

12. DATE AND TIME OF NEXT MEETING

The Committee agreed to hold its next meeting on Tuesday 14th March 2006 at 3.30pm.