Visitor Access and Facilities

First Report of Session 2012–13

Volume I: Report, together with formal minutes and oral evidence

Written evidence is contained in Volume II, available on the Committee website at www.parliament.uk/ac

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The Administration Committee

The Administration Committee is appointed to consider the services provided by and for the House of Commons. It also looks at services provided to the public by Parliament, including visitor facilities, the Parliament website and education services.

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

Geoffrey Clifton-Brown MP (Conservative, The Cotswolds)
Bob Russell MP (Liberal Democrat, Colchester)
Angela Smith MP (Labour, Penistone and Stocksbridge)
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Additional written evidence may be published on the internet only.

Committee staff

The current staff of the Committee are David Weir (Clerk), Keith Neary (Second Clerk), Dawn Brown (Committee Assistant) and Liz Parratt (Media Officer).

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1 Introduction

1. Approximately 1 million people enter the parliamentary estate every year as visitors rather than as Members or staff of the two Houses of Parliament. Their reasons for doing so are varied, ranging from official appointments as witnesses to Select Committees to visits as constituents or tourists who wish to see inside one of the United Kingdom’s most famous buildings. The two Houses must balance the business needs of a fully working legislature and those of a visitor attraction. This raises various challenges, not least the logistical difficulty of ensuring that the work of Parliament is not adversely affected by the presence of ‘non-business’ visitors while simultaneously ensuring that those people obtain a full and rewarding experience of the operation, art, history and heritage of their Parliament.

2. The Commons and the Lords are publicly committed to opening the Houses of Parliament to visitors. The Commons, in its strategy to 2015, specifically includes “making the House more welcoming to the public” among its means of earning respect for the House as our central democratic institution.\(^1\) Since 1997, the Commons has been formally committed to bringing more people on to the estate, particularly for educational purposes, as well as to taking the House’s work, history and heritage out to the public via the website, the education service and an outreach service that now has House of Commons staff working in various regions of the UK.

3. To some degree, that commitment has been fulfilled. Some 123,468 people visited the public gallery in the House of Commons in 2010–11, and another 122,084 enjoyed tours sponsored by Members of Parliament.\(^2\) The number of schoolchildren making a visit rises each year and is about 40,000 annually, the UK Youth Parliament has had four annual sittings, using both Chambers, and the opening of parliamentary buildings to paying visitors during the summer recesses and on Saturdays has proved that a significant proportion of the 30 million people estimated to visit the Westminster area each year are extremely interested in seeing the inside of one of the world’s most iconic buildings. Saturday opening and summer recess opening have also demonstrated considerable interest in the place.

4. Parliament is first and foremost a working institution, and that implies clear principles for how access is organised. Democratic access to the work of Parliament must remain free and open, enabling any citizen, at least so far as physical space allows, open access to sittings in the two Chambers, in the Committee Rooms and in Westminster Hall, or to meet their Member of Parliament. Other visitor access to the buildings must always be secondary to the primary purpose of the working institution.

5. It is necessary, however, that Members and staff of both Houses recognise a second, complementary concept of “Parliament”—as a visitor attraction. This raises new questions about how to make the buildings accessible to the public on the 200-plus days of the year.

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\(^2\) House of Commons Commission, Annual Report 2010/11, p. 37
when one or other House, and usually both, are not sitting. Until now, commercial opening—unknown and unthinkable a decade ago—has been conducted on a partial cost-recovery basis. But the two Houses face financial challenges—the Commons seeks to reduce its overall budget by 17 per cent by 2014–15 against its 2010–11 baseline. The idea of recouping through charging for tours some of the running costs of providing Parliament—around £231 million for Commons administration in 2010–11—is gaining ground, particularly as a means of raising the funds for the maintenance and renovation of the palace buildings.

6. The two Houses already defray the costs of providing some services through activities that generate a surplus—notably banqueting events such as dinners and receptions, and the sale of souvenirs. Considerable work needs to be done on how the visitor attraction part of Parliament is best operated, not least in persuading some reluctant Members and staff of both Houses and an often instinctively negative media to recognise the difference between democratic access to the work of the place and interest in its heritage and tourism aspects.

7. The central idea that has emerged in this inquiry is that two conceptions of Parliament are required: the working institution and the visitor attraction. The two should be complementary, not in conflict, and some of the tensions that presently arise from, for example, queues outside the building and the consequent delay of business meetings for Members and others would be resolved if the two concepts were more rigorously held apart.
2 Purposes of the House of Commons

Legislation and holding the Executive to account

8. The primary purpose of the House of Commons is to be the national Parliament of the United Kingdom. None of what follows is intended to conflict with that purpose, and where there is any clash between the principle of being as open and welcoming to visitors as possible and the primary purpose of the institution, there is no doubt that the latter principle is superior. That proposition is agreed by Members, the House authorities and external bodies. As John Pullinger, the Director-General of Information Services, put it: “Our prime purpose is the business of Parliament; our prime purpose is not to be a historic monument preservation body.” Bernard Donoghue, Director of the Association of Leading Visitor Attractions (ALVA), agrees: “like most museums, galleries and stately homes, being a commercial attraction is not [the House’s] principal purpose for existing”. Dr Ruth Fox, Director of the Hansard Society’s parliament and government programme, added: “the primary function of this building is as a working legislature [...] To my mind, visitor numbers and accessibility have to be managed around that”.

Visitor attraction

9. The House is, however, of considerable interest beyond its primary purpose, and it therefore attracts not just visitors whose business is primarily parliamentary but those who wish to see Members at work or simply to view the building and its art works and to explore the history and heritage aspects of the estate. As John Pullinger told us, the House’s desire to improve the welcome it offers its visitors in fairly large numbers is relatively recent, prompting innovations such as commercial weekend and summer recess tours. Nor does Westminster appear to fare badly in comparison with other European Parliaments in what it offers its visitors: Dr Cristina Leston-Bandeira of the University of Hull, who is conducting a comparative study of how international legislatures deal with the relationship between parliament and citizens, notes that the House of Commons “has a very strong set of public engagement activities and services”, singling out the education service for particular praise.

10. The fact of comparatively recent expansion means, however, that the House is, in some ways, still coming to terms with having large numbers of visitors on site whose presence is not directly tied to the business of the House and its Committees. There are many among both Members and staff of the House whose long experience includes a time when the public had very limited access to the Palace of Westminster. That, allied with the increased security threat of recent years and the need to process visitors through search facilities, can mean that the Palace is not perceived by the public as the most welcoming of institutions. Several difficulties that we identify arise to some degree from institutional slowness to

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3 Q 28
4 Q 234
5 Q 267
6 Q 18
7 Vol. II, Ev w28
respond to a changing environment, notably in resolving the problems of lengthy queues, an absence of cover from the weather for visitors, finding an efficient Visitor Route and identifying and creating suitable facilities for visitors, particularly educational visitors.
3 Types of visitor

Entering parliament

11. Most of the million or so people who visit Parliament each year enter through the Cromwell Green, Portcullis House or Black Rod’s Garden entrances. Different issues arise in relation to different types of visitor—the needs of a witness invited to attend a Select Committee hearing are not identical with those of a tourist who wishes to see Westminster Hall or a visiting constituent wishing to sit in the Public Gallery during Question Time. None the less, at present, all such visitors enter the estate via the three principal entrances.

The fast track

12. Certain visitors are ‘fast-tracked’ through the queuing system, but these are necessarily few: a fast-track system does not work if the proportion of visitors eligible to use it is high. This means that those comparatively few visitors on parliamentary business—witnesses to Select Committees, for example—are able quickly to enter the building. It also means, however, that others, including those holding private meetings with Members of Parliament, attending banqueting events or going to meetings of all-party parliamentary groups (APPGs) will queue alongside members of the public who wish to exercise their democratic right to view parliamentary proceedings or lobby their Member of Parliament without an appointment, and with visitors whose interest is more in art, heritage and history.

13. The current order of priority for fast-track arrangement is as follows:

   **Fast track**

   Visitors connected with the proceedings of the Houses, such as committee witnesses and officials supporting Ministers; and

   Visitors requiring disabled access.

   **Main queue**

   a. invited visitors to meetings with or fixed appointments with Members;

   b. visitors attending banqueting functions;

   c. visitors undertaking a tour;

   d. lobbyists, individual and mass; and

   e. visitors wishing to attend the Galleries or a Committee sitting in public, or view an exhibition.  

   At no time are members of the public prohibited from joining the queue. However, in busy periods visitors are warned of the likely queue time and advised that they may wish to
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return when it is expected to be quieter. Mr Speaker and the Lord Speaker have in the past raised concerns about the impact this system has on those who wish to sit in the public galleries. As John Pullinger told our predecessors: “poor relation in the whole picture is the constituent who happens to be in London, finds their way to Westminster, and, without prior arrangement decides to exercise their democratic right to watch a debate, ask whether they can meet their MP, or simply view the building where decisions affecting their lives are made”.

14. **It is our view that members of the United Kingdom armed forces wearing uniform should also be eligible to be fast-tracked into the House**, both because of their service to the country and because security concerns may arise if they are required to queue in a publicly visible position for any length of time. We appreciate that difficulties would be raised if a substantial number of armed forces personnel were fast-tracked at any one time, but believe that any such significant arrival is likely to have been well organised in advance and that special arrangements should already have been made to deal with it.

15. The present fast-tracking system is designed to ensure that visitors on core parliamentary business are enabled to enter the buildings as quickly as possible. This is entirely sensible and ought to remain the primary purpose of fast-tracking. We shall, however, make some suggestions below in relation to specific entrances to the estate which we believe may relieve pressure on the busiest public entrances. **Fast tracking should remain available only for visitors directly connected with the proceedings of the House and visitors who require disabled access. No fast track system works if access to it is widely spread.**

**The standard queue**

16. The “Main Queue” prioritisation system raises more questions. At present, those who wish to view the House’s proceedings or those who wish to exercise their democratic right to lobby Members are graded beneath those attending banqueting functions or those taking a tour. Ideally, this would raise no difficulty; in practice, long queues presently build up and delay results, both for visitors and for the Members who are hosting their visits. In practice, clearly, this priority system needs to be flexible, and the rigorous application of common sense is required—for example, an invited visitor 90 minutes early for a meeting need not have priority over a constituent whose meeting is in five minutes. However, it is useful to have a set of principles in place to guide the Visitor Assistants tasked with organising the queue. **It is clearly unsatisfactory that those who wish to view the proceedings of the House or its Committees have the lowest priority among visitors.**

We recommend that the ‘Main Queue’ list be revised as follows:

- **Main queue**
  - invited visitors to meetings with or fixed appointments with Members;
  - visitors undertaking a tour;
  - visitors wishing to attend the Galleries or a Committee sitting in public;

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9 Administration Committee, Notes of Discussion, June 2008
d. visitors attending banqueting functions;
e. lobbyists, individual and mass; and
f. visitors wishing to view an exhibition.

Members' tours

17. A significant source of visitors is tours sponsored by Members. The maximum size for a group is 20 per guide; a larger group needs one or more additional sponsors. When the House is sitting tours occur on Mondays, Tuesdays and Wednesdays from 9am to noon (though tours on Wednesday are not full tours after 9.30am), and on Fridays from 3.30pm to 5pm. The tour taken along the Visitor Route (formerly known as the Line of Route) raises some difficulties, which we shall address separately below.

18. Members, or the staff to whom Members delegate the task, meet their guests on arrival in Westminster Hall. Members’ tour timings are staggered (at four-minute intervals) to avoid clashes; they may, however, coincide with the arrival of parties attending other events, such as an APPG or private meeting. This can mean that a Member’s tour group is delayed in entering the Palace, with consequent impact on the Member’s ability to conduct the tour in person. It also means that tours may run into each other if a subsequent tour begins on time. This is clearly unsatisfactory and a poor service to constituents who may be rushed through or disappointed by not having the Member himself or herself present if diary commitments are unable to accommodate a delayed tour.

Courtesies

19. Members’ tours are also sometimes delayed by the actions of Members themselves. John Pullinger told us that: “There is a frequent problem that causes many complaints from Members. They go through the system and book a slot and then their guests are baulked because a large group of people have turned up and are hogging a particular point. That is something that officials, the tours, the visitor services find extremely difficult and frustrating, because at the moment it is almost impossible to challenge these people”.

20. As Head of Visitor Services, Simon Blackburn, was responsible for drawing breaches of the rules by Members to the attention of the Serjeant at Arms and “I was asking the Serjeant to write a couple of letters each week in the summer recess” of 2011. Mr Blackburn also told us that the “rules are broken on a daily basis. The number of breaches this summer [2011] was higher than in recent years and this may be due to the recent influx of new passholders to the Estate. [...] we ask the Serjeant at Arms or Black Rod to write to the Member or passholder involved (including the Member if a passholder they sponsor is in breach).”

21. A further difficulty has in the past arisen from Members telling their visitors that they will be fast-tracked on arrival. This places staff in the position of telling constituents that their Member was wrong to do so, or of wrongly allowing such visitors to jump the queue.
when there is one. Action such as this delays other Members’ guests who are attending meetings with or events organised by other Members who are keeping to the rules. As Simon Blackburn told us: “The length of the queue can be frustrating but it is of no benefit to the system or to the public perception of Parliament if individual Members are seen by the public to overrule staff and the police by plucking their guests out of the queue and moving them into the fast track lane”.

22. Staff must be able, politely, to challenge Members who are breaking, however inadvertently, the rules that regulate tours of the building. The House authorities might more vigorously advertise what those rules are, but it is up to Members themselves, as hosts of our visitors, to know what the rules are and to abide by them, in order that fellow Members who do so are not inconvenienced.

23. Members, quite rightly, have the privilege to conduct their own tours: we also have a responsibility to do so with due consideration for our colleagues. We believe that staff need more robustly to implement well-founded rules fair to us all. We also believe that Members themselves must accept that they cannot break such rules. **Members who do break the rules should if they do so repeatedly face sanctions relating to their right to conduct tours. We recommend that the Commission set such sanctions after suitable consultation with Members.**

24. **The staff and the management of the House should expect the full support of the Commission and Member Committees such as our own when they behave entirely properly in implementing the rules that we, or our predecessors, have created.**

**Weekend and summer opening**

25. The two Houses offers commercial tours to visitors at times when they are not sitting, in the summer recess and on Saturdays. Summer tours for 2012 will be run from Monday to Saturday between 27 July and 1 September from 9.15am to 4.30pm, and again from 19 September to 6 October. Saturday tours have been offered since July 2010 as a two-year experiment, at the end of which an assessment will be made of profitability. The costs of the operation are broadly similar to those for the summer programme with three key additions: the cost of security officers and police who would not otherwise be required on the Estate; the Parliamentary Estates Directorate’s costs for having maintenance staff undertake work on Sunday rather than Saturday; and additional payments to the cleaning contractor. If visitor numbers in the winter suggest that the operation is uneconomical, the options include ending year-round opening and scaling it back to those periods over which it breaks even. Saturday tours, between 9.15am and 4.30pm take about 75 minutes and include the Commons and Lords Chambers, the Queen’s Robing Room, the Royal Gallery and Westminster Hall.

26. The basic charge for both Saturday and summer tours is £15, with concessions for seniors, students, children and members of the armed forces. There is also a family ticket priced at £37 for two adults and two children. The principle underlying the charges has so far been cost-recovery rather than profit for the House, those costs including payment for

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13 Vol. II, w5, para 20
14 Vol II, w6, para 28
tour guides, visitor assistants and security staff. There have been complaints that the charges are high. They are, however, low in comparison with those for major London visitor attractions. The basic charge for the Royal Collection at Buckingham Palace, for example, is £18. Bernard Donoghue said that £15 for the Commons and Lords tour represented ‘fantastic value for money’ in comparison with tours in similar attractions: “If I am being brutally honest, you may well be undercharging”.15

27. The House of Commons Commission is committed to reducing the annual cost of the House service by 17% by 2014/15, based on a Resource Estimate of £231 million for the financial year 2010/11. Accounting for upward cost pressures, such as inflation, the target equates to savings of approximately £44 million a year. Whether income to offset costs can be raised from activities undertaken by the House is a central question in that programme. Clearly, provision of tours on a commercial basis offers some scope.

28. Two questions arise, the second partly contingent on the answer to the other. First, should the House continue to charge for tours on a cost-recovery rather than a profit basis? This raises the thorny question of whether people are being asked to pay to see their own Parliament. We believe that this question is based on a basic misunderstanding, and an elision of Parliament the working institution with Parliament the building. A fundamental distinction needs to be drawn between the work of Parliament and its surrounding elements. Bernard Donoghue argues that there exist two entirely different but complementary ways of accessing Parliament: “The very fact of having a good, rich and sensibly managed visitor experience that is paid for does not undermine at all the nature of free access by all constituents to their MPs”.16 There is, and should never be, any question of charging anyone for any reason to see proceedings in the Chamber or Westminster Hall or a Committee Room. Nor, to the best of our knowledge, has anyone ever suggested that there should be.

29. There is, however, no reason why those who wish to see the buildings and art works or learn about Parliament’s past should not contribute towards the costs of providing that ancillary experience, in the same way that those attending a service at St Paul’s may do so while those who wish to tour the building pay for the experience. As Westminster Abbey and Buckingham Palace, to name but two institutions within a short distance of Westminster, have shown, there is considerable public interest in seeing inside our major public buildings and willingness to pay a reasonable cost for doing so. We recommend that the Commission engage in widespread and effective consultation with Members on the current charging structure for commercial tours and on the costs to the public purse arising from the provision of tours of the Palace and parliamentary estate.

30. Secondly, should tours be extended to run on Sundays and Bank Holidays? If the Commission agrees that charges should rise to provide a surplus to the House from tours instead of their simply covering costs, then the answer to that is clearly yes. Even if no surplus is generated, however, the benefit would be in enabling more people to have access to the Palace of Westminster when it is not working, and on days on which, by their nature, most people are not at their own work and therefore free to visit an attraction. An
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internal report on income generation for the House produced by Tricon Culture Label notes that Sundays and evenings are prime opening time for many visitor attractions, and that the House’s current commercial tour capacity of about 18,000 annually is lower than in comparable institutions.  

We recommend that the Commission approve the introduction of commercial tours on Sundays and Bank Holidays to enable the maximum number of people to enter and enjoy the Palace of Westminster on days when neither House is sitting. We appreciate that negotiation would be required with the House of Lords to enable the opening of the whole Palace.

Specialist tours

31. The Tricon income generation report also identifies options for specialist tours, including tea on the terrace, champagne on the terrace, art tours, and opening up for special events such as New Year or the Jubilee. The report notes that Members currently have sole right to sponsor events but questions whether that ought to continue as it clearly places a restriction on the potential to increase income.

32. The House on 15 March decided, however, not to introduce proposed £15 charges for tours of the Clock Tower, including Big Ben, from June 2012. Members objected to the idea on the grounds that the public should not be charged for access to Parliament, in spite of the fact that cost-covering charges are already levied for weekend or summer opening tours. The House of Commons Commission, having proposed the idea as part of a wider savings package in 2010, agreed to rescind its previous decision in the face of clear opposition from a significant number of Members. This leaves the House authorities in something of a quandary about precisely how far Members consider it permissible to charge for tours of the Palace of Westminster.

33. Commercial opening at weekends and during the summer recess is currently run on a cost-recovery basis, rather than for profit. The intention with the Big Ben tours was the same: no profit, just recovery of the roughly £100,000 annual cost of providing staff to take and administer the tours. There is considerable illogic in the House’s current position, therefore, and this tension needs to be resolved if other plans to introduce specialist tours of, for example, the House’s art and architecture are to be introduced and commercially charged. The question may arise of whether any tour should attract a charge.

34. Our own position, already stated, is that a clear distinction needs to be made on the difference between Parliament as a working institution and Parliament as a visitor attraction. The former is about democratic access and must remain free and open; the latter is principally a leisure pursuit. With the exception of those tours organised by Members for their constituents or conducted for educational purposes, we believe that tours, including tours of Big Ben, fall into the latter category, and that the costs of providing those tours should, at the very least, be recovered. Indeed, we believe that there is a strong case for going further and using income from such leisure pursuits to reduce the overall cost of running the House. Other Members of the House clearly disagree, however, and the Commission should take steps to engage actively with Members on the question of what is and is not possible or desirable in this respect.

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17 Tricon Culture Label, Commercial Strategy: recommendations for the House of Commons, November 2011
35. We support the introduction of specialist tours, including those focusing on the art and architecture of the Palace of Westminster, and we support the principle of charging reasonable fees for providing those tours to those who choose to take them.

36. We believe that the Commission would be well advised to organise a full debate on its savings programme to gauge, among other things, the extent to which cost-recovery or profit-making charges for tours of the House and its artworks and architecture are considered acceptable and desirable.
4 Practical arrangements

Security arrangements

37. Most visitors to the parliamentary estate enter via the visitor reception centre at Cromwell Green, which is fully equipped with security search facilities. There are further security search lanes at Portcullis House and smaller-scale operations at Black Rod’s Garden Entrance and No. 1 Parliament Street and Derby Gate. The number of search lanes open at the two major entrances varies according to demand, enabling staff to be allocated to other duties at less busy times. The allocation of security teams to the various entrances is a matter for the Serjeant at Arms and Black Rod, and the Metropolitan Police as the House’s security contractor.18 John Pullinger argues, however, that the cost of security can be covered to some degree through charges to visitors for commercial tours: this in turn might enable the opening of more security lanes with consequent reductions in queues.19 That is, however, much easier said than done.

38. Dr Ruth Fox of the Hansard Society noted that resolving the queuing issues at Portcullis House and Cromwell Green would result in small but significant changes “in terms of the welcome that visitors receive, rather than having to be stood out in the rain on a Wednesday evening for 45 minutes, waiting to get in because of the queue”.20 People expected security to take some time, but were less forgiving when they found only one of several security lanes open after a 45-minute wait.21

Cromwell Green

39. Once through security checks, all visitors are given a temporary photopass, and their first stop is the information desk in Westminster Hall. The desk is staffed by Visitor Assistants who provide help and guidance inside the Palace, including managing queues and access to the public galleries and helping lead tours. Other support comes from the Central Tours Office, which organises tours, and the Admission Order Office, responsible for tickets for guests and access to the Chamber galleries. Cafes and souvenir shops also provide services to visitors. During 2010–11 a programme of training and certification for in-House guides was introduced and public tours have been extended to be available on Saturdays. Visitor satisfaction surveys showed that Parliament scored a 4 or 5 (with 5 being ‘excellent’) 97 per cent of the time, exceeding the 95 per cent target.22

40. The principal entrance to the Commons part of the building at Cromwell Green is not capable of processing all visitors at all times under current arrival arrangements. The entrance was initially designed to process about 1,000 people an hour. By the time it was opened on 1 April 2008, however, the London bombings of July 2005 had resulted in a raised security level, and that maximum capacity was halved to about 500 when all security

18 Vol. II, w4, para 10
19 Q 1
20 Q 264
21 Q 266
22 House of Commons Commission, Annual Report 2010/11, HC 1439, p. 18
lanes are open. On Tuesday and Wednesday afternoons and early evenings, far more people often want to enter the building for various reasons, and substantial queues build up on the uncovered ramp leading to St Stephen’s Entrance and the pavement outside the Palace. For example, on 12 July 2011, one of the busiest days of the week in one of the busiest weeks of the year, about 730 visitors were expected to enter for pre-arranged appointments, meetings or banqueting events between 4pm and 5pm and another 659 between 7pm and 8pm. Nor do those figures include any unexpected tourists or citizens who wished to sit in the Gallery or watch a Committee in action. Although all three security lanes were then in operation, the queues stretched back along the front of the Palace to Carriage Gates at one point at least.

41. Clearly the Entrance is simply not big enough to deal with those numbers of planned visitors even when operating at full capacity. John Pullinger told us: “On a Tuesday afternoon, in particular, we are systematically inviting more people in than it is physically ever going to be possible to get into the building […] If people are waiting for three quarters of an hour, as they often are, to get into a banqueting event, either they have been told to come three quarters of an hour early, which is not very great, or they arrive three quarters of an hour late and miss half of it”. Methods must be found of reducing the number of people attempting to enter via Cromwell Green or of spreading the load so that there are not bottlenecks at peak times. We make some suggestions of how that may be done below.

42. There is a clear need, however, to prevent queues from building up at times when Cromwell Green’s security facilities are operating at below capacity, and to be more responsive when unexpected queues are created. Not all security lanes operate at all times; reducing the number of security staff needed at non-peak times helps to keep security costs within budget, and in line with the contract the House has with the Metropolitan Police Service. That flexibility is reasonable, and the Serjeant at Arms and his Metropolitan Police counterparts must be responsible for operational decisions on when to reduce or maximise staffing.

43. It is clear, however, that the system currently in place does not always work. We visited the Cromwell Green entrance on Monday 11 June. We found a queue on the ramp, and a quick and admittedly unscientific ‘vox pop’ of about a dozen members of the public suggested that most had been waiting between 20 and 30 minutes to enter the building. When we entered the building, however, we found that only one search lane was in operation—with a second in action, the queue would have been processed much more quickly. There were not enough staff present to open another lane at that time. It seemed clear to us as a result of our visit that some organisational change at Cromwell Green could speed the flow of visitors into the House. Capacity issues aside, it was apparent that the search and photography facilities on site were not fully operational in spite of their being a significant queue of people waiting to enter. Queues are inevitable if more people seek to enter the building than it is possible to process; but the presumption at Cromwell Green should be that the search facilities are staffed and managed to the maximum whenever there is a queue on the ramp.

23 Vol. II, ev w5, para 14
24 Q 26
25 Q 2
44. Christine Sillis, Deputy Director for Projects at the Parliamentary Estates Directorate, told us that remedial works are planned to make Cromwell Green more weatherproof and watertight. There are, however, no plans to increase the number of security lanes there: bomb blast shields on either side of the search lanes limit room for expansion. The building, though less than a decade old, has significant design and material problems: the glass roof needs repair, but is too fragile for routine maintenance to take place on it.

45. There is a small-scale alternative, however: the then Acting Serjeant at Arms, Mike Naworynsky, told us that some minor adjustments might make it possible to install a single ‘walkthrough’ lane without x-ray equipment at Cromwell Green. “This would permit visitors not carrying bags or equipment to be fast-tracked through a search arch which detects metallic items being carried. While it is anticipated that the increase in capacity would be fairly modest, it would allow some business visitors to proceed quickly through the search point and allow the x-ray facilities to be utilised to check bags”, Mr Naworynsky said that a revised protocol was trialled during the summer whereby the requirement to be photographed on entry was removed at certain times, with a pre-printed and dated pass being issued instead. The trial indicated that this simple measure improved throughput at busy times, but there is a slight increased risk in that no image is collected of the visitor. Mr Naworynsky suggested that repositioning CCTV cameras might provide appropriate images suitable for any necessary post-incident analysis.

26 Q 142
27 Vol. II, w24
28 Vol. II, w24
29 Vol. II, w25–7
30 Vol. II, w25-7
31 Q 142

We support any move that will increase capacity without reducing security, such as the small-scale measures proposed by the Serjeant at Arms at Cromwell Green.

Portcullis House

46. The second major entry point is at Portcullis House, but here, too, queues can build up on the Embankment outside the building. Invited guests at this entrance include educational visitors. There is only one operational security search lane, and a small reception area where visitors may wait to be collected. Capacity is only 125 visitors an hour, and queues of people waiting to enter have extended around the corner and back towards the entrance to Westminster underground station.

47. Works are planned to change access arrangements in Portcullis House, including reconfiguration of the escalator leading from Portcullis House into the Palace. These works should raise capacity to 250 people an hour from June 2012. Christine Sillis told us, however, that security considerations prevent the introduction of a new search lane, which might help to ease queues that build up outside on the Embankment at busy times. An initial investigation was undertaken to see whether a second search lane could be created within the existing bomb blast screens using spare equipment, but was ruled unfeasible. As an interim measure, the police have formed a temporary search line using hand-held
search devices, using doors provided for visitors needing disabled access. Further improvements are expected later in 2012. **We recommend that owing to congestion and safety issues the passholders’ entrance should no longer be used as an exit, and a separate exit door should be created.**

**Black Rod’s Garden Entrance**

48. When the Cromwell Green entrance was conceived, it was planned that the Sovereign’s Entrance, at the House of Lords end of the building, would continue to be the entry point for tours. Following security advice that search facilities should be located outside the building, it was subsequently decided that tours would enter via Cromwell Green. Sovereign’s Entrance is not now used for security reasons, and Black Rod’s Garden Entrance is the only public entrance at the House of Lords end of the Palace of Westminster.

49. At present, capacity there is limited, but there is considerable long-term potential to introduce more visitors to the estate via Black Rod’s Garden Entrance. A 2011 project to improve the entrance has improved matters to some slight degree, but not as greatly as might have been the case. A larger-scale improvement was ruled out on grounds of cost. This appears to have been an opportunity missed, and to demonstrate some lack of coordination between competing aims, and possibly officials, within the two Houses: on the one hand, there is a commitment to raising the number of people brought into the estate, but on the other there is neither the finance nor the will to grasp the chance of substantially improving one of comparatively few main entrance points.

50. We sought a trial under which Members’ tours—which visit both Houses—might be conducted via that entrance. Four days were offered; but two were cancelled at short notice. Our Lords counterparts, the Administration and Works Committee, informed us that it saw no reason to complete the offered trial: “the trial [...] revealed a number of issues which would need to be addressed if the visitor route were to be reversed, such as a suitable waiting area for visitors, the provision of lavatories and disabled access,” wrote Lord Brabazon of Tara, Chairman of the Committee. This accords with the view Hannah Lister, Visitor Assistant Supervisor, one of those who conduct the tours: “If the meeting and greeting point were to change from Westminster Hall to Black Rod’s Garden entrance for tours, then in order to achieve an excellent customer experience we would need to furnish the area accordingly with extra seating, information leaflets and easy access to toilet facilities without the need for escort”.

51. **We are disappointed that only two days of an offered four-day trial enabling Members tours to enter the Palace via Black Rod’s Garden Entrance were completed.** We are frankly surprised that our Lords counterparts feel no obligation to fulfil the commitment made to us by their officials. There is little point in our pressing for completion in the face of such an absence of co-operation.

32 Vol. II, w25–7
33 Vol. II, w27–8
34 Vol. II, w33–4
52. We note that the costs of providing visitor services for both Houses are currently split on a roughly 70:30 basis, with the Commons paying the larger share. We recommend that the Commission enter into discussion with their equivalents in the House of Lords on whether that balance of cost apportionment remains appropriate. We note, too, the growing imbalance between the number of Members of the House of Commons and the substantially larger number of members of the House of Lords and recommend that the Commission examine whether the number of visitors invited to both Houses continues to justify the present allocation of costs.

53. The difficulty of using Black Rod’s Garden Entrance more fully lies, as our Lords’ counterparts have noted, in the absence of some facilities there, particularly waiting space and lavatories. As configured, the space is also too small. We would hope that both issues may be resolved in the longer term, but the cost of making improvements is clearly a difficulty at a time when the Commission has launched a substantial savings programme in the Commons. Full-scale improvement of facilities at Black Rod’s Garden Entrance would be of significant benefit to the public in enabling both easier access to the estate as a whole and in enabling the Visitor Route tours to begin at the Lords’ end of the Palace of Westminster as intended. The small-scale improvements made last year were an opportunity missed, and the reluctance of the Lords to offer more access to Visitor Tour visitors to both Houses is unhelpful.

**Other entrances: Derby Gate; Parliament Street; Peers Entrance**

54. A single search lane at No. 1 Parliament Street is not greatly advertised and not used for any official visits, but rather for Members and officials to introduce small numbers of guests to the estate. This should remain the case, but it may make sense to try to direct more small-scale business through that entrance, which is fully manned throughout the sitting day. John Pullinger acknowledged that that entrance could be more greatly used. For example, encouraging Select Committee witnesses to use that entrance would relieve some pressure on Cromwell Green as well as ensuring that witnesses did not inadvertently end up queuing in the non-fast track lane and possibly being late for evidence sessions. This would require Select Committee staff to meet witnesses at Parliament Street and conduct them to meeting rooms, which has an impact on staff time, but which would not be immensely inconvenient for meetings being held in Portcullis House.

**St Stephen’s Entrance**

55. Another possibility would be the creation—more accurately, the re-creation—of a small-scale security point at St Stephen’s Entrance, through which fast-track visitors would bypass the main Cromwell Green queues. This, indeed, is the situation that pertained before the Cromwell Green building was opened. John Pullinger suggested that there would be “strong resistance” to reintroducing another structure in front of St Stephen’s Entrance, in the style of the portacabin that used to serve for Members’ guests. That may be so, but the objection can hardly be to the aesthetic appeal of the cabin, given the
predominance along the whole of the front of the Palace of unsightly black security gates and barriers deemed necessary for security reasons. **We consider the reintroduction of a cabin outside St Stephen’s entrance to deal with official VIP guests such as foreign parliamentarians or ambassadors an idea worth exploring.**

**Visitor Route**

56. The present entrance arrangements, with most visitors entering via Cromwell Green, have created significant difficulties with the Visitor Route (formerly known as the Line of Route). The route has traditionally been from the Lords end of the Palace of Westminster via the Robing Room, Queen’s Gallery, House of Lords, Central Lobby, House of Commons, St Stephen’s Hall and Westminster Hall. This, indeed, reflects the way in which Pugin decorated the House, with England’s and gradually the United Kingdom’s history being represented chronologically in that order. This worked well when visitors undertaking the tour entered via Sovereign’s Entrance. That is out of action for security reasons. The clear reluctance of the House of Lords to allow use of Black Rod’s Garden Entrance for our joint visitors leaves Cromwell Green as the only possible entry point. This means that visitors taking the tour must arrive in Westminster Hall, be rapidly transported to the other end of the Palace and then walked back again along the Visitor Route. This is a nonsensical state of affairs.

57. John Pullinger told us: “At the moment people have to travel twice the distance they really need to, and that is a difficulty for parents with small children, for elderly people, and people with all kinds of disabilities and impairments”.38 The Hansard Society also highlighted the ineptitude of the present arrangements: “This is an inefficient use of valuable time and space, frustrating to many visitors and problematic for anyone who has walking difficulties”.39 Dr Ruth Fox expressed some frustration: “I do not much care whether it goes from the Lords to the Commons or the Commons to the Lords but it should go one way”.40 Bernard Donoghue also identified the current route as a “serious logistical oddity”. He said: “One is taken through all the rooms at a hurried pace to begin the tour at the other end of the building. One is then brought back through the rooms through which you have already walked. I knew where I was going but the people in my group worried that they would never see those rooms again because it was not explained to them that essentially they were doubling back on themselves.”.41

58. Simon Blackburn told us that there are advantages to starting the Visitor Route in Westminster Hall: notably, there is a large marshalling area, an information stand, a cafeteria, toilets and potential space for a souvenir shop.42 On the other hand, Bernard Donoghue pointed out that that means that Westminster Hall, perhaps the most impressive space in the Palace presently resembles “a mediaeval departure lounge” at times.43
59. Mr Blackburn accepted the "very strong argument" for keeping the Visitor Route running from the Lords to the Commons end of the Palace, but pointed out the absence of suitable facilities at that end of the building. "If we were to start at Black Rod's Garden Entrance we have the issue of making sure that the people who are waiting to do their tour can wait in a comfortable environment and go to the toilet without having to be accompanied by our staff because the toilets are in a secure area of the Palace."  

60. Logic, history, architectural design and consensus all suggest that the Visitor Route should begin at the House of Lords end of the building. The current system of bringing visitors in to Westminster Hall, rushing them through the building to the beginning of the tour, then walking them back along the same route is inefficient and a waste of everyone’s time. We recommend that the Visitor Route begin in the Robing Room, as at present, and that a means be found as soon as is practicable to bring visitors in at the House of Lords end of the estate. We recommend that the Visitor Management Board be encouraged to find an immediate solution to a nonsensical situation that has been allowed too long to endure. We invite the Commission to begin discussions with its House of Lords counterparts about resolving a chronic problem whose lengthy duration does credit to none of us.

**Queuing**

61. Solutions are required to the bottlenecks that result in queues outside the Palace and Portcullis House that are long, unsightly and, most of all, inconvenient to members of the public and to Members whose busy diaries are disrupted by delay. In the short term, the security situation offers most potential for reduction in queues and delay. On the day of our visit to Cromwell Green, we saw a queue while security search lanes were closed. We also saw that the ‘pinch point’ appeared to be the photography of guests entering the estate, but that only one camera was in use while another was idle. We are told that the second camera is a back-up in case the first fails. At busy times at Cromwell Green, both security cameras should be in use, and if one fails, the other will still be in action. The presumption should be towards getting people through quickly, not covering for risk.

62. The allocation of security search teams to the various Entrances is a matter for the Serjeant at Arms and Black Rod and the Metropolitan Police as the Houses’ security contractor. We recommend that current arrangements at the three public entrances be reviewed to ensure that security teams are being allocated efficiently at times of greatest pressure.

**Central booking system**

63. Changes in security arrangements can go only so far: the simple fact is that there are times when more people wish to enter the estate than our limited number of entrances and security procedures can process without delay. We need, therefore, either to limit the number of people coming on to the estate, or to try to spread the load more evenly than is the case at present. We are reluctant to suggest the former as it conflicts with the House’s intention to be as open and transparent as possible. On the latter, the business pattern of
the House, with most business occurring between Monday evening and Thursday morning inevitably concentrates the times at which business visitors need to be in the Palace and other buildings to attend meetings or to meet Members.

64. A substantial proportion of visitors attend banqueting functions organised in both the House of Commons and the House of Lords parts of the parliamentary estate. At present, such visitors are warned that they should allow 45 minutes to go through security procedures, and while this is often justified, it can mean either that guests to functions arrive in the Palace very early and have to be held in Westminster Hall until their event begins, or that they arrive very late and miss much of it. We recommend closer coordination between the various organisers of events to spread the start times in order to reduce peaks of pressure on the search facilities at entrance points. Ideally, in the longer term, a single booking system should be created to identify pinch points and enable pre-emptive action against bottlenecks.

65. Simon Blackburn gave the example of Tuesday 12 July, the busiest day of the week in one of the busiest weeks of the year. About 730 visitors were expected to enter via Cromwell Green between 4pm and 5pm and 659 between 7pm and 8pm. Mr Blackburn suggested the introduction of a single bicameral recording system for events at which non-passholders are invited, but pointed out that there would be as-yet uncalculated costs to bringing together the existing several booking systems.46 Hannah Lister, who as Visitor Assistant Supervisor has the day-to-day task of bringing visitors into the Palace and dealing with those who must queue, also suggested “a bicameral booking system that lets pass holders see all events that are scheduled that day and prohibits any further bookings once the predetermined ceiling has been reached”.47

66. Mr Blackburn also suggested the introduction of a system of prioritising room bookings: “We could in theory have simultaneous events in every single banqueting facility, every single committee room and the Jubilee room and every other room you can think of, for which people were invited into the Palace. We do not prioritise why we bring people in”.48 Mr Blackburn suggested, for example, that all-party group meetings not being attended by Members ought perhaps not to be held on the estate. A centralised booking system could provide the potential to encourage, or mandate, those organising non-core parliamentary events, such as some of the 1,500 or so annual banqueting events, meetings of all-party groups or events organised by the four grant-aided bodies, to begin at times that do not clash with, for example, Select or Public Bill Committee meetings or debates in the House likely to attract significant public interest or lobbying. We appreciate that there would be considerable administrative difficulty and substantial costs if such a system were introduced.

67. In the long run, it would be advisable to seek a means of identifying separate entrances for business and non-business visitors to the estate. Bernard Donoghue pointed out that most Parliaments do this, citing the Scottish Parliament, the US Capitol, the Knesset and the Canadian national Parliament as examples.49 He also pointed out that other ‘working’
heritage sites such as Edinburgh Castle, St Paul’s, Westminster Abbey and Buckingham Palace manage similar challenges: “there is much for Parliament to learn from these institutions who have similar concerns about ensuring that widening public access and providing a welcoming, rich visitor experience does not undermine the dignity of the institution or detrimentally affect the fabric of the building”.

**Welcoming visitors**

68. Bernard Donoghue noted the lack of formal welcome visitors to Parliament receive: “There is no word of welcome as one enters the Palace of Westminster. [...] The first sign you see on leaving security is about regulations relating to serious organised crime. Therefore, the first information you get is that these are all the things you are not allowed to do rather than a welcome”. Mr Donoghue “mystery shopped” the commercial public tour before giving us evidence, and noted that his guide, albeit excellent in every other respect, had also opened by listing things that could not be done rather than offering a welcome. “Your first impression of Westminster is restrictive and prohibitive rather than welcoming and enabling”. We recommend that informative and historical signage be placed on the walls by the ramp leading down to the Cromwell Green visitor reception area.

69. Mr Donoghue also suggested that all staff working for the House should be aware that they might be the first to welcome a visitor into Parliament for the first time: “The first face of Parliament that the visitor experiences could be a police officer, a tour guide, or someone standing outside in the road directing people in, but that initial experience of Parliament is an important one to get right because of the welcome connotations that come from that”.

70. Professor Jon Drori, the volunteer Chair of the Speaker’s Advisory Council on Public Engagement, also noted that visitors entering the grand and historic Palace for the first time might feel more nerves than welcome. Professor Drori said that people ought to be able to feel that their Parliament is welcoming and accessible. That was not always so: “one sometimes gets the impression that not everyone really feels that this is necessarily a space which is of the people, but rather it is more owned by the people who work here and the public are lucky if they are allowed in once or twice”. He detected an “attitudinal divide” that may affect the welcome visitors’ experience. He said: “I think that there is an underlying issue which is that some people just do not really like members of the public being around the place very much”. The Hansard Society has also noted that the entire area around the Palace of Westminster is a “living, working museum of democracy but one in which, at present, the public appears only to be tolerated.”

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50 Vol. II, w34–6
51 Q 235
52 Q 235
53 Q 256
54 Q 180
55 Q 182
56 Q 190
57 Hansard Society, A Place for People, 2011, p. 45
71. Clearly, there is work to be done on making visitors welcome, both physically and mentally. At the simplest, a review of signage in and around the Palace is required. At present, there is nothing outside the Palace to inform visitors that they can enter the building, far less what sittings are occurring or what else there is to see. **We recommend that suitable external and welcoming signage be designed and erected as soon as is practicable to tell the public what the building is, what we do, what is happening each day, and when and how they may visit.**

**Educational facilities**

72. The Administration Committee in the last Parliament considered the general question of visitor facilities, focusing in particular on facilities for educational visits. The Committee said that the highest priority for an improvement in visitor services must be to provide dedicated facilities for educational groups. It recommended that a space of about 1,000 sq m be found, including room for five classrooms, storage, toilets, a lunch area and locker space. That would have provided sufficient capacity for about 100,000 schoolchildren to visit the estate annually.

73. The House of Commons agreed a resolution to that effect on 12 June 2007, and the House of Lords a similar resolution on 16 October 2007. Detailed designs were drawn up for buildings in Victoria Gardens or at Abingdon Green, but those proposals were rejected on cost grounds. Parliamentary Estates Directorate (PED) later identified the Lower Secretaries’ Area beneath the Commons Chamber as a possible location for an education space, but structural difficulties and the need to find alternative accommodation for the Members’ staff currently located there led to that idea also being shelved.

74. Nearly five years after the two Houses resolved that a centre should be built, the House of Commons corporate business plan for 2011/12 continued to state that plans for an education centre would be taken forward. In June 2011, however, the House of Commons Management Board reported to us the results of a review of options for providing an Education Centre, concluding that it could not be done within the present estate.

75. Nor does our counterpart Committee in the House of Lords, the Administration and Works Committee, appear any longer to favour rapid action on this point, principally on grounds of cost and the reputation of the two Houses. Lord Brabazon of Tara, its Chairman, wrote that they

> favour a long-term, modular approach, where visitor facilities at the south end of the building could be gradually developed over time. For example, a first step could be to create a separate security building, detached from the main building, at the southern end of the Parliamentary estate. If this was built with an eye to the future, over time a reception facility for visitors could be added with adequate waiting areas and lavatories. In the long term, the building could perhaps be extended again to create an education centre for school groups.

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The Committee agreed that it might be desirable in the long term to create such a facility at the south end of the building. However, we felt strongly that there would be significant risks to the reputation of both Houses of embarking on such a project in the current economic climate. Furthermore, whilst both Houses are still in the process of tackling a backlog of extensive maintenance works, the Committee felt that the development of a visitor centre should not necessarily be the top priority for Parliament at the moment. 69

76. It is clear that rapid action is not to be expected on providing the educational facilities that both Houses resolved to provide in 2007. It is deeply frustrating that nearly five years have passed without substantive action to provide those facilities or to put in place alternative means of meeting the clearly expressed aspiration of both Houses to invite up to 100,000 schoolchildren a year to visit the estate. We recommend that the Commission inform Members that their expectations on how many children may visit the estate must be scaled back and provide a clear explanation of why the settled will of both Houses has not resulted in an education centre or alternative suitable provision.

77. We believe that provision of an education centre should remain a live aspiration. There is also a clear location where some form of educational centre might be located. John Pullinger, told us that the Black Rod’s Garden area, beyond the House of Lords end of the Palace, remained the most viable location for an education facility. Aileen Walker, Head of Public Information, also told us that that was the ‘ideal’ location for an Education Centre. In the long-run, we continue to hope that an education centre may be provided, ideally at the southern end of the Palace on land beyond Black Rod’s Garden Entrance. This could be allied with a wider visitor centre, enabling separation of ‘business’ and other visitors to the estate and reducing queues at Cromwell Green and Portcullis House.

**Education service and provision**

78. Professor Jon Drori, chair of the Speaker’s Advisory Council on Member Engagement, said that current provision was “run brilliantly” but noted that visits are “hugely oversubscribed”. 60 This is so: when 350 slots for visits in the autumn term 2011 were made available recently the service received 21,000 phone calls in three hours.

79. A record number of students visited Parliament in 2009/10: the total of 40,117 significantly exceeded the target of 37,000. With the currently available accommodation, there is, however, a natural limit of around 40,000 on the Education Service core programme. Tom O’Leary, Head of the Education Service, told us that about 11,000 students came to the House through the Education Service in 2005–06; the figure had reached 40,000 by 2009–10; and demand implies that considerably more visits could occur. The potential is, of course, much greater than can ever be achieved: between 600,000 and 700,000 children are born each year.

80. The service is using the Macmillan Room, space in 1 Parliament Street, Committee Rooms on Mondays and Fridays, and space off Westminster Hall when available. In June 2011, the Administration Committee approved a plan to provide an additional 2,500 educational spaces by using the Grand Committee Room on Monday mornings and

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69 Vol. II, w27–8
60 Q 180
Fridays. Other options include using the Members’ Centre and nearby offices (up to 27,000 more children a year); some Members’ Library space (about 6,000 more children a year); and/or the CPA and IPU rooms when not in use. Mr O’Leary noted: “There are no toilet facilities dedicated to schools, and we still do not have a lunch room, so if a school party comes here in the middle of the winter and it is raining outside, we cannot let them stay in the building and eat their lunch. That really is not so acceptable for schools”.

81. Dr Ruth Fox suggested that the space currently occupied off Westminster Hall by the CPA and IPU and a variety of meeting rooms could provide useful additional space for educational facilities, with suitable relocation of the other bodies. The Hansard Society argued: “The CPA and IPU rooms are highly valued by their organisations but the considerable amount of space they are afforded is not being utilised to best effect from Parliament’s perspective […] Were the CPA and IPU to be relocated elsewhere, this would open up space on two floors for education centre provision”. We are not opposed to that idea, but the importance of the CPA and IPU should not be underestimated: space is required to entertain and hold seminars for the VIP guests it hosts from other Parliaments, Governments and embassies.

School visit subsidy scheme

82. The previous Administration Committee also recommended subsidising schools visits to Westminster from more remote constituencies. We are pleased that this recommendation has been successfully implemented. Travel subsidy is provided for school visits, and the level provided depends on how far the school is from London. This system was introduced during the 2005–10 Parliament, and has significantly changed the pattern of visits: formerly, about 70 per cent of visitors came from Greater London and the South East; now about 50 per cent of visitors do, with the percentage of visitors from the midlands, from the north and Scotland and from Northern Ireland all rising significantly. The UK is split into three bands: Band A covers London and the South East, for which no subsidy is available; Band B attracts a subsidy of 50% of costs with a maximum claim of £650; Band C attracts a subsidy of 75%, with a maximum claim of £1250.61

Outreach

83. The previous Administration Committee also recommended the introduction of regional outreach officers, and we are again pleased to record the successful implementation of that recommendation, with officers now employed in the various regions of England (the other three parliaments and assemblies in the United Kingdom offer their own parliamentary outreach services). We are aware both that the outreach service would appreciate more involvement in events from Members and that Members would frequently welcome more involvement in events.

61 www.parliament.uk/education/visiting-parliament/transport-subsidy/
Guides and audio guides

84. Weekend and summer tours are largely delivered by contracted guides. The current focus on reducing the House’s running costs raises the question whether that comparatively expensive method of providing tours remains justifiable. 62

85. Conducted tours are available every Saturday and throughout the Summer Recess, and 34 Blue Badge Guides (or 28 in the winter months) deal with up to 3,000 visitors per day. 63 Tour Guides Ltd, which supplies those guides, notes that “There are no issues of sickness/holiday and no insurances or other staff costs as our guides are not ‘employed’ by Parliament. They are supplied by us on a contractual basis. The daily charge for one guide equates to 15.4 adults buying a ticket for the tour at £15 each. Our guides lead parties of up to 25 people [...] and conduct 4 tours per day, so on a busy day a guide can sometimes take 100-plus visitors on tours. This means that the cost of each guide is covered after 15.4 adults have bought the tour”. 64 Simon Blackburn said, however, that “After the deduction of VAT and processing fees charged by our ticketing contractor, the largest cost of the operation is the contracted ITG Blue Badge certified guides who lead the commercial tours. Other significant costs include staff [...] and advertising”. 65

86. Tours could be provided more cost-efficiently if the number of guides were reduced by placing suitably trained assistants or wardens in each room on the Visitor Route and supplying self-guiding audio guides of the type now used in, for example, Buckingham Palace or in most museums and art galleries. As well as reducing costs, the removal of guided groups might also increase capacity. Mr Blackburn said “We have not crunched the numbers, but I think you would probably be able to get through slightly more people if that was the case”. 66 Bernard Donoghue noted that most major attractions now use audio guides: “That enables you to change the script [...] very easily and very quickly; you are not dependent on tour guides to do visitor and traffic management, which takes up quite a lot of time”. 67

87. Audio guides can also be flexible. Mr Donoghue suggested that a parliamentary audio guide could include “former or current Members or Members of the Lords giving their anecdotes of what it was or is like to be in the Commons. You cannot get that on the current tour, but with an audio guide you can build in all those things”. 68

88. Previous Administration Committees have been reluctant to contemplate ending personal guided tours and have ruled out the introduction of audio guides. We believe that the time has come to offer a more flexible approach. We recommend that a more mixed offer be made to tourists, with a reduced number of guided tours available on Saturdays, and possibly Sundays, and summer opening days and self-guided audio

62 Tricon Culture Label, House of Commons Commercial Strategy: recommendations for the House of Commons, October 2011
63 Vol. II, w31–2
64 Vol. II, w31–2
65 Vol. II, w3–11
66 Q 55
67 Q 237
68 Q 243
Visitor Access and Facilities

equipment available to those visitors who prefer that option. Different pricing structures should apply, with the self-guided tour the cheaper option. Depending on feedback and profitability, the long-term goal should be to move towards greater provision of self-guided audio tours, including recorded contributions from Members past and present of both Houses.

**Summer recess and works**

89. The Saturday and summer openings raise questions about necessary maintenance and improvement work on the parliamentary estate, particularly in the Palace of Westminster itself. The fact of opening reduces the time available for such work. The presence of visitors adds to wear and tear on the building.

90. Weekend opening also results in overtime costs for some building and maintenance work, which has to be done at premium rates on Sundays. Mel Barlex, the Parliamentary Director of Estates, told us that extending weekend opening to include Sunday as well as Saturday would mean his maintenance and estates staff moving to 24-hour working patterns, with consequent costs.

91. The House of Commons also sat for two weeks in September in both 2010 and 2011. Formerly, the Parliamentary Estates Directorate (PED) was able to use the full 10 or 12-week recess period to schedule major works, but the idea that that period is necessary to the maintenance of the House is worth querying. Christine Sillis, Deputy Director of Projects at PED, said that a three-month recess does not in any case provide enough time to do all the major works required. “We really do need to work throughout the year […] we still need flexibility to do noisy or disruptive work out of hours. […] A longer recess is a little bit of help [but] there is a limit to how much work we can still do in a summer recess, whatever length it is, because we have such a volume of work that we need to be working throughout the year”. Mel Barlex added that better planning of works meant more was now being done in four or five-week recess periods than had previously been achieved in the long summer recess.

92. The need to maintain and repair the building must clearly be taken into account in deciding whether and when to open the Palace of Westminster to visitors. Allowing the works programme to fall behind schedule would negatively impact on the work of the House. Clearly, necessary works must take priority. Equally clearly, the additional costs arising from delayed works or weekend or evening works must be accurately measured and factored into prices charged for tours.

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69 Q 169
70 Q 172
71 Q 172
72 Q 172
5 Income generation

93. The savings programme created following the Commission’s decision to reduce the running costs of the House by at least 17 per cent by 2014–15 has resulted, among other things, in moves towards greater generation of income from activities undertaken by the House. Consultants have offered a range of ‘blue sky’ options, and more specific plans are being drawn up. All this is welcome, but the pace of change is likely to be slow, and it may be that short-term quick wins should be identified and benefits taken in advance of longer-term and more widespread plans. In particular, there are easy steps to be taken in retailing the House’s range of souvenirs.

94. The Houses of Parliament are, according to ALVA, the 31st most visited attraction in the UK, but a comparatively small number of visitors (around 183,000) pay to see it. By contrast, Westminster Abbey, across the street, receives about 1.4 million paying visitors a year. Greater income could be derived not only from increasing the number of paying visitors, but from encouraging greater spending in the House’s souvenir outlets and visitor cafeteria. Bernard Donoghue has noted that income derived by Parliament from visitors could be used to maintain the fabric of the buildings and to fund education about what Parliament does. We suggest that a special, low-price tour simply of Westminster Hall might be introduced, aimed largely at tourists who wish to see inside the Palace of Westminster, and focusing on the history of the Hall and the purpose and work of Parliament. Proper location of a gift shop in the Hall and further improvement in usage of the Jubilee Cafeteria would clearly have a part to play in that.

Shops

95. Tricon Culture Label’s internal report on how to generate income within the House noted that the three retail spaces on the Commons part of the estate currently generate around £1.5 million and a profit of about £100,000. This is considerably lower turnover and profit than two nearby, comparable attractions in Westminster Abbey and Buckingham Palace, each of which has embraced more commercial public opening strategies and each of which has a strongly performing shop providing relevant merchandise.

Parliamentary Bookshop

96. The House possesses a shop on the corner of Parliament Street and Bridge Street, currently titled The Parliamentary Bookshop and focusing on the sale of books and parliamentary papers. The shop’s opening hours are limited—it closes at 4pm on a Friday and does not open at all at the weekend. It is also somewhat hidden behind the pillars on that corner, reducing its visibility to the estimated 30 million people who pass through the Parliament Square area each year. The Triton report notes that its turnover of £326,359 in 2010/11 is “low in comparison with the insight we have on other units”. The report also

73 Tricon Culture Label, House of Commons Commercial Strategy: Options appraisal and business case, October 2011
74 Tricon Culture Label, House of Commons Commercial Strategy: Options appraisal and business case, October 2011
75 Q 234
76 Tricon Culture Label, House of Commons Commercial Strategy: Options appraisal and business case, October 2011
notes that the shop managed to make a loss in spite of its prime high street location. Dr Ruth Fox also identified a "valuable piece of parliamentary estate and parliamentary real estate", adding: "One of the problems with it now is that it does not operate in accordance with visitor times: my understanding is that it is closed on a Saturday. You have to align the retail—souvenirs, catering and so on—with visitor throughput; it is a huge lost opportunity if you do not". 77

97. Given the shop’s stock, its opening hours and its lack of active marketing, we are not surprised that it makes a loss, but we are surprised that the parliamentary authorities have not moved quicker to capitalise on such a prime space. Over the past year, the range of stock has been improved, with souvenirs taking some of the space formerly occupied by books and parliamentary papers. The window display has also been improved, although much remains to be done in that respect.

98. The pace of change has, however, been extremely slow. We believe that there are simple short-term gains to be made either from leasing the unit to a third party, as for other neighbouring units, or from altering the name of the bookshop, altering the balance of what is stocked there, opening it to match commercial hours rather than the limited hours of present opening, and making it more visible to passers-by. We recommend that those changes be made immediately, even if a longer-term vision may mean further change at a later stage.

**Souvenir shop**

99. The opportunity to maximise income, and customer satisfaction, from a good shop within the estate has also not yet been fully taken. At present, there is a public shop in St Stephen’s Hall, a small and busy space in which the amount of stock that can be displayed is limited. The shop is also not located at the end of the Visitor Route, meaning that much obvious trade is probably lost. Bernard Donoghue pointed out to us that most visitor attractions are arranged so that visitors exit through the gift shop, and “for very good reasons”. At Westminster, by contrast, “you bypass the gift shop, which is in St Stephen’s, and end the tour in Westminster Hall. Most people because they have been on their feet for an hour and a half, either go straight out of the door or get a cup of coffee. Relatively few people, at least in my group, went back to the gift shop. The gift shop is good. It is my honest opinion that it could be a lot better”. 78

100. Nor is it hard to identify precisely where the shop should be, so long as it was demountable quickly and cost-effectively as required. Simon Blackburn put his finger on it: "Ideally, you would put [the shop] just before people leave the building, which means in the current Estate it would be in Westminster Hall or one of the rooms off it". 79 We recommend that a souvenir and tourist shop be set up in Westminster Hall immediately to maximise revenue in the period until longer-term income generation plans are drawn up and implemented.

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77 Q 268
78 Q 235
79 Q 48
101. Bernard Donoghue said that organisations such as the British Museum, Natural History Museum and Science Museum “put a huge amount of effort into getting their retail product correct. The profits they are now generating from their retail shops are absolutely enormous [...] The savvier of ALVA, the large museums and galleries are learning as much from John Lewis and IKEA about packaging, marketing and retail as they do from some of their contemporaries within the tourism and attractions sector”.  

**Online shop**

102. The House does not as yet sell any souvenir material online, and this is another missed opportunity to raise revenue. Bernard Donoghue said “online is absolutely the way to go [...] it is cost effective; it reduces queues at site, and you can manage and predict your visitor traffic in advance. In addition, if you use the website that manages those tickets to sell online products [...] there is the enormous possibility of providing a one-stop retail shop that is not tacky but is sensibly managed and still projects the dignity of the institution”.  

We recommend that an online souvenir sales service be established. We therefore invite the Catering and Retail Service to provide a proposal to the Committee.

**Cafeterias**

103. Bernard Donoghue told us that although spending in gift shops in other attractions had gone down during the period of recent economic difficulty, spending on catering in attractions had continued to rise: “people still want a cup of tea and need to eat”. The principal cafeteria for visitors to the estate is the Jubilee Cafeteria off Westminster Hall. Visitors will use other venues when escorted by a Member or other passholder. The Jubilee is the only venue for the unescorted. We expressed our dismay in our last Report on catering at the fact that that cafeteria made a loss. In the six months since the Commission’s response to that Report was published, revenue raised from the cafeteria has increased substantially, partly as a result of greater internal advertising, including banners placed at its entrance in Westminster Hall. This is welcome. It is expected that a surplus will be generated by the Jubilee Cafeteria in 2012–13, and we urge the Commission to ensure that that objective is achieved.

104. More remains to be done, however, to ensure that visitors to the estate are aware that that cafeteria exists and is for them. Signage can be improved further, not least outside the Palace itself, where visitors waiting at the Cromwell Green entrance could be informed that there is a cafeteria at journey’s end. We welcome the progress made on raising the profile of the Jubilee cafeteria for visitors and recommend that further signs be provided inside and outside the Palace to ensure that visitors are aware that it is available for them.

105. Our Report on the House’s Catering and Retail Service also held out the prospect of offering wider catering facilities to the public on days when the business of the House does not require them. Discussion continues on whether, for example, tea on the terrace might be provided at commercial rates, and we can only reiterate our frustration at the slow pace of change in this and other respects, and recommend that the Commission encourage the

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80 Q 241
81 Q 241
82 Q 239
Management Board to proceed more rapidly. In particular, we cannot see why interim action cannot be taken in the apparently lengthy period required by the House authorities to consider wider, long-term change. **We reiterate the recommendations made in our previous Report on Catering and Retail Services on opening the Strangers Dining Room and other facilities to members of the public on days when the House is not sitting, on offering the public afternoon tea on the Terrace on days when the House is not sitting and on using other spaces within the House for similar purposes. We are disappointed that progress towards offering these services has been so slow.**
Conclusions and recommendations

1. The central idea that has emerged in this inquiry is that two conceptions of Parliament are required: the working institution and the visitor attraction. The two should be complementary, not in conflict, and some of the tensions that presently arise from, for example, queues outside the building and the consequent delay of business meetings for Members and others would be resolved if the two concepts were more rigorously held apart. (Paragraph 7)

2. Several difficulties that we identify arise to some degree from institutional slowness to respond to a changing environment, notably in resolving the problems of lengthy queues, an absence of cover from the weather for visitors, finding an efficient Visitor Route and identifying and creating suitable facilities for visitors, particularly educational visitors. (Paragraph 10)

3. It is our view that members of the United Kingdom armed forces wearing uniform should also be eligible to be fast-tracked into the House. (Paragraph 14)

4. Fast tracking should remain available only for visitors directly connected with the proceedings of the House and visitors who require disabled access. No fast track system works if access to it is widely spread. (Paragraph 15)

5. The “Main Queue” prioritisation system raises more questions. At present, those who wish to view the House’s proceedings or those who wish to exercise their democratic right to lobby Members are graded beneath those attending banqueting functions or those taking a tour. Ideally, this would raise no difficulty; in practice, long queues presently build up and delay results, both for visitors and for the Members who are hosting their visits. In practice, clearly, this priority system needs to be flexible, and the rigorous application of common sense is required—for example, an invited visitor 90 minutes early for a meeting need not have priority over a constituent whose meeting is in five minutes. However, it is useful to have a set of principles in place to guide the Visitor Assistants tasked with organising the queue. It is clearly unsatisfactory that those who wish to view the proceedings of the House or its Committees have the lowest priority among visitors. We recommend that the ‘Main Queue’ list be revised as follows:

Main queue

a. invited visitors to meetings with or fixed appointments with Members;
b. visitors undertaking a tour;
c. visitors wishing to attend the Galleries or a Committee sitting in public;
d. visitors attending banqueting functions;
e. lobbyists, individual and mass; and
f. visitors wishing to view an exhibition. (Paragraph 16)
6. Members who do break the rules should if they do so repeatedly face sanctions relating to their right to conduct tours. We recommend that the Commission set such sanctions after suitable consultation with Members. (Paragraph 23)

7. The staff and the management of the House should expect the full support of the Commission and Member Committees such as our own when they behave entirely properly in implementing the rules that we, or our predecessors, have created. (Paragraph 24)

8. There is, and should never be, any question of charging anyone for any reason to see proceedings in the Chamber or Westminster Hall or a Committee Room. (Paragraph 28)

9. We recommend that the Commission engage in widespread and effective consultation with Members on the current charging structure for commercial tours and on the costs to the public purse arising from the provision of tours of the Palace and parliamentary estate. (Paragraph 29)

10. We recommend that the Commission approve the introduction of commercial tours on Sundays and Bank Holidays to enable the maximum number of people to enter and enjoy the Palace of Westminster on days when neither House is sitting. We appreciate that negotiation would be required with the House of Lords to enable the opening of the whole Palace. (Paragraph 30)

11. We support the introduction of specialist tours, including those focusing on the art and architecture of the Palace of Westminster, and we support the principle of charging reasonable fees for providing those tours to those who choose to take them. (Paragraph 35)

12. We believe that the Commission would be well advised to organise a full debate on its savings programme to gauge, among other things, the extent to which cost-recovery or profit-making charges for tours of the House and its artworks and architecture are considered acceptable and desirable. (Paragraph 36)

13. It seemed clear to us as a result of our visit that some organisational change at Cromwell Green could speed the flow of visitors into the House. Capacity issues aside, it was apparent that the search and photography facilities on site were not fully operational in spite of their being a significant queue of people waiting to enter. Queues are inevitable if more people seek to enter the building than it is possible to process; but the presumption at Cromwell Green should be that the search facilities are staffed and managed to the maximum whenever there is a queue on the ramp. (Paragraph 43)

14. We support any move that will increase capacity without reducing security, such as the small-scale measures proposed by the Serjeant at Arms at Cromwell Green. (Paragraph 45)

15. We recommend that owing to congestion and safety issues the passholders’ entrance should no longer be used as an exit, and a separate exit door should be created. (Paragraph 47)
16. We are disappointed that only two days of an offered four-day trial enabling Members tours to enter the Palace via Black Rod’s Garden Entrance were completed. We are frankly surprised that our Lords counterparts feel no obligation to fulfil the commitment made to us by their officials. There is little point in our pressing for completion in the face of such an absence of co-operation. (Paragraph 51)

17. We note that the costs of providing visitor services for both Houses are currently split on a roughly 70:30 basis, with the Commons paying the larger share. We recommend that the Commission enter into discussion with their equivalents in the House of Lords on whether that balance of cost apportionment remains appropriate. We note, too, the growing imbalance between the number of Members of the House of Commons and the substantially larger number of members of the House of Lords and recommend that the Commission examine whether the number of visitors invited to both Houses continues to justify the present allocation of costs. (Paragraph 52)

18. Full-scale improvement of facilities at Black Rod’s Garden Entrance would be of significant benefit to the public in enabling both easier access to the estate as a whole and in enabling the Visitor Route tours to begin at the Lords’ end of the Palace of Westminster as intended. The small-scale improvements made there last year were an opportunity missed, and the reluctance of the Lords to offer more access to Visitor Tour visitors to both Houses is unhelpful. (Paragraph 53)

19. We consider the reintroduction of a cabin outside St Stephen’s entrance to deal with official VIP guests such as foreign parliamentarians or ambassadors an idea worth exploring. (Paragraph 55)

20. We recommend that the Visitor Route begin in the Robing Room, as at present, and that a means be found as soon as is practicable to bring visitors in at the House of Lords end of the estate. We recommend that the Visitor Management Board be encouraged to find an immediate solution to a nonsensical situation that has been allowed too long to endure. We invite the Commission to begin discussions with its House of Lords counterparts about resolving a chronic problem whose lengthy duration does credit to none of us. (Paragraph 60)

21. At busy times at Cromwell Green, both security cameras should be in use, and if one fails, the other will still be in action. The presumption should be towards getting people through quickly, not covering for risk. (Paragraph 61)

22. We recommend that current arrangements at the three public entrances be reviewed to ensure that security teams are being allocated efficiently at times of greatest pressure. (Paragraph 62)

23. We recommend closer co-ordination between the various organisers of events to spread the start times in order to reduce peaks of pressure on the search facilities at entrance points. Ideally, in the longer term, a single booking system should be created to identify pinch points and enable pre-emptive action against bottlenecks. (Paragraph 64)
24. A centralised booking system could provide the potential to encourage, or mandate, those organising non-core parliamentary events, such as some of the 1,500 or so annual banqueting events, meetings of all-party groups or events organised by the four grant-aided bodies, to begin at times that do not clash with, for example, Select or Public Bill Committee meetings or debates in the House likely to attract significant public interest or lobbying. (Paragraph 66)

25. We recommend that informative and historical signage be placed on the walls by the ramp leading down to the Cromwell Green visitor reception area. (Paragraph 68)

26. We recommend that suitable external and welcoming signage be designed and erected as soon as is practicable to tell the public what the building is, what we do, what is happening each day, and when and how they may visit. (Paragraph 71)

27. We recommend that the Commission inform Members that their expectations on how many children may visit the estate must be scaled back and provide a clear explanation of why the settled will of both Houses has not resulted in an education centre or alternative suitable provision. (Paragraph 76)

28. In the long-run, we continue to hope that an education centre may be provided, ideally at the southern end of the Palace on land beyond Black Rod’s Garden Entrance. This could be allied with a wider visitor centre, enabling separation of ‘business’ and other visitors to the estate and reducing queues at Cromwell Green and Portcullis House. (Paragraph 77)

29. We are aware both that the outreach service would appreciate more involvement in events from Members and that Members would frequently welcome more involvement in events. (Paragraph 83)

30. We recommend that a more mixed offer be made to tourists, with a reduced number of guided tours available on Saturdays, and possibly Sundays, and summer opening days and self-guided audio equipment available to those visitors who prefer that option. Different pricing structures should apply, with the self-guided tour the cheaper option. Depending on feedback and profitability, the long-term goal should be to move towards greater provision of self-guided audio tours, including recorded contributions from Members past and present of both Houses. (Paragraph 88)

31. The need to maintain and repair the building must clearly be taken into account in deciding whether and when to open the Palace of Westminster to visitors. Allowing the works programme to fall behind schedule would negatively impact on the work of the House. Clearly, necessary works must take priority. Equally clearly, the additional costs arising from delayed works or weekend or evening works must be accurately measured and factored into prices charged for tours. (Paragraph 92)

32. We suggest that a special, low-price tour simply of Westminster Hall might be introduced, aimed largely at tourists who wish to see inside the Palace of Westminster, and focusing on the history of the Hall and the purpose and work of Parliament. (Paragraph 94)
33. We believe that there are simple short-term gains to be made either from leasing the unit to a third party, as for other neighbouring units, or from altering the name of the bookshop, altering the balance of what is stocked there, opening it to match commercial hours rather than the limited hours of present opening, and making it more visible to passers-by. We recommend that those changes be made immediately, even if a longer-term vision may mean further change at a later stage. (Paragraph 98)

34. We recommend that a souvenir and tourist shop be set up in Westminster Hall immediately to maximise revenue in the period until longer-term income generation plans are drawn up and implemented. (Paragraph 100)

35. We recommend that an online souvenir sales service be established. We therefore invite the Catering and Retail Service to provide a proposal to the Committee. (Paragraph 102)

36. We welcome the progress made on raising the profile of the Jubilee cafeteria for visitors and recommend that further signs be provided inside and outside the Palace to ensure that visitors are aware that it is available for them. (Paragraph 104)

37. We reiterate the recommendations made in our previous Report on Catering and Retail Services on opening the Strangers Dining Room and other facilities to members of the public on days when the House is not sitting, on offering the public afternoon tea on the Terrace on days when the House is not sitting and on using other spaces within the House for similar purposes. We are disappointed that progress towards offering these services has been so slow. (Paragraph 105)
Formal Minutes

Monday 23 April 2012

Members present:

Sir Alan Haselhurst, in the Chair

Thomas Docherty
Graham Evans
Mark Francois
Simon Kirby

Dr Phillip Lee
Sarah Newton
Mr John Spellar
Mark Tami

Visitor access and facilities

The Committee considered informally the Chair’s draft Report.

[Adjourned till Monday 14 May at 4.30pm]

Monday 14 May 2012

Members present:

Sir Alan Haselhurst, in the Chair

Thomas Docherty
Mark Francois
Nigel Mills

Sarah Newton
Mr John Spellar
Mark Tami

Visitor access and facilities

The Committee considered informally the Chair’s draft Report.

Draft Report (Visitor access and facilities), proposed by the Chair, brought up and Read.

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

Paragraphs 1 to 105 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, along with written evidence reported and ordered to be published on 12 December 2011 and 5 March 2012.

[Adjourned till Monday 21 May at 4.30 pm]
Witnesses

Monday 17 October 2011

John Pullinger, Director General, Information Services, House of Commons  

Monday 24 October 2011

Simon Blackburn, Head of Visitor Services, Houses of Parliament and Aileen Walker, Director of Public Information, House of Commons  

Matthew Morgan, Tours Manager, Houses of Parliament, Hannah Lister, Visitor Assistant Supervisor, Houses of Parliament, Mark Cullen, Visitor Assistant, Houses of Parliament, and Aileen Walker, Director of Public Information, House of Commons  

Aileen Walker, Director of Public Information, House of Commons and Tom O’Leary, Head of Education and Public Engagement, House of Commons  

Monday 28 November 2011

Mel Barlex, Director of Parliamentary Estates and Christine Sillis, Deputy Director Projects, Parliamentary Estates Directorate, House of Commons  

Monday 16 January 2012

Jonathan Drori, Chair of the Speaker’s Advisory Council on Public Engagement  

Monday 23 January 2012

Bernard Donoghue, Director, Association of Leading Visitor Attractions  

Monday 30 January 2012

Dr Ruth Fox, Director of the Parliament and Government Programme, Hansard Society
List of written evidence

(published in Volume II on the Committee’s website www.parliament.uk/ac)

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<td>Association of Leading Visitor Attractions (ALVA)</td>
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Oral evidence

Taken before the Administration Committee
on Monday 17 October 2011

Members present:

Sir Alan Haselhurst (Chair)
Rosie Cooper
Thomas Docherty
Mr Mark Francois
Nigel Mills
Tessa Munt
Mr John Spellar
Mr Shaiiles Vara
Mr Dave Watts
Mike Weatherley

Examination of Witness

Witness: John Pullinger, Director General, Information Services, House of Commons, gave evidence.

Q1 Chair: Thank you very much indeed for your paper, Mr Pullinger, and for coming to see us this afternoon. Would you like to make an opening statement, please?

John Pullinger: Yes, just a few words, if I may, Sir Alan. You will be talking to members of our outstanding visitor services team at a later date, but I would like to start by paying tribute to them and their achievement in 2011 of winning two UK Best Visitor Attraction awards. I do that because providing a successful welcome to visitors in this place requires a unique ability to recognise, first, that this is a place of work for Members and staff; secondly, that new expenditure of public money is rightly challenged very hard; thirdly, that we have unusually onerous security requirements; and fourthly, that this Grade I listed World Heritage Site building needs to be maintained and protected.

The challenge for us and for your inquiry is to turn these challenges into opportunities. Your review of catering has shown the way. For example, if we can get visitors to use the facilities here when they are not needed by members and staff, costs can be reduced rather than increased. Saturday opening, which we have been doing for the last year, has shown that the cost of security can be covered through visitor charges. If, as a result, more security lanes can be kept open, hopefully queues and frustration at security points can be minimised. In addition, it may be possible for Parliament to learn from many other cultural and heritage organisations around the country, and establish the means for surplus income to be directed towards the protection of the Palace of Westminster for the long term.

In my note I have highlighted seven priorities that I believe would serve to meet the expectations of both Houses to improve the welcome we give to visitors and ensure that those special challenges are met. That is all I would like to say at this point. I will be happy to take those seven items in turn or take questions if you wish.

Q2 Mr Spellar: I have two areas that I would like to address. Firstly, in your points A to G, you talked about the pressure on Cromwell Green. When we went down to Cromwell Green, frankly, it was a very badly organised facility. There are two camera points. Initially, we thought the real choke point was the one camera point, but in fact there are two cameras; they are just not being operated. So you have long queues of people. The staff are by no means running that system through the monitors or with the cameras at full capacity. It is going to be difficult to go to the House and argue for additional facilities when we are not using the capacity that we already have. We went down there three or four months ago, in July, and we were very clear about that, but there does not seem to be much evidence that there has been an improvement.

John Pullinger: That building was designed to have three security points running, and if three security points are running at full capacity, on the original design we could have got 1,000 people through in an hour. That is an awful lot of people and likely to meet pretty much any requirements we have seen. The original design was drawn up before the 7 July bombings in 2005, and as a result of that event we have had to increase the level of security checks people go through, which has roughly halved the capacity. Our current estimate is that 500 people can get through there in an hour if all lanes are open.

When we have busy times, which typically tend to be Tuesdays and Wednesdays for obvious reasons, we quite often substantially exceed 500, even with all three lanes open. We end up with queues up the ramp, as we did on Tuesday and Wednesday last week, for example. Therefore, even with all three lanes open there is clearly a problem with capacity at busy times. The three lanes are not always open, and that is primarily down to the fact that it costs a lot of money to keep one of those lanes open with security officers. It is the job of the Serjeant at Arms to manage the police contract to ensure that we match supply with demand and keep the costs down.

Generally speaking, I think they are pretty aware of when the crunch times are—when lobbies are coming—and will staff it up to match, but it does not always work. The reason why not all the security lanes are open all the time is to manage the cost of that police contract.
Q3 Mr Spellar: When we were there, there was a queue stretching, again, up the ramp, and very limited use was being made of the lanes. It is a real question as to who is running that in real time. Nobody seemed to be running it in order to speed it up.

John Pullinger: The management of that contract is such that the police have the operational responsibility for it and the Serjeant at Arms runs the contract. The aim is to get best value for the House out of it.

Q4 Mr Spellar: Yes, but best value cannot be that we have all sorts of arguments taking place about how long groups of visitors are having to wait, and all of the inconvenience to visitors. If lots of times when we go by we see that there are long queues, then clearly this is not being run well, especially if, when you get to the front of the queue—we went round the side when we went down there to inspect it—they are probably working at around one-third to one-half of capacity. That cannot be proper use of a facility that should be designed to get people into the building.

John Pullinger: On that occasion it does not seem as if best use was being made of it. The judgment on each day is based on the expected number of people coming through and balancing the need to get people through without queuing against the cost of having the lanes open. On a normal day when we can balance that, I am saying that we can manage up to 500 people an hour, but even with the thing working at full capacity, that is often not enough. On Tuesday afternoons and Wednesday afternoons there can be as many as 800 people trying to get in, and that is when the queue backs right the way up to the ramp and over into the car park, which it did on a couple of occasions last week.

Q5 Chair: Could I just follow that up? Do I understand from what you say that it is not so much the physical constraints that have halved the original projected capacity, but a change in the level of security being applied?

John Pullinger: Yes, that is my understanding.

Q6 Chair: I do not know whether it is right to pursue this in an open session or whether there are implications in discussing it, but is the risk assessment immutable from the point of view of bringing people in? Are we facing a permanent downgrading of capacity because of serious security concerns or is there scope for looking at that? Is this a question that we have to pursue with the Serjeant or someone to see whether or not it could be eased slightly to improve throughput?

John Pullinger: The Serjeant would be able to give you better advice than I can, but my understanding is that the level of security threat is continually being reappraised and it changes. It has certainly changed, on occasion, since 2005, but the big tightening came at that point, which was just after the current building had been commissioned and was under construction. We had a facility that would have been enough to get people through with the security regime before 2005 and has not been sufficient since. That is not to say there are not tweaks that are possible, but I am sure that the Serjeant’s department will act on whatever security advice they are given; they are going to want to follow that advice very clearly.

Q7 Chair: Was no thought then given, because of the need to change the security level, to doing something more to restore what we all expected the original throughput to be?

John Pullinger: I am sure we will come on to it in questions. There is the further examination of Black Rod’s Garden as the second biggest potential area of entry and, at the northern end of the Estate, whether more capacity could be created in Portcullis House. That discussion has been carrying on since 2005.

Rosie Cooper: That is a quick discussion then.

Q8 Tessa Munt: In light of what you have just said, the Speaker made an announcement about an hour and a quarter ago in which he suggested that changes would be made about bags carried by people who wished to visit Committee Rooms, in the light of the instance in the last session. I wondered what your observations are on that. My main question is about paragraph nine, which refers to disabled access. It says, “A report on physical access arrangements in conformity with the Disability Discrimination Act has been compiled and followed up.” I would like you to comment on that, but will you talk about what the Speaker said first, of which I assume you are aware.

John Pullinger: Yes. There is a review each time there is an incident, and that review leads to recommendations as to how we manage the threat we perceive. There are continuing assessments by the Serjeant at Arms at all times, and something like that is a tightening. The level of tightness we adopt depends on the threat assessed, which also is dependent on what has happened. The particular issue around that Select Committee hearing has caused us to look again at how we check people as they are coming into the building. Those checks will in turn influence how long it takes to get people through the various security points. On occasion, there is a need for tightening; on other occasions there is a relaxation. It depends on the advice we get.

Q9 Tessa Munt: It struck me that the Speaker was making a pretty comprehensive case for people not taking bags into Committee Rooms. I may have misheard, but I just wonder how that is going to be facilitated. When we visited that entrance there did not even seem to be space for people to store their coats in a secure way and that sort of thing. It was fairly chaotic, in my view, with pretty ad hoc arrangements. I just wonder how we envisage holding off perhaps 100, 150, 350 or 400 bags from going into Committee Rooms if people wish to join a public session.

John Pullinger: That is going to be a challenging and it is slightly easier at Portcullis House than it is at Cromwell Green, but none of these facilities was designed for that at the time. They were designed with a particular regime in mind, and we are having to deal with changes. We will have to deal with them and that will be a conversation between the Department of Facilities and the Serjeant at Arms to make sure we
have a secure place for people to put things if they are not allowed to take them into Committee Rooms.

**Q10 Tessa Munt:** Thank you. Can I ask you to move to the issue of access?

**John Pullinger:** Yes. The disabled access review—we had a report in January 2010 that comprehensively looked at our compliance with the Disability Discrimination Act. It came up with a range of recommendations, and the examples I have are: to improve signage; to improve the training of staff; and to look very carefully at the entirety of the route for wheelchair users, for example simple things like door closes—some of the doors in this building are very heavy and difficult for people. But probably the most significant thing as far as I could see from that was to build in to our regular maintenance programme an assessment that we were going to be compliant and we could improve our compliance with the Disability Discrimination Act as we went forward. I have highlighted some other things in here such as easy read leaflets and so on, but this clearly is an issue that, as Parliament, we have to take very seriously and make sure we are operating best practice rather than just compliance. But it is jolly difficult in a building like this.

**Q11 Tessa Munt:** I was present at a debate last week in Westminster Hall that was attended by a large number of people who are wheelchair users, and it was disastrous, frankly. Lisa Nandy, who is the Member for Wigan, has raised a point of order this afternoon about exactly that. People who wish to access the Chambers, including Westminster Hall, and any other Committee Room, should be treated as people. They should have equal access; we should not be discriminating one from another. What was happening in that particular setting was embarrassing, frankly. I was not sure there was any point in your A to G that dealt with the fact we have not quite got a grip on access for everybody to certain parts of the House. I suppose I would like to see a point H saying clearly the report implies it has all been dealt with and it is done—followed up and sorted. Clearly it has not.

**John Pullinger:** I think your point is entirely fair. That could absolutely correctly be at point H on the report. I reported the action we took at the time of the last review, which was in 2009, when we did commission this report, and I can make it available to the Committee if you wish. It seems entirely appropriate that we look at it again, particularly in the light of that particular example, which clearly did not show us in the greatest light. I am conscious from the comments we get from not just wheelchair users but other people who do not have the same level of access—

**Q12 Tessa Munt:** Is there a suggestion scheme when one leaves the building at any point? Are there suggestion sheets?

**John Pullinger:** We do collect information from people as they go through.

**Q13 Tessa Munt:** We do? How do we do that?

**John Pullinger:** I am just trying to think where it is now in Westminster Hall—we have moved it around—but when people come to the end of their tour in Westminster Hall there is an opportunity to leave suggestions with a staff member.

**Tessa Munt:** Sorry, I do not just mean people who do the formal tour; I mean people who use the facilities of the building generally.

**John Pullinger:** I will make sure you have the right information on that when you have some of my staff with you next week, but I do not think there is a formal process to collect information systematically in the way you have described, but clearly there could be.

**Tessa Munt:** It might be helpful, thank you.

**Chair:** I can inform the Committee that I had a letter about three days ago that will be going to G that dealt with the fact we have not quite got a grip on access—

**Q14 Mr Watts:** Mr Pullinger, can I just follow up John Spellar’s point? It seems to me that, at a time when finances are very tight, it is very difficult to justify spending more money on the Palace of Westminster unless you are absolutely certain there is no alternative. It seems to me what we should do is start from a position which I think the Committee recommended, which was to look to see how you could improve throughput within the existing system. I take on board the fact that you have reduced it from 1,000 at peak time to 500 because of security measures, but I am not sure whether all security measures have been stepped up to reduce the level of throughput by half. I am not sure whether this is the right venue to ask those questions—in public—but there does seem to me a case for reviewing the security levels to see whether they could be improved.

We have heard already that the Speaker is looking at banning people from bringing bags into Committee rooms. That may well have a massive impact on the way you take people through. If they are not taking bags through, those bags do not have to be scanned, and if those bags do not have to be scanned, perhaps people could just go through the normal scanner. That will speed the process up.

Thirdly I would ask whether there is any scope for dividing the sorts of visitors coming in. As I understand it, everyone visitor who is a non-pass holder, goes through the same system. Is there some scope for people accompanied, for example, by a Member of Parliament or a senior member of staff to be taken to a different system from the one we have to release pressure? I am looking for whether that sort of thing is ongoing and whether people are actually doing that. Quite frankly, it is hard to see how anyone
can go with a recommendation to expand the existing facilities until we have all the answers to those questions and know whether we can get more out of the ones we have.

John Pullinger: There are three questions here. On the assessment of the security requirements that has led to the change in throughput now, I do not know the precise answer, but I am sure that the Serjeant at Arms could provide you with a note if you wish. I am recalling my understanding of the situation as it happened in 2005, and I am sure they could give you chapter and verse on that.

On the second point regarding bags, you are right that if bags are being dropped off it is going to change the logistics. It is a handling point as to how long it takes to get someone through. I would be surprised if there is a magic answer, but we need to do an assessment of that. This is clearly very recent news; it has come out of the review that has just been published now and we need to explore what it does. I would not like to say whether it will help one way or the other yet.

In terms of the alternative route people can take, the ramp going into the Cromwell Green Entrance has two lanes at the moment. The second lane is designed to be a fast track lane for priority visitors, which is essentially people such as witnesses to Committees, who have a timed reason to be here and are on parliamentary business. The job of the people at the top of the ramp is to ensure that those people go through the fast track, particularly when there is a significant queue on the ramp. In practice, I am sure that you, as most Members will be, are very acutely aware of when the pressure points come. It is possible to bring people in through the Portcullis House entrance, through Black Rod’s Garden Entrance or through the Peers’ Entrance to get the pass. The critical thing is that we all need to get someone through the system so they have a photo pass on them, and if they are challenged in the building it is clear that they have gone through security. There are a limited number of places to do that, but Cromwell Green is not the only one. Certainly, if it is a Tuesday afternoon and I have a guest coming I would advise them, unless there is a big Committee sitting, to go to Portcullis House, because generally the queues are shorter.

Q15 Mr Watts: Could their passes be processed before they arrived? I am talking about priority visitors.

John Pullinger: The main purpose of the pass is to prove that you have been through the scanner. You get your pass once you have been scanned as having been accepted. Our main form of security is the perimeter security you get by people going through the scanners.

Q16 Mr Watts: The point about this is whether we should look at the categories and the security procedures in different ways. I would have thought that someone who is coming to a Select Committee witness is a very low security risk. You could process their application when it is quiet. They could arrive with their pass and go through Black Rod’s Garden Entrance rather than the traditional entrance. I am talking about other people as well—different groups could be processed in different ways to take the pressure off the point where the general public are coming in.

John Pullinger: Yes, you certainly could do that. The large volumes of people coming through tend not to be in that category. Those people who are in that category clearly are extremely frustrated if they are caught, but the large volumes tend to be for things like banqueting, which inevitably clusters around certain times of the day when events are starting. If you have large numbers of members of the public wishing to attend particular Committee hearings or lobbies, none of that would be solved by this. You would certainly make it easier for particular categories of people, particularly Select Committee guests, but for most purposes it should be possible, using the fast-track facility, for those people to go straight to the front of the queue and straight through the scanner without any waiting—passes done—and through. I am not sure whether the pre-printing of the pass would work from a security point of view, because those people still would not have gone through the scanner.

Q17 Mr Watts: A very final question: when you indicate that it is all being looked at, when do you expect that report on all the options for increasing throughput to be available?

John Pullinger: What I said was that the Serjeant at Arms is continually reviewing the security requirements of scanning people and how to get people through quickly.

Mr Watts: So there is no—

John Pullinger: Nothing has been commissioned specifically on this at the moment.

Mr Watts: Okay, so this is the point: when we saw what was going on we made certain recommendations, and from that nothing is happening. There is no final date that has been put in place for coming back and saying, “We’ve looked at all these issues. This is what you can do; this is what you cannot do.” The Committee is not going to get that response unless we ask for it separately.

Q18 Chair: We have not got that far yet. We have to decide what it is we believe should be done. Some of these questions are verging too much on the security issue, which we are going to have to tackle, but when the Serjeant is with us. The Serjeant is coming on 7 or 21 November. I think that will be the time to pursue some of these matters. I think there is a tension between what you are trying to achieve in your Department—in terms of generating business and ensuring that the people who come here are welcome and given a good deal—and certain other parts of the building, where there is a very restrictive attitude that security is paramount, which is absolutely right, but there is almost an unwillingness to compromise to meet the purposes that you are trying to pursue. Do you sense that? I am not asking you to be disloyal, but is it a fact that we have a misfit at the moment between trying to bring more people in to experience Parliament, this great building, and the fact that at the moment we do not have the maximum facilities for admitting them?
John Pullinger: The way I would put it is that the House’s desire to improve the welcome to visitors in reasonably large numbers is relatively recent. It has only been a very serious ambition over the last 10 years. In the past it has happened; Members have always wanted to welcome their constituents, bring them in and give them tours, but the idea of making this a visitor attraction, for want of a better term, is something new. Until 10 years ago, visiting has effectively been an adjunct to the Member’s role. So everything has really been designed around Members taking responsibility for their own visitors. That change is a result of the evolution of the role of Members and of the House’s wish to be much more welcoming to the public as a separate, distinct ambition. The consequence is that the visitors’ service fits in a series of cracks in a system that has been designed around security of the building, maintenance of the building and the fact this is fundamentally a working building rather than a place for people to visit.

All that has made it very challenging, but the thing I really do sense is changing—and I hinted at it in my opening. I think one of the ways in which we are now thinking about how to work with visitors, I do highlight what came out of your catering review. There is the potential in visitors to bring extra money into the system. So extra money into the catering facilities provides a better service for visitors, but it also helps cover overheads for Members. Extra money from visitors helps us keep extra lanes open on the security system, for example, as we have been doing on Saturdays, so that everybody benefits from that. I think what has changed is that there is a much stronger willingness in this Parliament to think of charging visitors for things and therefore improving facilities not just for the visitor but for Members and people who work in this building. That is a change.

Q19 Mr Francois: Forgive me, Chairman, if I ask a question and have to nip off once I have heard the answer. I do not mean to be rude, but I put my hand up now. Is there any further update with regard to an education centre? The reason I ask is that all the slots for school tours organised by the Education Service go by subscription only, within a morning of being advertised. You are then often bringing school parties up as if they were “normal visitors”. Previously, you could find a location within the current Estate. The most promising one was the area known as the Lower Secretaries’ Area under the Chamber because it is a relatively large contiguous space. It would minimise the amount of traipsing about that school groups would have to do, and there was a sense that it would be feasible.

Two things have scuppered that. The first is that most of that space is currently occupied by the staff of Members. There was a project linked with helping Members move out of windowless offices upstairs here; that has not gone forward and was shelved on grounds of cost.

Mr Francois: So I understand.

John Pullinger: The education centre was part of that chain of things. The second thing was the detailed feasibility study from an engineering point of view. It was realised that the structure underneath the Chamber could not take the works that were necessary. Clearly, you could not take any risks with the Chamber, so that proposition fell. Then we were tasked with finding alternative locations, and I came to the Committee a few months ago with a series of alternative rooms that would help improve space.

The one that found immediate favour was the Grand Committee Room on Mondays and Fridays, and we are now starting to use that. That will enable us to bring more school groups in, but we are forever on the lookout for other rooms that are unoccupied or under-occupied that we could use as a sensible place for you to meet school groups and for us to give them a good educational experience. As I indicate in the paper—item 12a on the list—doing something in Black Rod’s Garden area remains the most feasible option on the table, because it is very unlikely there will be a space inside the building that could be made available cost-effectively. The Parliamentary Estates Directorate is doing another feasibility study at the moment to see whether that is possible.

Q20 Mr Francois: I am just conscious that, as you say, the House resolved in 2007 this was something it wanted to do, and here we are a good four years on—
lots of study and analysis—and there is still no firm plan. I just wonder how many more times we are going to go round in circles before there is a definitive plan for something to open on a given date.

**John Pullinger:** You are right, and the terms of reference of this Committee’s Inquiry are to help to break that logjam. I have described the way in which we have been baulked in doing so at the moment. My sense is that the desire in both Houses to make this happen is as strong as it was before. The initial impediment was cost, and I am sure that it remains a challenge—if not an even stronger one—now, so in looking at building options we will need to be extremely hard on ourselves about what is going to be cost-effective. The guidance from the Committee is going to be very important on that. It also has to be something that will not fall. There was a firm plan for the last one and it fell because the chain of moves of which this was part was deemed to be too expensive, so I think the financial difficulty is the biggest one.

The only extra observation I would put on the table is that at other buildings where people have wanted to create a visitor education facility they have looked at, as well as very nice high-quality options, what you might describe as temporary/low-cost options. A number of other heritage buildings, particularly National Trust properties, have some very attractive educational facilities built in a low-cost, timber, prefabricated way. We have not looked seriously at that before, and hopefully there is an opportunity in the current review to consider a way of meeting the requirement to create space without necessarily over-engineering it.

**Q21 Rosie Cooper:** Given that pass-holders and Members have passed all the security restrictions and reviews that may be applied to them, can you explain to me why, for example, at Black Rod’s Garden, I am required to use my pass three times before I can get through? In the absence of common sense, why would anyone think that was good?

**John Pullinger:** I do not know the answer to that question. It occurs to me every time I go through it as well. The building at Black Rod’s Garden end is not an ideal place for people to come through and be security cleared. It is a very small space; it is in a point of entry and bringing visitors in on a large-scale basis, that exist at Black Rod’s Garden with the second line of entry and bringing visitors in on a large-scale basis, which Mr Pullinger is concerned about. Effectively, after a perfunctory trial, the opportunity of bringing in guests to re-establish the line of route at the southern end of the building is blocked for the moment. That is the bigger question that we have to examine, and the particular layout there is a matter for security and indeed the House of Lords to consider.

**Q22 Rosie Cooper:** If you will forgive me, I think this probably goes to the heart of the problem in that you are using your pass three times within 12 or 14 feet probably—from one door to the other door. The kind of logic that goes into producing that kind of result is the reason we are having this discussion this afternoon. The absence of common sense just leaves me completely bewildered. I cannot understand it; you do not understand it; and yet somehow the powers that be have implemented it in this building. That is what I find so frustrating. We may pass or we may agree a certain line, but, by the time the Chinese whispers have finished, I could not recognise that I would ever condone a system where I would be required, having passed every security test that Parliament wants to establish, to use my pass three times in 12 or 14 feet. It is just crazy. Surely, that should have been realised by the people who were trying to do it. Did no one think, “This is a bit silly”?

**Chair:** This is not for John Pullinger. This is for the Serjeant when the Serjeant comes. That is security.

**Rosie Cooper:** Absolutely, but, on the throughput, even now Mr Pullinger has said it occurred to him. What have you done about it?

**Chair:** Rosie, I am sorry, this is not John Pullinger’s responsibility. If it is a responsibility, it is what is happening at the other end of the building. I think you are right to say that there has been a mismatch between the actual physical arrangements that exist at Black Rod’s Garden with the second line of entry and bringing visitors in on a large-scale basis, which Mr Pullinger is concerned about. Effectively, after a perfunctory trial, the opportunity of bringing in guests to re-establish the line of route at the southern end of the building is blocked for the moment. That is the bigger question that we have to examine, and the particular layout there is a matter for security and indeed the House of Lords to consider.

**Q23 Rosie Cooper:** May I just quickly finish? Referring to Tessa’s point about disability, not everybody with mobility problems, for example, is in a wheelchair, yet the route is lengthy, and I will just ask you to bear this in mind when you are feeding into the disability solution that we will hopefully come up with. Not everyone with mobility problems is in a wheelchair and not everyone can stand for a long time—half an hour or an hour queue—and we need to accommodate those people who just cannot do it. It is not that they do not want to wait there; they just cannot do it.

**John Pullinger:** I agree entirely, and each review that has been done has suggested that we should have a route that minimises the amount of travel for people. At the moment people have to travel twice the distance they really need to, and that is a difficulty for parents with small children, for elderly people, and people with all kinds of disabilities and impairments. I can only agree with you, but we are in the situation we are at the moment primarily because the main point of entry is at Cromwell Green, which is pretty much at capacity, and we cannot get large numbers of people through on any other part of the route.

**Q24 Nigel Mills:** I broadly agree with most of the points in your paper, John, but I have just a couple of questions. At least a couple of entrances are relatively underused: Parliament Street and Derby Gate. Is there
any way of shuffling demand around to make better use of those? I would say the Portcullis House entrance is as congested at times as the other one, and trying to direct more people there is unlikely to be a happy experience on a Tuesday or Wednesday. Is there any plan to make better use of those two empty entrances?

John Pullinger: The first point to make is that any entrance in the northern part of the Estate, if it is about people getting to the Palace, is just going to exacerbate problems on the escalator. The real pinch point is the escalator, which is difficult to deal with. Of the entrances you mentioned, Derby Gate is quite difficult because you go in at Derby Gate, you have to go under the tunnel, up to Parliament Street and—back to Rosie Cooper’s point—you are increasing the amount of travel for people. It is also physically a difficult entrance; there is one rotating door that would be quite difficult to take out.

Parliament Street is potentially more promising, and you have the scanner there at the moment. Again, you have the problem of going through Parliament Street, with up and down steps, and the steps into Portcullis House are a challenge. But people are increasingly use that entrance, because it has the scanning facilities. However, I would still say if we want to improve the entrances of that end of the Estate, improving the main Portcullis House entrance is the best option, because if people are congregating they can wait under cover. The original entrance was designed to enable us to put in extra security facilities there. You asked where we are with reviewing that. The main project on the books in the northern end of the Estate at the moment is to increase the number of people who can get through the Portcullis House entrance.

Q25 Nigel Mills: I certainly would not argue with that, and preferably there would be a door that is designed to be an exit only, rather than that horrible logjam you have of people trying to get out a door when someone is trying to get in—they both end up stuck. I think you have tried to fix that by making it a manual door rather than automatic.

John Pullinger: It has changed several times over the last few weeks, hasn’t it? I thought I might be asked this question. My understanding is that the Parliamentary Estates Directorate is bringing forward, by January, a proposal—a business case, in the language here—that will then help us see what is the most cost-effective way of taking that particular project forward.

Q26 Nigel Mills: Your point E was about creating a centralised mechanism for room booking and tours to limit the amount of people trying to get in to the capacity. That sounds a bit of a challenge as to who wins if there is a big banqueting booking versus some big tours booked in. Is that going to be first come, first served? Is it going to be, “Well, the banqueting will make us a fortune. Sorry, your tour has now been cancelled”? I can see the logic of the system, but not how you would play off the competition.

John Pullinger: All I can say is that nobody wins at the moment. On a Tuesday afternoon, in particular, we are systematically inviting more people than it is physically ever going to be possible to get into the building. We know that, so that seems to me an avoidable problem. You are right that we are going to have to make some judgments about which groups should have priority, but, for practical purposes, if you invite more people to come to your event than get in, they do not get to your event, so you are not really very much the wiser. If people are waiting for three quarters of an hour, as they often are, to get into a banqueting event, either they have been told to come three quarters of an hour early, which is not very great, or they arrive three quarters of an hour late and miss half of it.

We are not far off some of the comments that were made earlier. It is a right hand and left hand question, but what this Committee could usefully do is think about the kinds of prioritisation mechanisms that might be acceptable to Members. As you say, on the banqueting side—you have looked at it from the catering point of view—we want to get more people coming in because that will raise more income. Similarly, if groups have events in Committee Rooms, they are events sponsored by you. I merely observe that, without a centralised mechanism, nobody wins at the moment at those times when more people are coming than we can get in.

Q27 Mr Spellar: The idea of the administration trying to decide which events can take place and who takes precedence is a nightmare scenario. Does a meeting on Sri Lanka take precedence over a reception for the West Midlands Fire Brigade? I think it is fraught with difficulty, and an issue that should be dealt with only as a last resort. There were a number of other areas that I was slightly concerned about. One was this central mechanism for tour bookings to alleviate congestion. That talked about official tours and unofficial groups. I do not know if that means that a Member of Parliament taking around half a dozen people is going to have to book a slot.

John Pullinger: It does not mean Members of Parliament taking around half a dozen people; it means Members of Parliament, or more often staff of Members of Parliament, bringing around large groups of people. There is a frequent problem that causes many complaints from Members. They go through the system and book a slot and then their guests are baulked because a large group of people have turned up and are hogging a particular point. That is something that officials, the tours, the visitor services find extremely difficult and very frustrating, because at the moment it is almost impossible to challenge those people. They have turned up with their coach and they are the guests of a Member. We have not found any way as officials of regulating that. It is a version of the other point. It is very hard for officials to do and they are genuinely areas where I would really welcome the views of the Committee as to how we can do it.

Q28 Mr Spellar: I understand that. Then we talk about the creation of a separate entity to manage income and talk about it as a charity. That would mean trustees and others, and it could reinvest its surplus in
the twin objectives of protecting and preserving the historic fabric of Parliament and improving public understanding. Part of the discussion we have had is about generating income to maintain facilities for what is the core business here, which is providing a Parliament. Creating a separate entity to run that brings the great danger that it will run away with itself and move us away from what is actually the core business here; the others are desirable objectives, but are not our core business. If we create a charity, we have trustees, and we are under charity law—that has considerable downsides to it all.

It ties in with the final point, which is about Parliament Square. Again, it might seem desirable, but Trafalgar Square, for example, was improved by cutting off one side. Trafalgar Square is a permanent bottleneck in the centre of London; it has huge effects on buses, for example, let alone all other vehicles. Taking out one side of Parliament Square could equally have a very significant effect. This city’s transport system does have to keep moving as well.

John Pullinger: Let me take those two in turn, if I may.

Chair: We are probably on the countdown at the moment.

John Pullinger: Okay, I shall take them quickly.

Mr Spellar: Mr Heath takes his time, you know.

John Pullinger: As part of our savings programme to look at how we can balance the budget over the next three years, we have been looking very hard at income generation. The advice we have received, which has been based on a range of other organisations, has been that we can increase the levels of income, or perhaps more accurately profit, from souvenirs, tours and so forth by several million pounds. However, we could probably double the amount we get if we created a charitable entity, which many other organisations have done.

The proposal in the paper to have the purposes of the charity related to the historic fabric of Parliament is precisely to avoid the kind of anxiety you have. Our prime purpose is the business of Parliament; our prime purpose is not to be a historic monument preservation body, so at the moment what happens is we have to maintain because there is only us to do it, and the only way of getting the money for conservation projects is from the Exchequer. Probably the most relevant experience of other organisations to us is the Royal Collection; it cleared several million pounds in income in the last year—and this is the year before the Royal Wedding—that it was then able to put towards maintenance costs. We can do this without creating a separate entity, but the advice we have had is, if you do create a separate entity, you can generate more income that could be used for those effectively non-Parliamentary purposes and would save us a cost that otherwise we would have to bear instead of doing what we really ought to be doing, which is focusing on running a Parliament.

Q29 Mr Spellar: How could we generate more income that way?

John Pullinger: There are two main reasons. The first one is that a charity has access to things like Gift Aid; it has access to grants from various bodies that we do not get—European grants. Lottery grants, all sorts of things—that are available for people who are maintaining heritage buildings. The second line is something that a number of bodies have done, which is to identify people who are very interested in the organisation they are trying to protect and introduce a National Trust-style membership scheme or a sponsorship scheme. The nearest example I can think of is the philanthropist who put money into recreating the Armada paintings in the House of Lords. At the moment we do not have any systematic way of getting that. Organisations like the Royal Opera House, because they are run in a charitable way, have a development team. I have been told that each member of that team generates large amounts of income to help support the Royal Opera House, because there are people who want to support something like that. The proposition has been put to us that there are people who wish to support the maintenance of the fabric of this place. So that is the answer to your first question.

On the second question, clearly with any change to the Square the primary concern is going to be the traffic—what the consequence is going to be for everybody else. A number of studies have been done. This Committee reviewed the World Squares Project that would have followed on from the Trafalgar Square one, and I think that is a determinant. One of the reasons why it is very difficult to make this place welcoming for visitors is that the space immediately outside is extremely difficult. The question is: is there anything that could be done to make it better?

Mr Spellar: Yes, get rid of that encampment.

Q30 Thomas Docherty: Mr Pullinger, I will try and cram this all in if I can. First of all, just to pick up on Mr Spellar’s point about revenue, do you accept there is a danger—obviously, we have some wonderful members of the press, and one of them is sitting in the press gallery, so I will say that—that some of the press might see the charity status as “MPs avoid tax wheeze”. Are you conscious of the public relations issues around using charitable status in order to avoid tax?

Secondly, on the issue about Westminster Hall and the doubling back of the line, I have had a couple of conversations with you on behalf of the Committee. Surely, the cheapest, most effective thing to do is to re-jig the script, because there is, as you know, in my view no reason why—as it is the 900-year-old bit of the Palace and the bit where Parliament used to meet—the tour cannot begin in Westminster Hall and go up to Sovereign’s Gate, rather than this slightly ludicrous situation where you meet in Westminster Hall, traipse all the way up and all the way back down again. What discussions have you had with your counterpart in CRS about the facilities within Westminster Hall at the end of the tour, as we have discussed in our report, as regards a visitor centre like the one in Congress, Buckingham Palace or any other major tourist attraction of this nature?

Finally, going back to Mr Spellar’s point about the outside of the buildings, and I have seen Parliament’s thoughts on pedestrianisation, how far have you got...
with Transport for London in discussing those issues? I think, Mr Chairman, that covers the main points.

**John Pullinger:** I will answer each of those quickly. On the question of tax status, clearly there will be publicity about this and people will make various points.

**Q31 Thomas Docherty:** Do you think it will be good or bad publicity?

**John Pullinger:** It is very easy to get bad publicity here.

**Thomas Docherty:** We are MPs; we know about that. **John Pullinger:** The primary motivation for this is, as part of the savings programme, to reduce the costs of Parliament. The positive point here is about reducing the cost of Parliament. Parliament is not a charitable purpose, but the maintenance of this Grade I listed World Heritage site is. I think we would have to make the argument that this, in the same way as any other historic monument, is worthy of support in whatever way we can. The short answer to your question is, yes, we have thought of that and it is something we would need to manage.

On re-jigging the script, we could certainly re-jig the script, although there are fierce advocates for telling the story in either direction. That has not been resolved and could be resolved as part of the discussion of this Inquiry. But it is a lot more than re-jigging the script. If we are taking people from the north and out to the south, we would have to create facilities at the southern end for exit. You have to have some toilet facilities, and anybody would say the shop should be at the southern end of the Estate, as people are leaving. So if you are to avoid the doubling back and you start at the north, you have to have better facilities at the south, and our discussion we had earlier about Black Rod’s Garden demonstrates we are a way away from doing that. You could do it, but that would be a consequence over and above changing the script.

On doing something in the Westminster Hall area, Sue Harrison and I are very actively discussing how we can do something with the shop, which is clearly in a bad position in St Stephen’s Entrance, and the Jubilee Café, and making better use of that combined facility. Finally, on Transport for London, a study has been commissioned by the Parliamentary Estates Directorate to look and talk very specifically to the various other stakeholders in the area about the challenges of any improvements in this. That has not yet been published. The report you were mentioning was the one I mention in my paper by the Hansard Society, and that has involved discussions with people but not negotiations, if that distinction is helpful.

**Q32 Thomas Docherty:** I have seen a report from one of your Director General colleagues that shows how you would pedestrianise the outside of whatever that road is called, Mr Chairman, that runs between here and Westminster Abbey.

**Chair:** I think this is something that we need to look at in more detail. Members of John’s Department are coming next week, so we can pursue some of these matters specifically.

**Q33 Thomas Docherty:** Can I take you back just to the point about the congestion, again following on from Mr Spellar’s point? Am I right in thinking that you are saying that a Member taking around five or six guests does not cause congestion, but for argument’s sake, a Member taking 30 or 40 does. Are you suggesting that this is being delegated to a staff member who is taking around very large parties? Am I right in thinking that that was the point you were making about “unauthorised”?

**John Pullinger:** Yes. **Thomas Docherty:** Typically, how often is that occurring?

**John Pullinger:** Often, is what I would say, but you will meet some of the visitor assistants next week and they will be able to tell you the impact on those people who have gone through the system. Just to emphasise, Members have the opportunity to bring in small numbers—six is the number that is in the Book—and this is not intended to impact on that, because small groups do not get in the way, but larger groups most certainly do.

**Q34 Chair:** May I just check one point with you before we close? It follows, does it not, logically that if one has a fast track and a slow track at Cromwell Green, we are reducing capacity still further because, if it is to work as a fast track, presumably we are trying to speed in fewer people, namely those who are coming in for a specific appointment or to give evidence to a Select Committee, and keep the bulk of people coming for tours in the slow lane? The overall capacity must be reduced further by that fact. **John Pullinger:** The overall capacity is not reduced, because as people come down the fast lane they simply go to the front of the queue. The scanners are available to everybody, but as people are coming down, the people on the fast track will go straight to a scanner, so everyone else is held up, but only to that extent.

**Q35 Chair:** Therefore, would it not be helpful if we in fact segregated the fast track out completely and restored the black cabin that we used to have to the other side of St Stephen’s entrance, so that those people who were coming in in ones and twos or threes and fours for the purposes of attending a meeting, or as guests of Members, could be handled in that way? That would slightly increase the ability to handle the larger numbers coming in at Cromwell Green. **John Pullinger:** Possibly. My guess is that there would be quite fierce resistance to putting another structure at the front of the building like that.

**Q36 Chair:** It is one that we have had before. I suspect the objection will be as much to do with cost and that no one will bother with the convenience of people trying to come into the building. I may be unfair, but that worries me. What I am trying to say is that if it would help your aims to get people better and faster into the building, would it not be a useful adjunct to restore that cabin so that we can segregate completely from Cromwell Green the people who are coming into the House for quite specialist reasons?
John Pullinger: On that narrow ground, yes it would, because you have more capacity so you get more people in, so I will answer “yes” to your question. I am just foreseeing formidable arguments against.

Q37 Chair: I am sure, but this is how we have to weigh those arguments as to whether they should be as formidable as that when our purposes are to try to help the public. Thank you very much indeed and I think we may want to see you again towards the end of the inquiry if that is possible.

John Pullinger: That will be fine.

Chair: We are looking forward to seeing your staff next week. Thank you very much indeed.

John Pullinger: Thank you.
Monday 24 October 2011

Members present:

Sir Alan Haselhurst (Chair)  
Rosie Cooper  
Thomas Docherty  
Mr Kevan Jones  
Tessa Munt  
Nigel Mills  
Bob Russell  
Mr Dave Watts  
Mike Weatherley

Examination of Witnesses

 Witnesses: Simon Blackburn, Head of Visitor Services, Houses of Parliament, and Aileen Walker, Director of Public Information, House of Commons, gave evidence.

Q38 Chair: Thank you very much indeed for joining us this afternoon. You are acquainted with the nature and scope of this inquiry that we are undertaking. I wonder, Simon, do you want to make any opening statement?

Simon Blackburn: I will, if I may, Sir Alan. I have to say, it is very strange as a career clerk to find myself sitting here, where I was sitting in the horseshoe. There are three main parts to Visitor Services, which I hope have come out in my paper. The first is visitor access and information, which is our bread and butter work, day in day out getting people into the Palace and Chambers. The Paper includes a worked example of some of the pressures that the entrances are under at sitting times. I think it is important that we consider access to the Palace in the broadest manner possible. It is possible to get visitors to use different entrances as long as security within the building is okay, and there is a means of taking them safely from whichever entrance they do use to wherever they are required without them going into an area where access is not controlled. But wherever they are brought into the building I want them to get a high-quality welcome. While we are talking about different entrances, you will be delighted to hear that I can answer some questions on Black Rod’s Garden Entrance and pass swiping there, if you want, later on.

I mentioned a high-quality welcome, which means a friendly welcome. When you arrive you do not just meet a policeman with a gun, there is somebody to talk to you, somebody managing the queue, somebody showing you the way and somebody giving you information. Only about seven years ago, if you wanted to go into the Gallery you were queuing outside in the rain and there were no Visitor Assistants helping you and telling you why there was a queue or what was going on. So we have moved on a long way, but there is still further to go. My team is also responsible for the tour script, the other visitor information, the material we give visitors—leaflets, pamphlets—and obviously we welcome any feedback or ideas you have on those.

The second main limb of Visitor Services is the sponsored tours. Hopefully the Paper shows that they do not cause huge queues as they tend to arrive at different times to the main business of the Houses. Tours are now led by qualified guides. You will be familiar with the Central Tours Office, who book tours for your guests. They are absolutely flat out. Demand is huge, and we know we cannot meet the demand. That is not helped by the occasions when Members flout the rules, and perhaps something we might discuss is the impact of new sitting hours, which I think the Procedure Committee is looking at. If you went to a nine to five sitting day then we would have some interesting dilemmas about when to bring in your guests for tours.

Q39 Rosie Cooper: Would it not be easier to close the place down?

Simon Blackburn: Sorry?

Q40 Rosie Cooper: Would it be easier just to close the doors? I hate to be such a bother.

Simon Blackburn: It would depend whether the House of Lords was sitting; we could show them round there. But it is a dilemma.

The third limb is commercial tours. We have been doing that for 12 years now. They are award winning; we have had excellent feedback. Starting in Westminster Hall has some pros and cons. A benefit for us is a nice, dry marshalling space, where if people arrive early they can have a drink and use the toilets. Is the shop in the wrong place? Yes, absolutely; if we could go downstairs and move it now, as a Committee, I would be delighted to help you do that. Do we make enough from catering and retail? Probably not; industry standards suggest that about 40% of visitor spend should be on catering and retail and we know it is not.

We now have a well-established summer programme, so we have extended that on to Saturdays. We are looking at specialist tours, including art and architecture. But we are a long way from somewhere like Buckingham Palace. In its summer programme it handles about 64,000 people each week. Our capacity is 18,000. It has economies of scale that we cannot begin to benefit from. So perhaps we could look at the way we give people tours. Perhaps there should be more self-guided tours. That was ruled out by the Administration Committee back in 1999/2000, so maybe you would like to revisit that as part of your inquiry. I would like to end by emphasising that we are not standing still, and we are very keen to hear your suggestions for further improving the service.

Q41 Thomas Docherty: Just a couple of opening questions. I am conscious that a number of colleagues will want to come in. You will be aware that the
Procedure Committee is simultaneously doing an inquiry into sitting hours, and there are many options on the table. One which some Members are supporting is moving the sitting hours of the House to, for example, starting at half past 9 on a Tuesday and running through to 6 pm to enable them to get to the theatre or whatever else they want to do in the evenings. You can see where I am lying with this one: what would be the impact on your department’s ability to bring visitors into the House if every day bar Monday there was a 10.30 kick-off, or even a 9.30 kick-off in the House?

**Simon Blackburn:** To some extent we have that on Wednesdays, where the House of Commons sits early, but the Lords do not sit until after lunch. We can bring people in and they get a smaller tour. They can see the Royal Apartments and the House of Lords, so there is something we could offer them. Capacity would decrease, but I think the Procedure Committee is also looking at moving Friday’s business, seeing whether that business could be moved to another time in the week. If we knew that the House of Commons would never sit on a Friday, for example, then we could programme more tours for Friday mornings without running the risk of then losing that Friday once the sitting calendar was announced. So there are pros and cons.

**Q42 Rosie Cooper:** Closing the doors is really an option.

**Simon Blackburn:** Not as far as I am concerned. Bringing people in is absolutely at the heart of what the House should be doing, so I really do not want to close the doors.

**Q43 Thomas Docherty:** I am conscious that you are a Clerk and thus skilled in the non-answer, but if I look at pages 3 and 4 of the Paper that you very kindly prepared, you set out a table of events on a typical Tuesday, which run between 3 o’clock and half past 7 or 8 pm. I think there is some debate about prioritisation, and there are different sides. If we asked the Banqueting Service, they might suggest that their events as revenue raisers are important. Select Committees clearly are a distinct parliamentary activity, and APPGs and receptions are not strictly parliamentary activities. Have you had dialogue with your colleagues in Banqueting Services and elsewhere about how you manage those queues and conflicting demands? And if so, what consensus if any has broken out amongst the departments?

**Simon Blackburn:** We have not had dialogue. As it stands, Visitor Services is there to manage what happens. Banqueting is allowed to bring in whoever it wants, and we make sure that that happens to the best of our ability. There is a forum, which I have touched on in the Paper—and John Pullinger was here last week in his role as Chairman of the Parliamentary Visitor Board—which brings together facilities, security, banqueting and so on. But no, as it stands, we see ourselves as an enabling part of the organisation, and once the people are invited in we help them get in.

**Aileen Walker:** Just before Simon joined Visitor Services the Parliamentary Visitor Board did look at this issue of banqueting, APPGs and Members’ meetings. The events calendar, which is reproduced in this Paper, sets out what we know in advance is coming, but there is no central body that organises everything. Visitor Services organise Members’ visitors and commercial visitors; the catering and retail departments organise the banqueting. We did ask the Banqueting Departments in both Houses to do a study for us to see whether there is anything that could be managed, and some staggering of events was introduced. But it did not make an appreciable difference because there are so many people coming at meal times, reception times.

**Q44 Thomas Docherty:** But Mrs Walker, when you and I and Mr Weir were sitting on the first sub-group, it struck me as the first time—and it was—that the various functions had got together to discuss some of those issues. And this surprises me. It is clearly an ongoing problem, and yet the House authorities are not talking to themselves.

**Aileen Walker:** I think the House authorities are talking, but without a Member instruction as to a priority, which group or guests once there, without precedence, there is a limit to what the authorities can do.

**Thomas Docherty:** Okay, that is a fair point.

**Q45 Mr Jones:** Perhaps the answer would be to actually spread people around the entrances. I had a reception here a couple of weeks ago for Cardiac Risk in the Young, a charity I am involved with. If I had told everybody that they should arrive through Portcullis or a different entrance to spread it out that would have been helpful, surely? I know that at the same time as that reception there were at least two other receptions on. Surely it would be best to spread the load around; if I had told that charity, for example, “Make sure guests arrive through Portcullis rather than Palace Green,” would that not have helped in trying to spread the load at certain times?

**Simon Blackburn:** Absolutely. There are times when it would, and that is why I touched on needing a means of securely getting the guests within the Estate to wherever they want to be. But then there are times of day when, at the same time as these people are coming in, there is a queue at Portcullis House and a queue at Black Rod’s Garden.

**Q46 Mr Jones:** Yes, I appreciate I was going to get that; you cannot avoid that because of the numbers. But I think that would at least be a start, trying to spread people around so you have an idea. For example, if you expect 100 people to turn up at Palace Green or Portcullis or one of the other entrances, you could be ready for it. I think most charities and most Members who were having events like that would cooperate and include it on the information that went out. At least you would be able to spread it out.

Can I just pick up on a couple of things? First of all, I think the introduction of the Visitor Assistants has made a real difference. I know when I was first elected, frankly, you got a route off the policeman and this, that and the other. The assistants are well turned out, which I think is important in terms of presenting...
the face of Parliament, but also very helpful, especially if you have got visitors with disabilities. They are very knowledgeable, so credit to them for what they have done.
Can I just touch on a couple of issues you mentioned? One is about Members abusing the system. Mr Docherty and I had cause to raise the case of one particular Member who tends to bring about 100 of his constituents in unannounced. What is your way of dealing with that? The other issue is the shop. Where would you ideally put it? Regarding the Saturday offer, which obviously gives you flexibility to use Saturdays, is there any possibility of using Sundays as well, perhaps during the summer when there are a lot of tourists in London? I know the poor Visitor Assistants will not thank you for having to work Sundays. Has the possibility of having a Sunday offer as well for the tours been looked at?

Simon Blackburn: I will take those questions in turn. When Members abuse the rules, we ask the Serjeant at Arms to contact them, and it is the same process as when there is a breach of any rule in the House. I do not get involved in discipline.

Q47 Mr Jones: How often does it happen?

Simon Blackburn: During my time in this role I was asking the Serjeant to write a couple of letters each week, in the summer recess.

Q48 Mr Jones: Was it the same Member?

Simon Blackburn: No, it was never the same Member more than once. But that just means we are not necessarily catching them. We do not dedicate resources to the problem by sending people out there spotting—maybe we should.

Where would I put the shop? This might be a question for Mr Morgan, when you speak to him in a moment. Ideally you would put it just before people leave the building, which means in the current Estate it would be in Westminster Hall or one of the rooms off it. In terms of Saturdays and Sundays, we have looked at it. The overtime costs for security in particular would mean that we would struggle not to lose money on the operation. The Serjeant at Arms will be able to give you more information about the security costs.

Q49 Mr Jones: Now that we have this very sophisticated key system, is there not a way of reducing security costs by locking off more of the actual route on a Saturday or Sunday?

Simon Blackburn: It is just the cost of the staff on the X-ray machines and those on the route themselves.

Q50 Bob Russell: I have one observation. I am concerned that another Committee of the House is considering changing the sitting hours on a Tuesday, if that is what I heard correctly. It does strike me as a lack of joined-up thinking within the House, if that is the case. I am sure you can remember, Chairman, when the House did have different sitting hours on a Tuesday, which turned out to be something of a disaster, and we reinstated what we have now. It would cause me serious concern if we altered Tuesday’s hours, not only for the reasons that have been said here, but also because it would virtually destroy the whole concept of visits from the constituencies, schoolchildren, retired pensioners groups and what-have-you. Tuesday morning is now basically the only day when a Member of Parliament can welcome constituents for morning tours, unless they come up on Sunday night to be here for Monday. Kevan Jones has now left his seat, but I need to ask through you, Chairman, whether there would not be serious security concerns if outsiders were coming for events in this building via Portcullis House and vice versa. My understanding is that the free movement of those other than pass holders from Portcullis House into the main Palace is not allowed, so I do not think there is a question of dispersing people for events here via Portcullis House because of all the security considerations. Apart from moving the souvenir shop to a more acceptable location, I think we now have a very successful formula; the Education Service, the tour guides and those who welcome the public should be congratulated. I am anxious that in trying to increase numbers and revenue we may in the process lose what we already have, and I think we need to be very careful. Let’s go with what we have got, improve it where that is possible, but please do not try and completely restructure it because I think we would end up with something that we may not wish for.

Simon Blackburn: I agree with a lot of what you have said. In terms of what we could do on Tuesday mornings, I should have said before that it is not impossible to look at, for example, education groups coming in and watching the live feed and having some commentary on that. So perhaps they do not see the entire building, but there is more explanation of what it is you are doing.

Q51 Bob Russell: I will come back on that. I think part of the experience of the visit, particularly for youngsters, is to go into the Main Chamber of the House of Commons. They might as well stay back in the constituency and watch it on television if they only see a live feed. It is physically going through that Chamber, where the Prime Minister and Leader of the Opposition have their Wednesday morning exchanges, that is the important part of the visit, and there are all the other aspects that go with this place. The fact that the Chamber is not in use does not mean to say that Parliament is not operating. There is a whole range of Select Committees and other meetings going on, Chairman. If another Committee of the House is considering destroying Tuesday, are we going to have joined-up thinking with this other Committee, whoever they are?

Chair: I think the purpose of these sessions is to ask questions of our witnesses really.

Bob Russell: I am defending what we have got.

Chair: Yes, but I do not think we want to get too involved with what the Procedure Committee is doing. Anyone who is aware of what they are up to and does not like it has the opportunity to make representations to it, and to do so, if I may respectfully say so, very quickly indeed. I take it we would have a view as to the optimum balance between access to the Palace for our constituents and the sitting hours. Hopefully we will come out with fairly definitive views on that.

Bob Russell: Well my views are now on the record.
Chair: Absolutely. But you will not always find the Chairman so tolerant.

Q52 Tessa Munt: Can I just offer my congratulations to the Education Service, which has been nothing but absolutely brilliant? Can I pick you up on a couple of things I think you said, which may conflict slightly with points that you have made at other times? Do I sense that you were saying there is no real priority system? Or is there one, but you are just trying to get everybody through as fast as you possibly can? Is the priority system just for you to get people through?

Simon Blackburn: There is the priority system that is set out in the Paper, which applies to business guests—so, for example, people advising Ministers. They go to the front of the queue for security. What I meant to say was that there is no system of prioritising room bookings or anything like that. We could in theory have simultaneous events in every single banqueting facility, every single committee room and the Jubilee Room, and every other room you can think of, for which people were invited into the Palace. We do not prioritise why we bring people in.

Q53 Tessa Munt: I am sure you have a view on what the priority might be.

Simon Blackburn: I do personally, but I think it is a decision for Members to make.

Q54 Tessa Munt: Indeed. I am completely aware of that. I do not know whether you are allowed to give a view, but certainly I would imagine if there is food involved you want to get people in faster than if they are sitting and talking, but that might clash with other departments in the House.

Simon Blackburn: When all-party groups host a talk that is not necessarily attended by Members of either House, you have to look at why that is taking place here and not, for example, in a university or a think tank. That is the one example I would give.

Tessa Munt: Are we allowed to ask, Chairman, for the views, or is that our job? It just strikes me that people actually do the job—

Chair: We are taking evidence, and we shall come to a view.

Q55 Tessa Munt: Yes, fine. Well maybe you would like to send us your views, because I am sure you have experience of it. You mentioned Buckingham Palace having a capacity of 64,000 guests per week, and that our capacity is only 18,000, and there is no way we could possibly do that. Can you just outline for me what restrictions or constraining factors forbid us from doing 64,000 per week. I am not saying we would want to; I would just like to know.

Simon Blackburn: My understanding is that when the House debated having a commercial opening in addition to the sponsored tours, which was back in 1999/2000, a lot of Members were opposed to the idea that anybody should be charged to come into this building for any reason. A compromise was reached that you would be charged to go on a tour and you were paying for the tour guide, but the access to the building was free. We technically still operate on that basis. You could change that and charge people to come into the building, and then charge extra to have a tour guide. You could also have a self-led tour, which is how Buckingham Palace works, or one of those audio guides that you often see in museums or art galleries. We have not crunched the numbers, but I think you would probably be able to get through slightly more people if that was the case. It would then move to an operation where, instead of having groups of 25 going round with their own guide, you would have what a museum would call a gallery assistant or warden based in each room to answer questions. That is a different way of doing things, and I think we have reached a point now where we need to examine whether that is a different way of offering what we do.

But to go back to the point that was just made, what we have at the moment is award-winning and very successful, and you do not want to make wholesale changes to it and risk losing the good will we have and not winning the awards that we are winning.

Q56 Tessa Munt: I would be quite interested in having your views generally, because we have an award-winning place. I am sure we can constantly change without throwing the baby out with the bathwater.

Simon Blackburn: That is also one of the reasons so far why our plans for expansion have been adding to the range of tours, for example, specialist tours of the art collection in Portcullis House. We are offering a larger range of things and keeping that core product to the high standards that we have developed.

Tessa Munt: I am based in No. 1 Parliament Street, and it is never a problem for me to get people through because there is that little lobby area and they just whistle in. We seem to have a couple of people on a desk there; I am not sure what their purpose is when you are already in, because you are held in the airlock if you are a visitor anyway. But it seems an eminently sensible place for MPs to bring their single guest, or couple of guests, in.

Simon Blackburn: I entirely agree. I use it myself; even sometimes when I am based in the Palace I arrange to meet people there if they are coming from Whitehall. If you can help us get that message out to your fellow Members that would be very helpful.

Tessa Munt: Yes, it would need a bit of management, I suppose. We might have to make the airlock a bit bigger, but that is not impossible.

Q57 Chair: Am I right in thinking that the story of Parliament is best told from the South end to the North? What I am getting at is that this trailing of people through the building takes time and is often very difficult to manage. People do not walk at the same pace, you can lose them, and they inevitably stop and look at the wonders they are seeing, thinking that they may not see them on the way back, despite whatever instruction they have been politely given. Have we not got to set our sights on getting the line of route reorganised to what it was before?

Simon Blackburn: There is a very strong argument from the South end to the North. I should point out the Hansard Society has published a report today which suggests North end to the South. If we start at Black...
Rod’s Garden Entrance we have the issue of making sure that the people who are waiting to do their tour can wait in a comfortable environment, and go to the toilet without having to be accompanied by our staff because the toilets are in a secure area of the Palace.

Q58 Chair: Forgive me, you are imputing into my question that I think that Black Rod’s Garden is the only answer to it. I am merely asking you a basic question. Should we not aim at having the tour moving from South to North as it used to do, and is that not the logical pathway?

Simon Blackburn: The view coming round the corner from St Stephen’s Hall into Westminster Hall is a brilliant thing to show people. To have that as the tour finale would be perfect.

Q59 Chair: With the shop and the cafeteria at the end, at the moment. The other question is about the Cromwell Green Entrance. Mr Spellar is not able to be with us today, but he feels strongly that, even as it is, it is underused. In your view, is it possible by certain changes within it that one could achieve a faster flow of people? We understand from Mr Pullinger—you may have seen the evidence—that the projected number of 1,000 per hour is down to 500 per hour.

Simon Blackburn: To be honest, Visitor Services treat that building almost as a black box. We get people up to the door and then take them back again once they are out the other side. You would be better off asking the Serjeant at Arms and speaking to the experts about how the security operates. My understanding is that the second camera in there, which you saw, is just a back-up camera in case the first one breaks down, and that is why it is not used.

Q60 Chair: So you would encourage us to look at that?

Simon Blackburn: Absolutely, yes. But I am afraid I cannot answer.

Q61 Chair: No. This is a question I put to Mr Pullinger for his opinion last week. Would it help if we could physically separate out, as we used to do—and have the black cabin at the other side of St Stephen’s Entrance—those who were coming for specific purposes such as to give evidence in Select Committees from those who were coming on the tours?

Simon Blackburn: The people who are coming for Select Committees already go straight to the front of the queue and have no delay whatsoever. It delays the queue. Can I tell you that I have numerous examples where that is not true and/or the policemen just cannot stand that length of time in a queue. You would be better off asking the Serjeant at Arms to tell you how much it costs to staff a security lane. Would we get permission for the Serjeant at Arms can tell you how much it costs. Yes, of course they would. There are costs, and again the Serjeant at Arms can tell you how much it costs to staff a security lane. Would we get permission for the Serjeant at Arms to tell you how much it costs?

Q62 Chair: We had it before. It strikes me that if one of the two lanes down at the Cromwell Green Entrance is deliberately being maintained for fast-tracking you are reducing capacity. It must be, or there would be no point in doing it.

Simon Blackburn: We are making the queue longer and thinner, because once they get to the door, as you saw for yourselves, everybody has their photo taken. Having two streams of people coming up to that does not reduce the rate at which they take photos.

Q63 Thomas Docherty: This is a quick one, on the issue of witnesses. Why can’t you talk to the Select Committee Clerks and just agree that any witnesses would go to, for argument’s sake, Portcullis House, and he met by someone from the Clerks’ office to be taken to their Select Committee? Is that not the obvious joined-up thing that this place does not do?

Simon Blackburn: I can certainly talk to them. I do not think anybody has ever suggested that before. I am not sure all Committees have the staff resources to do that, especially when they have a stream of witnesses arriving at different times, but we can ask the Committee Office whether they are able to do that. Lords Committees may not want their visitors going in at Portcullis House.

Q64 Thomas Docherty: To be fair, that is not our problem. That is the Lords’ business.

Simon Blackburn: But that goes back to the point I tried to make at the start. I think visitors have to be treated in the round. You may need to sit down with the Administration and Works Committee and share some of these things with them because we would still need the fast track at Cromwell Green for the Lords Committees witnesses, even if your witnesses were going to Portcullis House.

Q65 Chair: We come up against this question: often we cannot afford what might be the most convenient way for valued visitors, in whatever category, to come into this building, or to do the things that would make their actual passage through the Palace better. Is this not true, and this it not an uncomfortable situation?

Simon Blackburn: Yes, and yes.

Q66 Rosie Cooper: I will start very positively. I have to agree with the comments made about the Education Service, it is absolutely superb. All the work that has been going in is really, really good. I would like to just ask you very quickly a number of questions. I believe the core business is the work of this House, and I am crazy enough to think that when people are coming to meet MPs, or going to Select Committees, they should not have to wait up to an hour or more on occasions. People with a disability just cannot stand that length of time in a queue. You just said that people who are coming to see MPs or going to Select Committees are moved to the front of the queue. Can I tell you that I have numerous examples where that is not true and/or the policemen have put people back in the queue, and I just could not wait any longer to see them?

Simon Blackburn: Are they giving evidence to a Committee?

Q67 Rosie Cooper: No, not just people giving evidence, people coming in to meet MPs. For example, if I have a meeting at 3 or 4 o’clock, or whenever it is, it has happened on a number of
occasions that they have thought arriving three quarters of an hour early would be fine. One person came out of the queue, spoke to the policeman because they were worried about how late they were, and they were told to go back into the queue in their position. I could not wait any longer and did not see them. That is wasting my time and their time. It is absolutely crazy.

Simon Blackburn: Can I set up a meeting with you outside of this meeting to discuss that, because that is very concerning.

Q68 Rosie Cooper: Absolutely, I would be very grateful for that. Could you talk about Black Rod’s Entrance, and why Members with passes actually have to use it three times? In your report you talk about the idea that to get people through more quickly they should perhaps not have bags. How are you going to handle even the thought of stopping people bringing bags into the building? And finally I wanted to ask, you talked about MPs flouting the rules, and I heard Kevan give an example of somebody bringing 100 people.

Mr Jones: It was me actually, I think.

Rosie Cooper: Could you describe other examples of flouting the rules because I have not got a clue? I cannot get one person in.

Simon Blackburn: On Black Rod’s Garden Entrance you will remember that everybody used to go through the same doorway, which meant that if there was a queue of non-pass holders waiting to come through you would have to elbow your way through that queue and wave your pass at the security officer. We now have a situation where we have separated pass holders and visitors. Visitors now have two search lanes, so we get people through more quickly. They also have a much better waiting room, and they do not have pass holders elbowing their way through.

To do that we have had to automate the pass holder entrance, which means swiping your pass, and it is not always getting checked by a security officer. My understanding is that the advice of the security officials is that to avoid tailgating you have to go through several different doorways, and then you have that final inner doorway that also has a pass control on it, because otherwise visitors who come through their room would be able to get into the Palace without being supervised as they went in through that final door. If we were not dealing with a Victorian Palace and people who stopped us from knocking doors through walls where we wanted to, we would not have that situation.

Q69 Rosie Cooper: Okay. What I cannot get is: using what you have just described, I can understand you might use your pass twice. But you are talking about three times. Flash, flash, and then you do not just use the door that you are talking about, the final door; you have to punch in a number. Why three times?

Simon Blackburn: As of last week you do not punch in that number. They have changed it, they have made it easier. They have listened to what we have been saying. It is not ideal, but they have made a step in the right direction.

You also asked about bringing bags into the building, which I am not sure I covered in my Paper.

Q70 Rosie Cooper: Sorry, I may have read it—

Simon Blackburn: Is it Mr Speaker’s statement?

Q71 Rosie Cooper: Yes, I may have read it somewhere else, sorry.

Simon Blackburn: My reading of the statement suggests that there will be a risk assessment for Select Committee hearings. So to use this one as an example, I would like to think that you were not a high target, and I was not a high target, so members of the public would be allowed to come in with bags. It is very high-profile events, for which the assessment is that there is a risk to the witness or to Members, where people would not be allowed to bring bags in. My understanding is that they have not yet worked out how that will be managed. It is a new idea and they need to work out how to do it.

An example of flouting some of the rules is that, over the summer, a Member had invited a group down and had asked their staff to take the people round. Knowing that they were not allowed to take round more than six, their staff got two of their friends who worked for different Members, and took them round in three groups. That would have more or less worked if they had stayed as three groups, but as soon as they started going round they clumped together as one big group. The problem is that the tour guides are trained, and one of the things they get trained on is how to manage groups of people and not get in other groups’ way, and how to communicate without disturbing others. When you have large groups being led by Members, Members’ staff and other pass holders, they get in the way, stand in the wrong places, and make it hard for the people who have paid to hear what we are wanting to tell them. This slows the flow of people down.

The best example I can give you is the mark where Black Rod knocks on the Chamber door. A trained tour guide will point that out and say, “As we walk past it, have a look at this,” and not stop there because it is blocking a doorway. An untrained person will stand in the doorway with their group of people and clog up the entire route.

Rosie Cooper: Might I just ask one further question.

Chair: Quickly, because I am trying to move on now.

Q72 Rosie Cooper: Very quickly, you talked before about people changing the way tours are done, people guiding themselves with perhaps information on disc or a cassette or whatever. How would that work security-wise? To me this is both ends of the spectrum; we are trying to keep everyone locked down, and now we are saying, “Well as long as you have got this, away you go.”

Simon Blackburn: We have now got to a point where trying to leave most of the visitor route is quite hard. There are access controls on most of the doors, which are activated during recess periods. They tend not to be on when the Houses are sitting. To be clear, there would still be staff in every single room. There would be a security officer in every room, as now. We would still have guides along the route to answer questions,
but we would not have such a staff-intensive operation, and we would make the guided tour a premium product that people might be charged more for.

Q73 Rosie Cooper: Have you worked out how much that might be?

Simon Blackburn: No, it is in our business plan for next year to work out how this might work.

Chair: Thank you very much indeed. If we could have Matthew Morgan and the Visitor Assistants, please.

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Examination of Witnesses


Q74 Chair: Do you want to start with some particular comments?

Matthew Morgan: Yes, a couple of quick words. Some of this Simon has already covered in his statements, but I wanted to talk about my role, what I do and some of the challenges and strengths in what we do. My role is Tours Manager, which is something I have been doing for just under 12 months. It looks after two facets: the Members’ tours, the tours that you and peers sponsor; and also the commercial tours that we run.

The commercial tours in some ways, especially as we are moving much more into an era of income generation, are those that face the greatest challenges. Ironically, the things that are strengths are also challenges. For example, we have got such an iconic building, which is a World Heritage Site, and also a working building, with a real living history, which is something that people are really interested in.

Mr Jones: Like you, Bob.

Matthew Morgan: From that point of view, the balance between the iconic building and the security issues that we have to face around that, the conservation issues we have, and the fact that we are also within a building that is working and living, is difficult to get right. We have to be able to deliver tours that generate income and are of interest to people, but also manage to walk that balance between making sure we can do all the other things that need to be done within the building.

That is also difficult in the economic era we are in now. Talking about income generation, we are a working building, but I think it is also worth recognising that within those barriers we are also a visitor attraction. We have to look at things within that remit. Other visitor attractions in periods of economic downturn like this will not cut back services. So we need to do more things, do more interesting things, which is why since 2010 we have introduced Saturday opening and are introducing the Portcullis House art and architecture tours. Later next year we will be doing art and architecture tours of the House of Lords and the Royal Apartments. We also want to work with the Catering and Retail departments to do more joined-up thinking, as has already been said today, such as running some joint events so that people coming to a tour can maybe go for an afternoon tea as well. We are also working on some premium tours. This is a really successful formula that has worked very well. We have won two awards this year, which is excellent. The easy assumption would be that it is because we have got a fantastic building, which we do have. But so do Buckingham Palace and Westminster Abbey. The reason we won these awards is the service and the staff that we have. I think the biggest advance in welcoming visitors into the building has been the Visitor Assistants, and they are one of the key reasons why the product is so successful and has won those two awards.

I would like to extend the invitation to my colleagues to introduce themselves as well.

Hannah Lister: I am Hannah Lister. I have worked here for the past two years. I am now a Supervisor of the Visitor Assistants, and I line manage six of them. My day-to-day duties are co-ordinating tours and specialist talks for particular events, and I have a particular emphasis on helping with the Education Service, to liaise with managers there to get Visitor Assistants on board with their specialist tours and talks as well. Another sideline of mine is to get all of the Visitor Assistants dressed perfectly in this great uniform that Mark is sporting there next to me. I will pass you over to Mark.

Mark Cullen: My name is Mark Cullen. I am a Visitor Assistant and I have worked in the Houses of Parliament for four years in that job. Like all the other Visitor Assistants, my job is to welcome visitors into the Houses of Parliament, and direct and escort them around to their destination. It is also to engage visitors, to inform, inspire and promote Parliament. To do that, we inform people of the debates in the public galleries, and the Committees, and get people to see those. We also take visitors on tours around Parliament, work closely with the Education Service taking school groups on education tours, and also assist with the commercial tours on Saturdays and through the summer.

Q75 Chair: How many Visitor Assistants are there now?

Matthew Morgan: There are 35.

Q76 Chair: Is that enough?

Matthew Morgan: You can always have more.

Q77 Chair: I am looking for an educated estimate.

Matthew Morgan: To be honest with you, every single year we have increased our numbers because it has been such a success. We have got VAs working in the Education Service, at Black Rod’s Garden
Entrance, at the Central Tours Office and the Information Office. I firmly believe that you cannot make the best use of all the security entrances with the number of VAs that we have now. If you want more use of those different entrances then you do need more VAs to back that up.

**Aileen Walker:** The last increase in VAs was as a result of a Member request. Because they are regarded as very useful, helpful and well-informed, a Member asked if they could be available in the evenings until the rise of the Houses. So the last increase was at a Member’s request, so that we could staff until the Houses rise.

**Q78 Chair:** How far is the whole exercise affected, putting it in a neutral word, by what presumably is the unquantifiable number of small tours undertaken by Members and their staff? Do you have a feel for the numbers, or for the fact that there are a lot of people moving around who have not come through the system, because they are twos, fours and sixes?

**Matthew Morgan:** Smaller groups are something that we can manage. On the commercial tours we put a limit of thirty permits for six people for a day. But we have many more people coming through on a commercial tour day; it can go up to 3,000, which is about double the capacity on a Members tour day. It is a challenge, certainly. We do not have people policing the line of route to ensure that people are standing in the right place or that people are not blocking up different areas. However, we teach the tour guides how to manage groups around other small groups. For example, if a group of six is standing in a place that might be slightly difficult, you would not go and stand right next to them. You would find an appropriate place where you could still deliver the tour. Smaller groups are manageable. The larger the groups the more difficult it is to manage, which is why we do set the limit of six people per pass holder.

**Q79 Bob Russell:** I understand what Simon said about opening the entire building up on Saturdays and Sundays. You have also done some experiments with bespoke tours. A lot of attractions, whether they be country houses or anything else, do have bespoke tours for specialist groups who are prepared to pay to see certain things. The obvious thing I think of, for example, is the Record Office in terms of the bills, etc. Do you think there is an option at the weekend to do bespoke tours for people who are perhaps interested in architecture or the bills, and sell it to them as a specialist thing? You are probably not talking about vast numbers, but some of those people might pay quite a bit of money for a tour like that. Would it be possible to do that type of thing?

**Matthew Morgan:** Yes, absolutely. This is something that we are actively looking into at the moment. When I am talking about doing these bespoke tours, half the thinking behind those is initially to get the product right. Once you have got the product right you can see whether you can extend that to a more specialist and premium market, which there undoubtedly is. We get a number of people asking for exclusive tours of Parliament. There is definitely a demand out there. If you can deliver something which is outside of the expected, then people will be interested in that.

**Q80 Bob Russell:** Do you agree that one of the prime reasons people like to have tours of the Houses of Parliament is to go into the Chamber of the House of Commons to see where the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition perform?

**Matthew Morgan:** I think it is fair to say that if you are coming to the Houses of Parliament you would be interested to go into the Chamber of the House of Commons.
Q86 Tessa Munt: And what time does that tour finish?
Matthew Morgan: That tour will finish at 6.15. We also run something called Extraordinary Line of Route tours, and they are in conjunction with banqueting functions and can run right through till 7 o’clock, starting at 7 o’clock and finishing around half-past 8.

Q87 Tessa Munt: Sorry, they can run through till 7 o’clock?
Matthew Morgan: Because they are tied in with banqueting functions, they will start either before or after a function. If a banqueting function is not starting until about 7 o’clock at night, tours will not run after that, but they can start before that, which means starting at 7 o’clock for about an hour and a quarter.

Q88 Tessa Munt: Why do we not run them in the evenings?
Matthew Morgan: We do run them in the evenings.

Q89 Tessa Munt: No, generally. I mean you are saying that is an extraordinary arrangement.
Matthew Morgan: Yes, that is correct. It is certainly something we can look at. The difficulty at the moment with opening the line of route entirely for the same sort of number is the staffing levels. But in terms of exclusive or specialist tours, that is a time that you could run them.

Q90 Tessa Munt: It strikes me that if we have a numbers problem, we have got people who want to come here, we certainly sit until 7 o’clock, finishing at maybe 7.30 or 7.40 on a Wednesday. It wouldn’t strike me as being unreasonable to run tours. I accept your point about staffing. Of course you would need staff. But am I misunderstanding? Are there any barriers to running tours into the evenings on a Wednesday evening and extending your Friday and Saturday service to a Wednesday evening?
Bob Russell: Are you aiming for 24 hours?
Tessa Munt: No, no, reasonable, personally.
Matthew Morgan: I think there is certainly potential for that. I would be surprised if there would be the same level of demand to do that on a week-to-week basis. If you look at the opening hours of other institutions that are running tours, it is unusual to be, on a week-to-week basis, running tours from 8 or 9 o’clock. Access to the gallery sharply decreases as you get later into the night. So you could certainly do it, but I would be surprised if the demand was the same.

Q91 Tessa Munt: Why does access to the gallery sharply decrease as the night goes on?
Matthew Morgan: Because fewer people come along and express their interest to come into the public gallery.

Q92 Tessa Munt: But if we were running tours, people could go into the Gallery, say, on an ordinary evening. Are you saying that on a Monday or Tuesday evening people do not want to go?
Matthew Morgan: I just mean that if you compare, for example, the numbers of people who will be coming along and wanting to go into the Public Gallery during the core hours of the day, and those who do so late at night, the number is reduced. I think you would see a similar trend in guided tours.

Q93 Tessa Munt: What is people’s understanding of what they can have when they first make contact with you? I am quite interested to know whether people feel they can walk into the Chamber any old time or not. I would imagine that most people would be quite surprised that they can go into the Chamber.
Matthew Morgan: You have the informed sector of society who will know what they are coming for and what they will see, and have even specified the debate and the time that they want to come. You will also have a number of people both from this country and from overseas who will not be aware of what they can see and do, but know that they can get in some way or other, and that is why the Visitor Assistants are here: to give them that information about what they can come to see and do.

Q94 Thomas Docherty: Correct me if I am wrong, Mrs Walker, but does some of this not go back to the discussions that we had around the cost? If we were running regular free-to-air, so to speak, tours when the House is not sitting on the evening, the Serjeant at Arms, whoever he or she may be in the future, may take a view of the cost of doing that. If tours run during the day when the House is sitting, am I right in thinking that the Serjeant at Arms effectively pays for that security out of his or her general pot? But if we were to go for a Wednesday or Thursday night round of tours, would the Serjeant-at-Arms come back to yourselves and say, just as there has been a discussion about banqueting security, there would have to be an additional security charge? Is that fair?
Aileen Walker: We did have that conversation, and yes, there would be additional security costs. But that is not to say that we could not cover the additional security costs; we would just have to work out what they were. We only relatively recently put forward the evening tours; the Exceptional Line of Route tours that Matt mentioned. Until that time we were not exactly sure how many tours there were in the evening. We now have a better idea; we have been collecting data. We now know what the situation is, and as part of our business plan going forward we are looking at opportunities for further tours on a charged basis.

Q95 Thomas Docherty: On a charged basis, not a free basis.
Aileen Walker: Yes.
Q96 Tessa Munt: But then of course you might have the opportunity to open the cafeteria and have the gift shop open, and to really stick people for a few extra bob.
Aileen Walker: Yes, but there are a lot of things that have to come together to make it work, and we are working on them.
Tessa Munt: That would pay, perhaps, for some of the costs of having the place open.

Q97 Chair: Can I ask Hannah whether there are difficulties sometimes with the customers? Do you have any real difficulties or challenges?

Hannah Lister: We definitely come across difficulties with people wanting to access the whole of the Palace, and to be able to wander off by themselves, which is obviously never going to be feasible as it is a working building. Generally, the main difficulties are ensuring that people understand absolutely everything that is going on inside the Chamber before they go to watch a live session, which we are really trying to improve with our Question Time talks. They are available for the first 20 people coming in to watch debates in the Commons Chamber. We go through a few procedures with regard to behaviour inside the Chamber so that people understand exactly what is going on. A lot of people are not aware of certain procedures: of people standing up, of having to ask the Speaker to talk, effectively. I know they seem like minor things, but a lot of people are not aware of all those different things.

Tessa Munt: I thought you meant general bad behaviour. Forgive me.

Q98 Bob Russell: Chairman, there is virtually a total ban on photographs, which I fully understand in Westminster. I am just wondering whether you could consider the possibility, as often happens in tourists visiting locations, of a professional photographer who actually takes the photographs of the lucky people with Big Ben in the background, or whatever. I just flag that up as a suggestion to be looked at so that people have a photo souvenir of their visit to the Houses of Parliament.

Chair: Well we are not sufficiently interested in taking pictures of ourselves with our visitors.

Bob Russell: I am not in the business of the cult of personality.

Chair: Tessa, quickly, because I want to move on.

Q99 Tessa Munt: Other thing. How many areas of the House have a loop system?

Matthew Morgan: For the guided tours we have induction loops, so if someone is going round on a tour, the guide has a microphone and everyone else can then take those induction loops round with them. So they can have the full guided tour and get the same experience.

Q100 Tessa Munt: And there is never a problem with getting access to that?

Matthew Morgan: No, it is something that we have only brought in in the last year or two. But we certainly have sufficient stock to ensure that if people want them they can access them. I think that is something that has improved over the last few years, but is still something we could definitely do better, and something we are working towards.

Q101 Tessa Munt: Do we publicise that? I am sure we do, but is that very obvious to people who are inviting guests in? I was not aware of that.

Aileen Walker: It is on the website, and it is also in the leaflet that I think you have in your bundle as well.

Q102 Chair: Hannah, you wanted to say something?

Hannah Lister: I was just going to add to the information about the induction loops. I have recently been liaising with Katherine Pyle, who is part of the Diversity Team, who wants to get more signage across the line of route and throughout the whole Palace so that people are aware they can just go up to a Visitor Assistant at the desk and they will have induction loops readily available. I have recently given a demonstration of how they work, and this is being passed on to Visitor Assistants, Blue Badge Guides and the in-house Yellow Badge Guides who come through, so they are aware of what the situation would be should they need to use them.

Q103 Chair: Thank you very much indeed. Aileen, now.

Aileen Walker: Can I say just one thing in summing up, please? A couple of years ago we did have a fairly fundamental review of visitor management in the Palace. Picking up on something that Mr Docherty mentioned earlier, if it were as simple as simply moving some guests to a different entrance, I assure you, we would have done that. We have looked at it. The fact is that there are so many people coming to Parliament all at the same time. Not all the time, there are peaks and troughs, but there are certain days and certain times of every day when there are just more people than we can physically get into the building.

Q104 Thomas Docherty: But not witnesses, Mrs Walker, to Select Committees. On the whole, thankfully, they are planned some time in advance by the Clerks. What we are suggesting is that, for arguments sake, the EFRA Committee or the Defence Committee has outside witnesses coming in, all it needs is for the Committee Clerks to liaise to meet them, or have someone to meet them at, for example, Portcullis House at 1.30 to make sure they get through, and then take them to the appropriate room. That was what I was asking.

Aileen Walker: I am not aware that there are problems with witnesses, because they are fast-tracked whichever entrance they come to. But I just wanted to make it clear that we have actually done all that we can do, looking at all the entrances and doing everything that is within our power in the administration to make sure that it is running as efficiently as it can.

Q105 Mr Jones: Is there anything that we could do as Members to encourage visitors to use alternative entrances? I suggest people come through Portcullis because it is easy to get in, but are there other entrances that would be easier for you?

Aileen Walker: The suggestion from Miss Munt is a good one—that if you are personally meeting guests, then 1 Parliament Street is probably underused. Portcullis House is not underused; it has large queues as well. But that is the one thing that would be helpful, yes.
Q106 Chair: Thank you very much. Can we now take you, Aileen, on the Education Service? Aileen Walker: Yes.

Examination of Witnesses

Witnesses: Aileen Walker, Director of Public Information, House of Commons, and Tom O’Leary, Head of Education and Public Engagement, House of Commons, gave evidence.

Q107 Chair: Aileen, do you want to make an opening statement?
Aileen Walker: I will ask Tom, who is Head of Education, to make a few comments.
Tom O’Leary: I thought I would take this opportunity to quickly recap on the recent developments the Education Service has made, within the current constraints on the Estate, just to remind us of the current position. In terms of pure numbers, in 2005–06 we had about 11,000 children coming in through the Education Service. That then rose to 17,000 in 2006–07, then 31,000 in 2007–08, and 37,000 in 2008–09, and then we peaked at 40,000 in 2009–10 within the current constraint of the rooms we are using, which is the Macmillan Room, 1 Parliament Street, and also a Committee room on a Monday and a Friday in Portcullis House.

We had a slight drop in 2010–11 due to the new sitting times. We hope to recover that position this year. This Committee recently granted us the use of the Grand Committee Room on a Friday and Monday morning. We do not know yet because we are trialling different ways of getting groups into that room, but we hope to be able to get up to about 45,000 once we get full use of that room and are able to exploit it.

This is not just about numbers. We have completely changed the way we deliver our services and have made great improvements to the quality of education we are delivering. We have revamped the programme, we train our staff differently, and we do an enormous amount of work to ensure that pupils coming in have a high-quality experience. We are pretty much making use of any room across the Estate we can get hold of.

There is a risk in this because we are becoming quite disparate in terms of our delivery; there are operational challenges if we are delivering out of rooms across the estate; and all the reasons we need an Education Centre have not gone away. There are no toilet facilities dedicated to schools, and we still do not have a lunch room, so if a school party comes in here in the middle of the winter and it is raining outside, we cannot let them stay in the building and eat their lunch. That really is not acceptable for schools.

In the rooms we use, the minute we finish teaching they are used by someone else—in the case of the Macmillan Room, for evening functions—so we cannot keep equipment in there very easily. We are trying to increase the quality of education in workshops. A lot of the equipment we use in workshops—for example, interactive whiteboards and voting pods—has to be wheeled out and put out of the way, and that creates extra pressure on the staff. We cannot put children’s work up; we cannot have displays that reflect the type of work we are trying to do.

One of the highlights of coming into Parliament is meeting a Member of Parliament. The additional capacity that tends to come on line is when Members of Parliament are not using rooms, so we are bringing in more pupils on a Friday when Parliament is not sitting, or when a room is not in use on a Monday morning. We appreciate that that is not ideal because Members of Parliament are not always available, or not very often available, to meet those groups, so there is a challenge in that. So we are still incredibly keen to see a dedicated Education Centre realised. It would take us to 100,000 users per year from the position we are currently in, and we are really looking forward to it when that is feasible and it can happen.

Q108 Mr Jones: I was a member of this Committee in the last Parliament when we agreed that. What has happened to it?
Tom O’Leary: I understand Mr Pullinger explained that at last week’s meeting. Do you want me to recap on that?

Q109 Mr Jones: Yes, sorry.
Tom O’Leary: There are two reasons. The space that was identified was the Lower Secretaries area. It was part of what is best described as a housing chain of moves of members of staff including the renovating of Derby Gate. That project did not go ahead for financial reasons, and so it involved moving members of staff out of that space. We then tried to look at that project in isolation without it being part of what I have called the housing chain. Through further investigation into the architecture and the structural issues, because that space is underneath the Chamber, we were told that it was not really possibly to use that space for education in a sensible way. So we lost the space that we were very hopeful would give us an Education Centre. So we are back to renewing our search for an ideal space, but it is incredibly hard to find a space in Parliament. So a feasibility study is under way to try and find a space for us.

Q110 Mr Jones: It is obviously a key job that you are doing. One of the problems I have representing North Durham is the cost of getting kids here, especially in a constituency like mine, where disposable incomes are not very high. In the report we did in the last Parliament we talked about some subsidy or help for those groups. In 10 years here, I have had perhaps less than half a dozen organised tours because of the cost. Is that something that we could be looking at? How would you help to support those?
Tom O’Leary: The travel subsidy was signed off by this Committee in the last session, and it has changed the pattern of visits. Zone A is basically Greater
London and the South East, and the percentage of visits from there reduced from 70% of our visits to 50%, which is broadly representative of the population density in those areas. Zone B—I can send you a map of where these zones are—is the Midlands. We increased that percentage from 28% to 42%. And Zone C—which is heading up towards Scotland, Cornwall and parts of Northern Ireland—has gone from 2.2% to 7.6%. Those figures fluctuate because we cannot control who is booking at the moment, but that is now broadly representative. And in Zone C up to 70% of travel costs are paid, so that has had a real impact in increasing the number of visits from there.

**Q111 Mr Jones:** And is that on a first-come, first-served basis?

**Tom O’Leary:** It is, yes, in the nature of booking school visits.

**Q112 Chair:** But if the economic clouds lifted, where would you look ideally to place a designed Education Centre?

**Tom O’Leary:** It is a good question. There are potential opportunities on the fringe of the Estate, but to be honest I am not an architect. I do not understand the difficulties. I see a space and I think, “Great, I could put an Education Centre in there;” and then I find that there are all sorts of reasons why that is not possible.

**Q113 Chair:** But as an integral part of the arrangements you make for visiting school parties is a tour of the Palace, would it not be logical to be thinking in the direction of Black Rod’s Garden or Victoria Gardens?

**Tom O’Leary:** I understand that Mr Pullinger raised that at the last meeting. I understand there are potential opportunities to go there.

**Aileen Walker:** Ideally, yes; that is the prime space for it for all sorts of reasons, assuming we do have the facilities, security and access that we would need.

**Tom O’Leary:** One of the real challenges we have is that sometimes a space is suggested, and it has to be near access to the tour route, it has to be near the toilets, we have to be able to get people through the secure entrances, they have to have somewhere to eat lunch, and we have to get them out of the building again. So there are all sorts of difficulties in terms of where we might place it. Around Westminster Hall is one of the perfect spaces for us; you have already got public access into there, so you are not trying to put visitors into a space that is insecure. When we deliver school visits within Portcullis House we have to escort them through non-visitor areas into the Palace to get on to the tour route, so there are always inherent challenges in where we might put it.

**Q114 Chair:** How generally does it work between yourselves and the rest of the tours? Do you have to notify numbers? Have you got an allocation for a certain number of schools, regardless of the demand on you? Is there a ceiling limit on the number of parties you can feed into the system as opposed to what is coming in in all other ways?

**Tom O’Leary:** We have a set amount of delivery we can do, which is constrained by the amount of rooms that we can deliver school visits from. We then work extremely closely with Visitor Services and Visitor Assistants, some of whom you have just met, who then deliver those tours for us. So we work in tandem with them in order to do that. But we are booking many months ahead, which is what we have to do for schools to plan their visits, so it is extremely rare that we would bring on to the tour route any school groups that we did not know about for months in advance.

**Q115 Thomas Docherty:** I am not encouraging officers of the House to go on trips overseas, but I am slightly baffled. This is a problem clearly that other parliaments and congresses and assemblies have around the world. It strikes me we are spending a vast amount of time wrestling with it. How do, for example, the Congress in the United States do it?

**Tom O’Leary:** They spent hundreds of millions of dollars creating a Visitor Centre.

**Bob Russell:** I think Mr Docherty is angling for a site visit.

**Tom O’Leary:** We do look at how other Parliaments across the world deliver this, and I think we have some quite unique challenges to do with being in this amazing building and having a very large population. Bear in mind that, even if we get the Education Centre with 100,000 children coming through the door each year, birth rates at the moment are around 600,000 or 700,000 per year, so you can immediately work out there is another 500,000 children who are not getting in. It is the sheer volume and the fact that we are in this building; the immediate space around us is incredibly tightly controlled and heritage controlled. Other Parliaments, I certainly have observed, have a lot more flexibility in order to create spaces and deliver things, and some of them have smaller populations and can just fit them in.

**Q116 Chair:** Were you to get the Visitor Centre, is it credible that with all the other constraints in the Palace you could manage 100,000? Is that still an aspiration?

**Tom O’Leary:** We believe so, yes. Some of that does involve taking existing CTO groups, as we call them, and Members tours, which are for school children. We would then add an education element and basically enhance and increase the quality of that visit. There is the limit of the capacity of the line of route. We cannot go beyond that; we are ultimately constrained by that.

**Mr Jones:** You are talking about money. I think the House of Lords Committee had a daft idea, which we quashed in the last Parliament, of building some subterranean Visitor Centre under Victoria Tower Gardens, which I think would have cost an absolute fortune and would not have worked. But I do think we need to press this in our report as a priority because open access to this place for young people should be seen as a priority. One of the problems we had last time with the House of Lords was in terms of making space available. As you suggest, possibly some space—it does not have to be in this part of the building, but at the other end—would be made available. So I think in our report we need to reflect
that this is education about the entire building, not just the House of Commons.

Q117 Tessa Munt: I just wonder whether in fact, if we had a review of the grace and favour residences that are used—bearing in mind we have pending changes of staff—some of the buildings that are used to the benefit of members of staff on this Estate could become staff offices, thereby freeing up other spaces in other parts of the Estate that could be used as education facilities. Look at the sheer numbers: if you are aiming for 100,000—good on you, I think that is fantastic—we have to make our move and not have single people using vast resources in terms of land and space.

Tom O’Leary: I have not actually commented on this, but there is a huge demand for this. It is not just us trying to push it. When we opened telephone lines we recorded 21,000 phone calls in the space of three hours. A lot of those would be people ringing back, but that gives you an idea of the sheer volume of people wanting to get in, and it is very frustrating for us not to be able to serve that demand.

Tessa Munt: We certainly have to work out what our priorities are, I suspect.

Chair: Thank you very much indeed.
Monday 28 November 2011

Members present:
Sir Alan Haselhurst (Chair)
Graham Evans
Mr Mark Francois
Mr Kevan Jones
Simon Kirby
Nigel Mills
Tessa Munt
Mike Weatherley

Examination of Witnesses

Witnesses: Mel Barlex, Director of Parliamentary Estates, and Christine Sillis, Deputy Director Projects, Parliamentary Estates Directorate, gave evidence.

Q118 Chair: May I welcome Mel Barlex and Christine Sillis? Thank you very much indeed for coming to see us. As you will know we are engaged in an inquiry into visitor access and matters connected with that. Thank you very much for the paper that you have presented. Would you like to make a few opening remarks in relation to it, Mel, before questions are asked?

Mel Barlex: Certainly not much. I hope that it provided the Committee with the information that it had asked for on the key areas. Secondly, if you have not met her before, Christine is my deputy, and we are here to do a double act and try to give you as many answers as we possibly can at this stage. If we cannot, I will certainly come back and give the Clerk the information at a later date.

Q119 Chair: That is all you wanted to say?

Mel Barlex: That is all I was going to say, and then take questions. If you want to go through it by section, I am happy to do it that way.

Q120 Chair: We might try to concentrate on following something of the order that you have. Starting at Black Rod’s Garden, we are disappointed with the trial of what might be done at that entrance, when they put in the extra lane. There was a flicker of hope that might restore access at that end of the building for the visitors who come mainly in the morning to tour the building, but the House of Lords officials seem to produce almost every reason under the sun why this would be very difficult. Of course, there had previously been a decision not to make more than one additional channel of security available on public expenditure grounds, despite the fact there was an active promotional campaign going on to increase the number of people coming through. Are you in accordance with the fact that, just by seeing what is there, it probably would be impracticable to bring in coach-loads of visitors in the morning hours?

Mel Barlex: We have only responded to the brief that has been asked of us on each of those particular points, which is why that particular piece of work has changed several times. We just delivered what was there in the end as required. As you see in the next bit, about the World Heritage Site, my concern was about the large volumes of people running around outside the estate, and therefore trying to get in. I have a long-term aim in my mind to try to ensure that the line of route goes back—if it can—to the Lords end through, and at the same time education may be wherever a location could be found that works, but independently of that. I have had it in mind to do that, and I have been trying to work through that with the World Heritage Site element. It is not as yet on a plan of action for increasing at Black Rod’s Garden entrance, because the Lords are fearful of the volume of people coming into that area and the impact on them. It is a bit of a tight space when you come in; you do not have an easy route through thereafter to go anywhere—you just come in. It suits the visitor types we have there, but they would have to walk quite a way to get into the Palace itself and up on to the floor level. That is the big problem with that area.

Q121 Chair: It is true that there is still an extant resolution of the House to say that a visitor centre should be the ultimate target?

Mel Barlex: There is, and that is what I have tried to point out in paragraph three—we are trying to draw a close to this. There is something that I have, and that the Palace and both Houses can agree to, as a way forward. We are reviewing all of the information we have had over the past few years to draw that into a coherent document for people to say, “These are the choices we have had.” What I have done is expanded that by putting a number of other proposals in with the World Heritage Site, so all of that will be brought together. In February our intention is to complete this study and provide back to both Houses: “These are the options you have; please choose.”

Q122 Chair: It is possible—I cannot anticipate the outcome—that this Committee might be minded in its report to give you every encouragement to find out and present more information on the feasibility. But apart from the cost—which is perhaps the obvious point that will give pause—do you, from your professional point of view, believe that it is reasonable to expect that the southern end of the building is a place where we could, without any other objections, achieve a suitable building?

Mel Barlex: It is the best location strategically because it brings the line of route back to where it ideally should be, and there is no other space, so yes. The difficulties are it is not necessarily our land, so we have to address that. It is also an awkward route into the Palace, which we have to address as well. Just some of the small issues we have to address: there is also a boiler house underneath part of that car park,
and oil tanks under there. We have some difficulties about it physically. We are also trying to address the road that runs across as well. I am trying to address those technical issues in that broader picture, as I have pointed out before.

Q123 Chair: When do you hope you might be in a position to complete your study?

Mel Barlex: End of February is the study specifically for the education and visitor centres. We will bring forward the options that exist at that time. I will release the World Heritage study prior to that—that comes out early December. It is running a little late. It is a tome of work that needs to be worked through properly. That is coming out in the next week or so.

Q124 Mr Kevan Jones: I remember the fiasco we had with the House of Lords Joint Committee over the proposal of the visitor centre with the subterranean option underneath the park at the end. Realistically, we have to accept that there is not going to be the money to do this. Therefore, we should be concentrating on getting the line of route right, and access points through. I know that you have spent a lot of time doing this, Mel, but, even if you come up with proposals, the money will not be there to spend on that for a long time yet. In terms of the access in the other end, they used to come through Sovereign’s Gate and then up through. What is the most ideal way? Is Sovereign’s Gate an option? People used to wait under the arch when it was raining—it was quite a sensible way of doing it.

Mel Barlex: I certainly was not here then, but that is what has been explained to me. The difficulty we have with it are the security measures that sit outside of it. We do not allow people to be on our estate anymore: it is gated and we have barriers in front of it. One of the main reasons I started to undertake the World Heritage study was to say, “I have to replace the external security barriers at some point. What is the best way to do that, and look at all the other opportunities that exist?” We have been undertaking that. It may seem easier, but it is more difficult to allow people to congregate outside in that area there, because it would block the road across for the Peers’ cars.

Q125 Mr Kevan Jones: But that is not what they used to do: they used to come through Sovereign Gate, wait under the arch there, and then obviously the door was there when you went through.

Mel Barlex: But they were not security assessed then. My understanding is that they were just allowed in. It was a ticketed arrangement. Now everyone who comes on to the estate is searched.

Q126 Mr Kevan Jones: No, it was not; you then had to go through security. There was a security checkpoint there that people went through before they got in.

Mel Barlex: Outside?

Q127 Mr Kevan Jones: No, as you went through the gates, because there are gates on there, you could control who went into Sovereign’s Gate: if they did not have a ticket, they could not get in. You waited there, the groups used to pick them up and take them up a few stairs through a door, and then there was a checkpoint there before they went on to the tour. The tour guides picked them up from there. When I first started that is what happened, and it worked perfectly well.

Mel Barlex: I will take that away. It certainly was not my understanding before; I have been misinformed about that. I will deal with that. I will add that into the list.

Q128 Chair: I can possibly help the Committee there. As I understand it, the argument was that, if you allow people who are as yet unchecked for security, a bomb could go off under the Victoria Tower. The fact that a bomb could equally go off as you approach the Cromwell Green entrance is thought to be more tolerable than the damage to the building itself. The human consideration of all this seems to be equal in both cases. That is the reason why there is a reluctance to allow the schoolchildren, who might be thought to be less of a risk, but generally not to allow people to congregate under the tower. I think that is the answer.

Mel Barlex: Well, I will certainly include it in the options.

Q129 Mr Kevan Jones: Isn’t the way round that to have checks just before people come in, so they could not bring big bags or things like that through.

Chair: That was part of the purpose of Black Rod’s Garden entrance.

Q130 Mr Kevan Jones: It is like Fort Knox getting in through there, because you have to swipe your card so many times.

Chair: It has not been concluded necessarily to the satisfaction of this Committee, but the powers that be at the other end of the building have concluded that it would not be practicable to get the numbers through.

Mel Barlex: I think it is not set up for the volumes at this moment. It would need much more work to make that happen.

Q131 Graham Evans: Further to that question, regarding the education visitor centre, have we got estimates of how much it would cost?

Mel Barlex: No.

Q132 Graham Evans: I agree with you. The immediate thought is we do not have any money full stop, but it would be interesting to know what sort of costs and quality of building it would be: would it be temporary structure, would it be a portacabin-type structure, or would it be in keeping with the Palace, therefore is there significant cost or not? That would be of interest. At least we would know what sort of figures we are talking about for when we get to better times. Has there been no feasibility study at all?

Mel Barlex: I believe there was a very early one, and it was many millions of pounds.

Mr Kevan Jones: This was several million, because it was about digging an underground under the actual path.
Chair: Sorry, I started this by answering the question that you asked, and I should not have done. The witness should answer the question that Graham is putting.

Mel Barlex: The feasibility study that I mentioned will have costs to it, but they would be very early-stage costs. But yes: every option should have a cost to it.

Q133 Graham Evans: Thinking ahead in terms of raising more money, by extending Sunday tours for example, have you looked at ways in which we can increase the revenue? If we are going to have increased footfall, have you looked at how we can maximise income from increased visitor numbers? We have the wear and tear that happens when you have more. It is a balancing act: yes we have more people; however, we have this amount of income. Coming from a business background, the moment you get people around, the footfall in this place and surrounding areas is huge. To me there is a real opportunity to maximise incomes that will therefore be able to be used to improve the fabric of the building, but also—say if we opened on Sundays to a greater extent—that money could be used for making the visitor and educational centre.

Mel Barlex: That piece of work is usually undertaken, and is undertaken, by the events colleagues. I believe they have already given information about the numbers of visitors coming through on Saturdays and generally throughout the year. It is within their remit to decide or discuss opening up the access. We are there to tell them what the consequences are: if it is an impact on work or wear and tear, as you say—those two issues, We will facilitate where we are asked to, but we have not been asked to look at that yet.

Q134 Graham Evans: But specifically on a Sunday, have you looked into the—

Mel Barlex: No, we have not at all. The progress so far is only to look at a Saturday opening, which has been trialled for the last six months or so. They have not considered Sunday opening yet.

Q135 Graham Evans: As a follow-up, all I would say to you is in recess, or even at weekends, this place is a magnet. Therefore if you open on a Saturday, I would say that the visitor numbers, certainly at holiday times, would be considerable. You may have an opportunity on Saturday. If it works on Saturdays, I would suggest that it may possibly work on a Sunday. There is a revenue source that could be substantial or not—I do not know.

Mel Barlex: I will certainly make sure my colleagues are aware of that. The balance to that is, since Saturday opening occurred, we have pushed all our work to a Sunday. We are doing more work on a Sunday as a result of not being able to have access on a Saturday. That balance has to be there. But that is what we will do.

Q136 Chair: Whilst we are still at that end of the building, there is the World Heritage Site issue. I seem to recall seeing a report recently that we might be in danger of losing that World Heritage status. Can you guide us on that, please?

Mel Barlex: I can give you my knowledge so far: there is a forum—the Westminster World Heritage Site forum—that is chaired by Westminster City Council, I think. That is the simplest thing. I think the report you were referring to was probably an article in the papers recently. I read it too. They are walking around with the UNESCO representatives because a report was completed—I think maybe eight to 10 years ago—that identified UNESCO status for the Palace of Westminster and Westminster Abbey. There were expectations on both parties to look at how you could accentuate and protect the views of the sites. That is what has been ongoing for some time.

They have not achieved a resolution to that yet, and it is about protecting vistas generally, and more. In fact that was one of the reasons why I promulgated the report I wanted to do about the wider issues for us in Parliament. Hopefully that will feed into it, because all the same parties are involved in it. I am, like you, waiting to hear of the walk around by UNESCO and their view of some work that was undertaken by their consultants on looking at the vistas. There is a particular way they do that, which we are waiting to see.

Q137 Chair: Wear and tear: what exactly gets worn and torn by the volume of people coming through, beyond carpets, tiles and stonework? Are there other things that wear as a result of the flow of visitors through?

Mel Barlex: Yes, everything. We have an effect on the environment around us: the humidity we give off has an effect on all the furnishings around here. The more people you put through, the higher the output is that way. Certainly putting more people through is a big issue for the stone in Westminster Hall. We are starting to see the stones crumbling already, and that is because the soot that was in the atmosphere originally is affected by moisture, which creates a catalyst for the chemical reaction that causes erosion. It is less so in here, but you will get—if you consider the damage we do to it when we have leaks and the like—certain issues in these rooms: the wear and tear and the dust that comes from people. It is all part of what happens. The National Trust came and presented to us and colleagues last year a whole thesis on the dust created by people who walk in and around places and the damage it does to buildings. They are the key issues. Then you have people walking past doorways, scuffing them, hitting them with their bags, doors getting slammed, and issues happening about general wear and tear that way.

Q138 Chair: Is there any information we could glean from those such as the National Trust that would give us some ballpark calculation to work out what the cost might be to us? I know there are special things, but we did after all pay for part of the floor of St Stephen’s Hall to be retiled. That was not the most worn part, as I recall. Again, we should have some evidence as to likely costs of having to replace sections of the building.
Mel Barlex: We have costs for replacing the worn tiles at this moment. There is a business case approved.

Christine Sillis: It is £9.814 million.

Mel Barlex: It is £8.5 million to £9 million to replace the existing encaustic tiles.

Q139 Chair: In St Stephen’s Hall?

Mel Barlex: No, all the way through to the Lords, Central Lobby—Central Lobby up to the Lord’s Chamber.

Q140 Chair: But these other more esoteric things, about the effect of humidity and dust and so on: is there any sort of rough figure that one could apply based on the experience of other famous establishments that equally cater for large numbers of people?

Mel Barlex: I can try to find out; I expect the answer is no. It is such an unusual thing to try to develop a detail on. It is usually all conjecture about how much damage it does and by what time. You can give an idea, as we have just done: we know how much it cost us to do the work in St Stephen’s Hall. That was done as a pilot to try to trial the type of tile, different to the one we did five or 10 years before that, because that is wearing worse than it should do. We have done things like that, and we know how much it costs to do that. That has been expanded now to cover all the other areas that we know now need undertaking. That is the kind of harder evidence we have been able to do.

When you are talking about the scuffing of doors, it can happen or it cannot happen. I can tell you how much it would cost to repair it, but not how many times I would have to do it. With increased number of people walking through, we would have to clean a lot more. You could put a tangible figure there, but you could not say it was an accurate figure that can be held up to be, “Every year I have to spend that.” That is the trouble with it. It is just an idea. I will try to find out from the National Trust if there is a measure they have used in looking at their buildings.

Q141 Chair: There might just be sufficient evidence around to make us feel we should not be allowing anybody in at all.

Mel Barlex: I am not sure about that; I think we should do that. The difficulty we have is I still have a plan of action to try to maintain the place over a 25-year period, and I do not yet know—I will know more next year, because of the work we are doing with the long-term mechanical electrical work—how we are going to approach that, and therefore how achievable that 25-year plan is. But yes, I am afraid I do not know the answers to that yet.

Q142 Chair: In which case, can we come back to the Cromwell Green entrance now, the other end of the building—the northern end of the building? You say that some remedial works are planned. Could you give us an indication of that? The Committee has visited the Cromwell Green entrance, and there are some members of the Committee who feel it is not operating at the capacity it ought to be capable of. Would you have any comments on that, and are there remedial works intended to improve throughput?

Christine Sillis: There are remedial works planned to do some quick wins and get the building much more waterproof and weather tight before the Olympics, and also to do some further investigative works into the glass roof. We will then carry out the long-term repairs after the Olympics, as we do not want to disrupt throughput during the Olympic period. There are no plans to increase the number of lanes we can get through there because of the bomb blast shields each side of the search lane.

Chair: I notice again a news report that theatres are refusing to take bookings in the period of the Olympics because they do not think the visitors are going to be there. I do not know why we should necessarily suppose that we are going to be having extra throughput because of the Olympics. The evidence from Theatreland points in another direction.

Q143 Mr Kevan Jones: How old is that visitor centre?

Christine Sillis: Four or five years old; I was not here when it was constructed. It is not very old.

Q144 Mr Kevan Jones: I remember the farce about it at the time. Why do we have to make major repairs to it after five years?

Christine Sillis: It is quite a long story, but it was designed with a glass roof, which is not fit for purpose; you cannot get on it to maintain it. We also had a number of intrusions where Greenpeace got on to it and used it to get up on to Westminster Hall. There are a number of issues with the building, which would appear to be its initial design, not necessarily its construction.

Q145 Mr Kevan Jones: Are we suing the designers?

Mel Barlex: We are taking advice on whether we can: it is an interesting chequered history. Christine certainly was not here when it opened, and I had just arrived. We were kept at arm’s length from it. Decisions, whilst they were appropriate at the time, arrived. We were kept at arm’s length from it. Why do we have to make major repairs to it after five years?

Chair: I remember the farce about it at the time. Why do we have to make major repairs to it after five years?

Christine Sillis: It is quite a long story, but it was designed with a glass roof, which is not fit for purpose; you cannot get on it to maintain it. We also had a number of intrusions where Greenpeace got on to it and used it to get up on to Westminster Hall. There are a number of issues with the building, which would appear to be its initial design, not necessarily its construction.

Q146 Simon Kirby: Can I come back to throughput? You were asked if it was possible to increase throughput, to which your answer was that there are no plans to increase the number of lanes people can use. That is only one answer. So can I ask you again: is it possible to increase the throughput without increasing the number of lanes?

Christine Sillis: I would have to speak to security colleagues, because we do not deal with the security issues and the searching of people. We are asked to deliver a number of lanes, for example. As it stands at the moment, with the space that is required around each search lane and the bomb blast shields, there is
not sufficient room to put another lane in the building. There may be other ways of searching people, but I would have to refer to security colleagues for advice on that.

**Mel Barlex:** I think they are looking into that particular part.

**Simon Kirby:** Thank you, that is very helpful.

**Mr Kevan Jones:** We were of the opinion there was no need for another lane when we went down there; it is just using the machines that are there. When we went down there, there was quite a long queue.

**Chair:** This is not really for this particular witness.

**Mr Kevan Jones:** I know, but I am saying that is the answer to it.

**Q147 Chair:** As a follow-up to Simon’s question, when we look at Portcullis House you have told us that, in the absence of being able to put in another lane, there is an intention to increase the throughput there by a handheld device, and that being done is improving the flow through. The question follows from that: if it can be done at Portcullis House, why can it not be done at Cromwell Green?

**Mel Barlex:** Again, I think your question is for security.

**Q148 Chair:** Is there nothing from your point of view that would—?

**Mel Barlex:** No, we have made suggestions, and we are undertaking some work. We are just defining that now. The idea is we will completely whatever work they require us to physically do by June next year anyway. We are just working that through with them. They are perfectly able to make the operational changes themselves if they deem they are able to make them happen.

**Q149 Chair:** We never heard about the handheld device before until your papers referred to it as a possibility as a means of increasing capacity.

**Mel Barlex:** I hope our wording is accurate.

**Q150 Chair:** One of the things we have asked previous witnesses about is the restoration of the black cabin that used to sit outside St Stephen’s entrance, as to why it is not now, would allow a proper filtering out of the people who come in for specific purposes, like being witnesses to a Select Committee, direct guests of Members, and so on. The question I would like to ask you is whether or not you can supply the Committee with what would be the cost of restoring that cabin. I do not ask you to consider the cost of manning it, but would that be a practical consideration, and at what cost?

**Mel Barlex:** I recall it was Black Rod Sir Mike Willcocks who brought Cromwell Green into operational being, and that portacabin was there prior to Cromwell Green working. It was there for a short period afterwards, and then it was removed. There is certainly no problem with us getting a cost for you to identify what it would cost.

**Q151 Chair:** If we move on to Portcullis House then, what is it you are hoping to achieve by 1 June next year?

**Christine Sillis:** We are undertaking a feasibility study to see what can be done in terms of any short-term measures that we can bring in before the Olympics, and also any long-term measures we could then bring in after the Olympics. I cannot say at the moment what we are hoping to bring in, because that is what the feasibility study will tell us.

**Q152 Chair:** Is it correct that it is physically impossible to achieve a second lane?

**Christine Sillis:** It is with the way the layout is set at the moment. That is determined by our security team and what they feel is suitable.

**Q153 Chair:** But it is not completely outwith consideration over the longer term?

**Mel Barlex:** No.

**Q154 Graham Evans:** Talking about roofs, the Portcullis House glass roof leaks when we have prolonged rain.

**Mel Barlex:** Yes.

**Q155 Graham Evans:** Is that sorted now?

**Mel Barlex:** It has not leaked for a while, thankfully. It is the cleaning of the gutters around the edge, which is manually undertaken by our cleaning staff, and sometimes it is not as well finished. The glazing does not leak. What there are as well but difficult to see are vents at each of the four sides, and sometimes that vent does not shut. It has occasionally happened, and I have been there and watched it. The vent does not shut, it rains, and it will come in through what is effectively a drip tray into the area. The roof does not leak in that way, but the rainwater bit on the outside did. That was about a year ago.

**Q156 Graham Evans:** In terms of the access, we have spoken about the main Portcullis entrance, but you have 1 Parliament Street. I notice when you exit 1 Parliament Street, at certain times of the day—I think it is from 4 o’clock to 5 o’clock—members of staff stand at the top of the stairs. I asked why they stood at the top of the stairs and they said, “We have to stand here between four and five,” but they could not tell me why other than they had been told to stand there.

**Mel Barlex:** Is this the security staff?

**Q157 Graham Evans:** The security staff. If that is for a specific reason, I question why that would be at that particular time, and could they not be used to alleviate queues elsewhere, either in Portcullis House, Cromwell Green or wherever?

**Mel Barlex:** I do not know the answer to that: it is the security staff. I can raise the question with them, if that is what you would like me to do.

**Chair:** We have to pursue that another way, Graham.

**Q158 Nigel Mills:** On Portcullis House, the other thing I always find a nightmare is the fact that the pass holder’s entrance is also the only exit. When you are trying to go in at the out rush hour or out at the in rush hour, it is an absolute nightmare: the doors are...
always getting clogged, people do not know whether they have to push it or not now. Do you still need to swipe your pass? I think you do, even though it is just a push from the inside. Is there any way we can have a separate exit or separate pass holder’s entrance that is not going to keep having these problems? I have been in the door with bags, and it suddenly goes into reverse and nearly knocks people over. It really is a difficult one.

Mel Barlex: The answer is yes, we can look into it: we put it into the brief for the feasibility study. We are just limited at the moment by the fact there are only two or three entrances through that glazing façade. That is the reason we have the problems.

Q159 Chair: What is it you are planning then in regard to the underground station entrance?

Mel Barlex: Both Black Rod and the Serjeant—predominantly the Serjeant—raised the query about the security risk of the particular security person sitting there being overlooked or being able to be compromised, shall we say. That was one aspect. The main aspect for us was I was trying to find a way—I cannot put another escalator down. A common problem since I have been here is the pinch point of the two escalators. We have trialled both escalators going in the same direction at one time, predominantly when a division rings: many people rush to that, and it is just a continuous stream. We have been trying to think of different ways round it.

Mel Barlex: Linking what I mentioned earlier about the security issue, if we change the entrance off the current area under the underground and move it round—if you can imagine the underground, there is the beginning of an octagonal area there—that is an area behind the lift shaft. What we were thinking of doing was trying to create a space, a staircase that then runs down from the ground floor and around, either going outside or straight through into the back area where the current security persons are, the current security entrance. Then you basically go round the lift and get to the same place where the escalators end. That is what we are looking at. It is quite complex to explain it, and there are some firewalls and some security structural elements.

Q160 Chair: And how complex would it be to do in terms of the length of time you would require the present entrance to be closed?

Mel Barlex: I do not know yet. That is the idea of the study: to look through it. We are looking at it next year, and intending to deliver it in 2013–14, subject to funding. That is our plan of action.

Q161 Mr Kevan Jones: What is the problem though?

Mel Barlex: The numbers of people and division bells going through and the pinch points it creates. If you have school parties there or others, it becomes slightly congested. It is just a way of improving it.

Q162 Simon Kirby: Chair, may I just be clear on that? Obviously I am a new Member, perhaps I am ignorant: where exactly is the pinch point? Let us say there is a division bell at 11 o’clock in the morning, and, most unlikely, let us say, 2 o’clock in the afternoon: where is the problem?

Mel Barlex: At the escalators.

Q163 Simon Kirby: At the top?

Mel Barlex: Yes, predominantly at the top in Portcullis House.

Q164 Simon Kirby: I have to say for the record I do not see that as a problem, as someone who comes through Parliament Street, through Portcullis House, uses the escalator. I would have thought if we were looking at issues we might be better off looking elsewhere. But that is my personal opinion.

Q165 Mr Kevan Jones: The other thing—I sound like an old fart here—part of the problem is on divisions what used to happen, many years ago, is the security staff used to open doors, used to marshal the areas and make sure members got through. That does not happen anymore; that is part of the problem. Sir Alan might even remember when the police used to stop the traffic for you to get across the road: that does not happen anymore. If we are going to spend a load of money on expensive works like that, an easier solution is to go back to the system whereby the lines of route back to the Chamber were properly—it is about a security issue. For example, the bugbear in my life is the door down near the gift shop, which, as soon as the division was called, security used to open and pin back. The number of times you have to tell people to do it, or I do it myself—I just take the fire extinguisher off the wall and put it behind the door to hold the door open.

Mel Barlex: I did not hear that.

Q166 Mr Kevan Jones: Otherwise you have Members of Parliament putting in passes to go through it. I do not think we need to spend a lot of money on these things. I know it is perhaps not a very fashionable thing that, when there is a division, Members get priority to get to places, but that is what needs to happen. It used to happen and it used to work perfectly well. I would be loath to spend public money on some fancy solution if there is obviously a simple solution to it.

Chair: I suspect we will be told, would we not, that there would be public money involved in having more security people.

Q167 Mr Kevan Jones: It is not, no Chair, I do not think it is. It is getting the security staff we have at the moment to do what used to come naturally to them.

Chair: Then this is a matter we need to pursue with that part of the management of the House.

Mr Kevan Jones: If you go to the top of the escalator there is always a person standing there. When there is a division, if he or she could just say, “Right, can you just hang back people while Members get through,” problem solved.

Chair: Maybe. We can pursue that, but I think not with the Director of Parliamentary Estates.

Mr Kevan Jones: But it links to him because he is about to spend a lot of money, time and effort drawing up things that are not—
Chair: It is true he led us in that direction.
Nigel Mills: I obviously also do come through Portcullis House to vote. There are times when it is a real problem on that escalator, and there are people on there dawdling down, having a chat. If you are short of time it can be a little bit anxious as you try to squeeze past them. Some way of trying to address that would help, because how many members are based over that half of the building? It must be well over half of us or something, all trying to get through there in a bit of a rush if you are running a bit late. Some improvement there would stop someone tumbling down the escalator at some stage. I am surprised it has not happened.

Q168 Chair: We can mull over the different views expressed on that particular point before we come to any recommendations. Can we look at the impact on your department of the extensions that have been made so far to visitor access to the building? I am thinking now of tour visitors more than anything else. There are Saturday tours, the possibility of Sunday tours: could you give us some idea of how far this could be accommodated or not? How far as it is per time when it is per with the works you have to do?
Mel Barlex: The caveat I gave earlier is we are still trying to assess the long-term plans. Therefore, how much of the work that we need to do is not yet clear to us; the way we are actually going to deliver it is not yet clear to us. We will be in that position in roughly a year’s time, or certainly the middle of next year. At the moment we are quite flexible: we adapt our work. That is generally what we do: we have adapted our programme such that we have a high degree of flexibility in what we do. The difficulty is we are getting less and less time to do what we need to do. With Saturday opening we came up with an indication, and that indication is it just costs my staff more in overtime because I now have to put them on to a premium rate to work on a Sunday. It is not a huge amount, but it is an amount that we have to cover. We have dealt with that. If we did it to a Sunday as well, then I am probably going to have to start moving to 24 hour working to try to cope with all the amount of work, or, as we have with the Saturday opening, we have the caveat that, if there are health and safety works, we will stop the line of route: we will stop that ability in there. If something happens, we have to just do the work: the work is dominant in that area. That was the original reasoning behind the Saturday opening: if there are health and safety issues, that takes precedent.

Q169 Chair: Whilst we are on that topic, this Committee, as you may recall, on its catering inquiry recommended consideration should be given to opening the dining rooms, for example, to members of the public when the House was not sitting. Would that equally have severe implications for you and the works you have to do?
Mel Barlex: General wear and tear yes: we do not know quite what that would be, but I suspect it would be the scuffed doors, the worn carpet, the trips and hazards that will occur naturally. The bigger area will be policing it, because at the moment the line of route is a managed route; where members of the public go in any other area, they have to be accompanied. It is the question of how you would get them to the dining rooms and accompany them safely.

Q170 Chair: It was refurbishment and maintenance I was thinking of—if you have to pull up the floorboards in order to look at the pipe work underneath, and wiring and so on. There would be a serious impact.
Mel Barlex: It would be, and that is our general problem. If you saw what the corridor looked like when the leak occurred, it would be evident to you that they are not floorboards out there; they are slate panels, eight by six, that have to be lifted by a machine to get access to the floor underneath. To then try to get through the works that, we have to ensure there is no asbestos in there first. We have to do a sample test; then that is 10 days before we are even allowed to take any work on to do that, because the health and safety have to be informed. We are not talking about ordinary easy work to do here: any work we have to do in those areas is difficult and has to be managed very well. It will have a major impact on how long places are not allowed to be accessed.

Q171 Mr Kevan Jones: If we were to have what we used to have before we had September sittings—the long summers to do most of this work—you would not have to fit it in around the visitors, would you?
Mel Barlex: We have changed the way we work—and Christine particularly can explain that—but we have tried to recognise the least impact possible by being more flexible. Do you want to explain what we have done?

Q172 Mr Kevan Jones: No, but when we did not have September sittings, the night Parliament rose, you had the entire summer to do major works and that got the bulk of your big jobs out of the way, didn’t it?
Christine Sillis: An 11- or 12-week recess is still not long enough to do major works. The way we programme our works now is to batch work up so that we do not do lots of small projects all over the place: we accumulate types of work. We have programmes of work. For example, the encaustic tiles is not just a project to do with St Stephen’s or Central Lobby; it is a programme of work that is ongoing throughout the year. A slightly longer recess still does not give us sufficient time to do the scale of work we need to do to maintain this House. There are also far more economies of scale and value for money by batching work into larger programmes of work. We really do need to work throughout the year, and that links back into Sunday opening: we still need flexibility to do noisy or disruptive work out of hours. If you were Sunday opening as well, it would restrict the ability for us to do that. There is a risk that it may affect the House, and it is not conceivable to us that we would affect the House sitting. We do not need some time out of hours to be able to do noisy work. A longer recess is a little bit of a help, because we can do some of the projects fully in that period, and by not doing those we end up putting them on to future years. But there is a limit to how much work
we can still do in a summer recess, whatever length it is, because we have such a volume of work that we need to be working throughout the year.

Mel Barlex: The point I would try to make is that when first arrived I had what was called legacy work; there was a way of doing things and an amount of work that was not clear to me. Now we have a much clearer action plan; we plan three years in advance of what we are doing. We shape our work to fit what we need to do. Therefore it is much more difficult to say, “What if we were having 11 or 12 weeks?” If we did that, we would have to look at every job and say, “If we did it in a different way, which of these ways?” It is just a cost, and it is a waste of money to do that.

We have changed our work; we are much clearer about it. That flexibility is there, and I think, in some of the history that I have heard in my four years here, going back 10 years there were short recesses then as well. The September sitting is not a new thing: it has happened and it is in the cycle. I came in when it was 11 and 12 weeks and enjoyed it, but we are doing not far off that amount of work in the four-and-five-week period we get now anyway because of better planning on our part.

Q173 Mr Kevan Jones: In terms of the major works, I remember several years ago there was a proposal to close the building down altogether. I think I went down with you under the building, which, frankly, is a horror story if you look at it down there. Where is that at now? I know one of the first jobs we are doing is assessing the state of the problem: are we into that scenario where we might have to close the entire building down to do all that work, or have you found a way around it?

Mel Barlex: I am on the case for that now. You are referring to the long-term mechanical and electrical works. We agreed to spend roughly £50 million over a five- to seven-year period to do the urgent works. That is what we are in year three of. We have now extended that programme to another three years, and that is just helping us. We have fixed some of the horrors you saw. A significant amount has been done this year that has helped us and has had significant benefits.

But at the same time, we have started to take an eye to how we deliver the long term, which is your particular point. Yes, there is a horror story of shut the building, decamp in part or in full, and there are also other ways of saying, “Should we just do it over a very long period of time?” We have now embarked upon our long-term vision, looking at what the House will look like—what the physical infrastructure will look like—and we will bring that together into a report for next summer. That is the intention; that is what I have been referring to as the evidence I will have. Then I can start talking to you about “this is what it means”, but we intend to deliver that some time next year. I am not going to be held to a date just yet—I still cannot get it for my own team—but that is the intention.

Q174 Graham Evans: Thinking about the Natural History Museum and the Science Museum, where you have quite iconic buildings and it is a place of work but it is also a place for people to come and visit—a museum piece—is there a similar building or set of circumstances you are familiar with where your counterparts have similar challenges? Do you compare notes with those sorts of people in similar buildings? There are a few knocking around London and elsewhere.

Mel Barlex: Ironically, there are not many in London.

Q175 Graham Evans: No, I appreciate that.

Mel Barlex: You mentioned the National History Museum: they have certain similarities, but it is not as similar. We have looked, for benchmarking purposes, to see if there is anywhere, and we cannot find anything. Certainly I have talked to colleagues at the Welsh Assembly, the Scottish Parliament and the Northern Ireland Assembly, but we are ahead of the game for anyone else. We are now looking further afield. We know that the Canadian Parliament has begun effectively what we are doing and taken this on board. They are part way through a major refurbishment programme of replacing all of their mechanical and electrical, including decanting a Chamber and moving people around, and then doing it 50/50. We understand the Austrian Parliament is similarly looking at that. That is as far as we have got; the intention is to do a wider consultation in the coming six months to see if there is anything we can learn from them and likewise they can learn from us.

Q176 Graham Evans: What I am looking for is best practice: what is best in terms of quality and cost-effectiveness, and that balance you must have. There is no manual you can update or have come across?

Mel Barlex: The nearest is the Canadian Parliament; it is live and doing the work. That is the nearest. It is a much smaller enterprise than we have here. I do not think it has the same quantities of usage of the different types we have. That is what sets us apart: this is a highly used building, for huge diversity.

Q177 Chair: Are there any other questions for our witnesses? If not, thank you very much indeed for being with us.

Mel Barlex: Thank you. I hope we have answered the questions.

Q178 Chair: If you could send us some of the outstanding points that we left with you, it would be very helpful, in so far as they are calculable.

Mel Barlex: I will do. I will ask the Clerk to give me some guidance to make sure I have not got them all wrong.

Chair: Thank you very much indeed.
Monday 16 January 2012

Members present:
Sir Alan Haselhurst (Chair)

Rosie Cooper
Thomas Docherty
Graham Evans
Mr Mark Francois
Mr Kevan Jones
Simon Kirby

Dr Phillip Lee
Nigel Mills
Tessa Munt
Sarah Newton
Mr John Spellar
Mr Dave Watts

Examination of Witness

Witness: Jonathan Drori, Chair of the Speaker’s Advisory Council on Public Engagement, gave evidence.

Q179 Chair: Colleagues, we are now in public session and we welcome Professor Drori, who is the Chair of the Speaker’s Advisory Council on Public Engagement. You took over from Mr Street, I think?

Jonathan Drori: That is right. I have not chaired my first meeting there yet, but I have obviously been to quite a few of the previous meetings.

Q180 Chair: Indeed. Would you like to make any initial comments.

Jonathan Drori: Yes, if I may? First of all, thank you very much for having me here. It is an honour to be here. Surely, democracy is one of the things that matters most for our society to function and to be healthy and fulfilling for those people who live here. If you really believe, as I do, that democracy matters, then certain things follow from that. One thing that follows from it is that people need to understand why democracy is important, not just for themselves individually, but for the good of us all. People need to value democracy. Maybe too many people take our democracy for granted.

The second area is that citizens need to be engaged. There are several components to engagement, which are bound up with valuing democracy. I would just like to describe some of those. First of all, the public should feel that they understand how the mechanics of democracy work. That means understanding the processes of voting both by the public and also by the Members who represent them; the way that laws are created; the work of Committees and the role of the Houses; the role of local democratic processes versus national ones, and so on.

This Committee, I imagine, is concerned with what goes on in and around Parliament, but the public may not see such a stark division between what happens locally and what happens at Westminster. Parliament should do what it can to help the public understand its work. For example, the school trips here are run brilliantly. It is a wonderful thing to see so many children here respectful, I think, and excited by their visits. But the education visits here are hugely oversubscribed and the proposed new education centre is very urgently needed.

All this activity from Parliament, in my view and in the view of the members of the Speaker’s Advisory Council on Public Engagement, needs to be supported by the education system of the country itself. We believe that no child should leave school without a clear knowledge of how our democracy works, why it matters, and how they can influence it. One might also suggest that debate and reasoned argument might be part of the deal as well. You could call it political literacy.

Another component of engagement with democracy is that people should know what is going on. Parliament should use all channels practicable to communicate with the public about its work.

People should understand how they can participate in democracy and be encouraged to do so. Parliament should encourage those who can engage the public in the largest numbers. They are more likely to do this if they feel their voice will be heard. Public engagement is two-way. I am afraid. It is not just about Parliament getting its message across but about processes that enable the public to take part, to participate. Maybe there are new ways for people to contribute their views or to see things that are relevant to them that are going on. It is better to experiment with new techniques, openly acknowledging that that is what you are doing, rather than not try at all. The Speakers’ Advisory Group felt that perhaps Parliament is a little too risk-averse at the moment. People should feel that the democracy and its institutions are theirs and accessible to them, both physically and in every other way. This principle might affect everything, from understanding what is going on and how to influence it, to Parliament Square architecture, to the location of Committee meetings, the language and dress, security—even a sign over Portcullis House saying “Welcome to your Parliament”, for goodness sake. The same principle already informs excellent initiatives such as Parliament Week. “This is our space” should be the message to the public.

Remember, it is not just about Westminster, but the way that democracy works and how people engage with it, all across the country. So it is not just about people coming here.

If we want our democracy to be open, transparent and inclusive, the Parliament needs to reflect that in everything it does and through every channel. This does not mean a lack of respect for heritage and status, but it does mean perhaps looking at the activities of Parliament through a different lens. Public engagement is vital to a thriving democracy. People need to see that Parliament is theirs, that it is of them and for them. If it is important, then there should
Jonathan Drori: Thank you very much indeed.

Q181 Chair: Thank you very much indeed. You will appreciate that, while all these matters are of interest to us, the inquiry in which we are presently engaged is about access, which is clearly highly relevant to the matters that your Group is considering. I think we would be pleased to hear your views on matters that relate in particular to how we engage physically, as it were, with people. Has the Advisory Council reached any conclusions yet on what we do well, what we do less well and where we might improve, or are you still halfway through?

Jonathan Drori: I think we are still halfway through. When you say you are concerned with access—the rest of your sentence implied that you were concerned with physical access. Have I read you right, because I would see access more broadly? As I tried to make clear, this is about physical, virtual and every other kind of accessibility.

Q182 Chair: We are thinking of physical access, but we are also thinking that there is another side to that, obviously, because it is not just bringing people here. It is also how we connect outside with the country. It is a matter of how Parliament as a building and institution can relate to the general public better.

Jonathan Drori: I will try to distinguish between views that are personal to myself and those where I am representing the Group. I think the Group would feel strongly that the attitude of Parliament is not always consistently welcoming. When you walk into Portcullis House, once you have got through the necessary security, there is an openness and a feeling that this is a space that a member of the public can understand. Then there is the feeling that I had waiting outside Committee Room 16 here in the Palace, which felt like coming to see the head teacher at school, which was a positively not welcoming one, or perhaps I should say a negatively not welcoming one. I am someone who is in and around Parliament quite a bit and, if I feel that way, I can only imagine how members of the public might feel if they have no connection with Parliament. I think this would be a very intimidating place. One can wander round the building with ideas for almost every part of it for how you could make it more accessible. You could have a notice outside that says, “Welcome”. You could have a notice saying, “If you have not been here before, here is how it works”. You could have interpretation out in the public areas, out on the street, about the buildings and so on. There are many things one could do, but I think one sometimes gets the impression that not everyone really feels that this is necessarily a space which is of the people, but rather it is more owned by the people who work here and the public are lucky if they are allowed in once or twice.

Q183 Chair: Indeed. I think we are constrained to some extent by the work of Barry and Pugin, or their advisers, who did not anticipate in the middle of the 19th century just how Parliament would develop and its needs to develop. I am sorry there is not a green room outside where our special guests are able to be accommodated while waiting to come in to give evidence. You are, nevertheless, a most welcome witness.

Jonathan Drori: Thank you very much indeed.

Q184 Sarah Newton: Welcome to our Committee. We are very friendly, actually, despite the grand building that we are in. I think you made some really good points. I am interested, because I represent Cornwall. Some of my constituents, certainly schools, come up, and I would echo what you say. They really love the school visits, which are really well done. Have you had a chance to or are you anticipating looking at the outreach work that is done? I have said in this Committee before that I have quite a few concerns about the people who, for example, come down to Cornwall and have meetings where they seek to explain Parliament. I think that could be done very much better. Are you looking at that? Very few people in Cornwall are going to be coming up and having the chance to visit Westminster and they do need democracy explained to them and they do need this place demystified. How can they engage? I think we do need to do a lot of work in that area, so I am interested to know what work you are doing in it.

Jonathan Drori: Going to monitor the quality of provision around the country would be beyond the scope of what we do, although in some of the changes I would like to make to our remit—with the approval of the Speaker and officials—I would like to have a slightly more strategic and trustee role. The service here might report to us on their market research and we could suggest changes if the market research indicates one way or another. From what I understand, going out around the country and giving those experiences is something that the Education Service here wants to do, but it is resource constrained. One of the things that you need to decide is how much you are willing to pay per person that you reach. If it is someone doing a school visit, if it is a virtual experience or anything else, how much is it worth paying for each of those experiences? You need to put a price on it and then you deliver what you can for the money. Is it worth a pound per child in Cornwall with whom you go and do a session? Is it worth £10? That decision needs to be made here. That provision is an expensive business. In a service that is country-wide, there are bound to be areas that are better served than others, but you need to decide where your priorities are. Does that answer your question?

Sarah Newton: Yes, thank you.

Q185 Dr Lee: Welcome. I would strongly encourage anything you can do to educate the populace on the division between national and local politics, as someone who is told that my primary role as the elected Member of Parliament is to hold the local council to account. I would very much like you to engage as much as possible with the populace. You say access has a wider definition and I would agree with you. Throughout the series of inquiries we have had here, there has been a sense that we lose sight of what this building is for, which is essentially a place for Members of Parliament to review and pass
legislation. It is not necessarily a place for people to come and visit. It is not a place for the staff to have a comfortable existence. It is not any of those things. It is actually for Members of Parliament to do what they have been elected to do. I think we encounter problems in terms of the school visits. Certainly, at times in Portcullis House I do wonder whether I am in a legislature or whether I am in a school playground. It is rather busy, to say the least. I wonder in your inquiries how you balance our ability to be able to fulfil our duties, be it in a Committee or in the Chamber, with this desire to make it open and accessible to the wider public. They can tune in on television or online, they can listen on radio. There are a number of ways in which people can participate and view the process without them having to physically be there. These buildings are already overpopulated. Jonathan Drori: Yes, I suppose you could say of theatre or of all sorts of experiences in life that you could watch them on video. It is not quite the same, I think. Also, they pay your salary and I think that is important to remember. The third point I would make is that it is a matter of attitude.

Q186 Dr Lee: Are you suggesting that they have full access to the Foreign Office to go and see what they are doing because they pay their salaries as well?

Jonathan Drori: No. I would say that the default position is that you should be open and transparent unless there is a particular reason not to be, rather than the other way round.

Q187 Dr Lee: There are cameras everywhere. We are open and transparent. I cannot move without someone tweeting it.

Jonathan Drori: I do not know. A personal view is that physical access is a fundamentally different thing to camera and virtual access.

Dr Lee: Yes, but—

Q188 Chair: Order, order. Let the witness answer your last question.

Jonathan Drori: Personally, I feel there is a qualitative difference between the two and I feel that I would rather err on the side of physical access, and then if you try an experiment and it is just all too much and everyone complains, you can rein back a bit. It is not like you have to make a decision for evermore about a particular kind of access. If you and all your colleagues feel that it is like a school playground and you just cannot do your work, then obviously you have to rein back a bit.

Q189 Dr Lee: I am asking about balance, because the reality is, as far as I am concerned, at certain times of the day you cannot get into this building. The access, particularly through Portcullis House, can take 45 minutes to get through. We have gone beyond the point of balance as far as I am concerned. I do not think if you go down the path that you seem to be going down that we can ever satisfy the desire for this place to be accessible to all because the buildings do not allow that and the security concerns and requirements do not allow that. So at what point do you say, "Enough is enough"?

Jonathan Drori: I would say that if access is a problem you need to do something to cure the problem of access rather than saying, “Do not come in.” I would say build the education centre. Where is that, for goodness sake? Do things that encourage more people to come in a way that does not disrupt your work, but do not keep them out.

Q190 Dr Lee: Give me a location for the education centre and at the same time allow my colleagues to have offices that are actually practical for the jobs that they do as well, because we do not have that. The reality is that space is a problem in this part of the world and so therefore to encourage more and more people to come in is just not practical.

Jonathan Drori: I think that there is an attitudinal divide here. I do not think that it is all about not having the space. I think that there is an underlying issue, which is that some people just do not really like members of the public being around the place very much. That is my hunch.

Dr Lee: I think you will find the problems—

Q191 Chair: Order, order. Let Professor Drori reply. He was in the middle of a reply.

Jonathan Drori: I think that if one came at it with the attitude of, “We really want to make this place as accessible as we possibly can and yet still do our work,” there might be solutions that you come to. There are all sorts of things that one could think about doing. I am no architect or town planner, but I do not quite understand why arguably the most important building in the country has the Parliament Square traffic issue going on around it. If we can solve Trafalgar Square, why can we not do that one? There are lots of things you can do to bring people closer, to make people feel they are part of it, without them necessarily traipsing through your office.

Q192 Mr Francois: The Parliamentary Estate has evolved incrementally over a long period of time. It was not set down as one bespoke design and we have had to make do with what has evolved over that period of time. As colleagues around this table can look you in the eye and tell you, space is at something of a premium around here. There are some physical constraints. That said, the paper here refers to the education centre. We have been kicking this around for a number of years. One of the things I like to see is school parties going around this place. Whoever these people grow up to vote for is entirely their own business, but it is important that they understand the history of this place, what it means in the 21st century and that democracy is something that is important. I suspect we would agree on that.

Jonathan Drori: Yes.

Q193 Mr Francois: That being the case, given that we have gone around in circles on this for a number of years here, how, if at all, do you see an education centre actually coming to fruition? Where would it be, over what time scale, and how, essentially, would it operate?
Jonathan Drori: I would love to be able to answer your question. I am not an architect and I do not have enough experience of the site here to know where it should be. I would say that, for me, it would be a fairly high priority because of the reasons I started out with. In order to have a thriving democracy it is very important that children and everyone else have a feel for how the whole thing works. Therefore, I would throw the question back and say, why on earth would you not have an education centre in a really important Parliament?

Q194 Mr Francois: On one level it is almost a motherhood and apple pie statement that you should have one. Yet given that there are genuine constraints on space here—which there are—and given that building this thing is potentially quite expensive, although it is arguably a price that we should pay, if you are hard over on where exactly it would be, over what time scale—

Jonathan Drori: I am not qualified to answer the question. I do not know enough about the estate. I am not an architect. I do not know how long these things take to build.

Q195 Mr Francois: Just to push back on you a little bit, you are obviously very keen to have it and, personally, I support the concept too, but I would have been a bit more impressed if you had said, “I really think you need to have one of these and I think you should have it there and I think it should open in year X and you should do it in way Y.”

Jonathan Drori: As a member of the public with no particular qualification in this, I would be able to suggest all sorts of places to put it, but I do not know whether they are practical or not.

Q196 Mr Francois: With respect, sir, you are not just a member of the public. You chair this rather important committee.

Jonathan Drori: I think that our committee would say, “We think this is a priority. Where you decide put it is up to you, but we think that it is a priority to have something like this.” We do not have all the plans of Parliament. We do not know where to put these things. You might say we should employ some architects to do a survey and tell you where to put it. Now, I thought your people were already doing that. If they are not, they should be, and if they are not, then maybe that is something we should take on. Do you think that is something we should do?

Mr Francois: I have always been personally pro this project, but if you will forgive me, sir, if you are so pro it I think it is very easy for you to say, “It is a really good idea,” and then throw it back at us. I would have been more impressed if you had come along here and said, “It is a good idea,” and given us your view of how we should do it.

Q197 Chair: We have been all around the houses over a period of years and been frightened by the cost of putting up a building that would not only serve as the education centre, but as a general visitor entrance, where they could be screened, given preliminary information about Parliament and then taken on a tour of the building. The question is, if we decided—and were helped by a recommendation from your Council—that this is a very important priority that Parliament should be observing, whether the public at the present time, or indeed at any time, will be happy at the amount of money that it would undoubtedly cost to do it properly. You have only to consider the visitor arrangements made in the House of Representatives in the United States to realise what this sort of thing could be. Bearing in mind we are elected politicians, would the press take a friendly view that this is something which is being done for the public, for the people’s benefit, rather than for any gratification of Members of Parliament? I fear that it might be represented as wanton expenditure by Members of Parliament on themselves, which would be a gross travesty against the background of what you and your Council are trying to inform us on.

Jonathan Drori: I think that is a risk. There are some parts of the press that will just be negative about whatever you do. It is probably something that is too important not to do for that reason—to use that as an excuse not to do it. I would ask a couple of things. Is this a project that can be phased in some way? That might reduce immediate costs while the country is going through a particularly difficult economic period. I might ask whether you can involve the public, via the press, in ideas for the centre. That can often take away some of the sting from the press, if it starts to feel that it owns it, and certainly if the public owns it. You can imagine either a broadcast media or a newspaper mass participation project in getting people to suggest ideas for what the centre should be like and so on. That just might encourage the press not to see it completely negatively, because then the public would have participated in it in some way. Again, part of the reason for doing that is not just to get people’s ideas and get the press on side, but to make people feel that it is for them and owned by them, rather than building a centre, which is designed here, and saying “You might as well come to it.” It is about participation.

Q198 Chair: Indeed, it could only be for them. That is what it will be termed.

Jonathan Drori: Yes, but they need to be involved. There is a difference between something that you are designing here and saying, “That is it. Come and visit.”—there is plenty of scope for that in society, by the way; that is fine—and something where you are saying, “This is actually Parliament, which is owned by the public, and so participate in some way in the design.”

Q199 Chair: How important do you regard the suggestion of more tours and activities for all members of the public in the Palace of Westminster to be and do you believe we are going about this the right way at the moment or could we be more creative?

Jonathan Drori: There is always scope for being more creative, doing things in different ways, and I think that the Education Service here seem to have good ideas, which are practical and bear in mind the limitations of the space you have and how many
people you can put through. All I would say is err on the side of access rather than exclude access.

**Q200 Chair:** And damn the cost?
**Jonathan Drori:** No. As I started out by saying to a previous question, you need to think about the cost per user of the people you are attracting here and are serving here. If you think about how much you are spending on each person, per visit, that has to feel reasonable to you. That is not a decision that I can make, but if I was running it I would put a price on everyone’s head and I would say, “For every school child of a certain age that comes through here we are willing to spend X pounds.” Then you decide whether the numbers are reasonable or not.

**Q201 Chair:** You must be aware that the House is engaged in a cost-saving exercise, which certainly embraces the whole security aspect: the police contract and so on. If we are to welcome more members of the public and more people being allowed into parts of the Palace, possibly, where they have not been allowed before, there is a security angle, which would drive the cost up. The reason why there are not more entrances available is in some cases due to manning, which again affects the contract. Now, it seems to me that the Palace of Westminster is in danger of going in the contrary direction. At the same time as we can extend access, there are pressures that are running quite contrary to that.

**Jonathan Drori:** Absolutely. There are two things I would say to that. You have to decide how much of a priority access is. The nation needs to think about that. Is it more important than all the other things we can spend public money on? Personally, I would put quite high up the list, because I think it is crucial to democracy, and not just physical access, but all the different kinds of access you can have. I think that democracy is just a little more fragile than maybe people in this room feel and I would err on the side of making sure that no child comes away from school without understanding how our democracy works and valuing it. That does not mean that they all have to come and visit all the time, but that is one of the things I would say. The second thing is there may be ways of doing things differently. I think it is very valuable for children to come here, but you might decide that, given the constraints of money, there is more that can be done out in other parts of the country physically by maybe even having occasional Committee meetings in other parts of the country or virtually, as a previous questioner asked. You might be able to do things with cameras in schools and so on. I would say there is a balance there and the more that you can have access, the better.

**Q202 Thomas Docherty:** You may be aware, Professor, of the inquiry that the Procedure Committee is currently doing on sitting hours. One of the options that they are considering is a proposal to shift the sitting hours of the House on a Tuesday and Wednesday to be much more aligned to 9 to 5, perhaps 10 to 6. What impact do you think those changes would have on the accessibility of the House for the wider public?

**Jonathan Drori:** That is a difficult question off the top of my head. I would be happy to think about that and submit evidence separately. There are a lot of factors to take into consideration. What is the nature of accessibility on top of that? In other words, would it allow a greater number of visits, fewer visits or would it be the same number of people coming into the building and out of the building? Would it be available by media in a different way or the same way as now? Are all other things equal?

**Q203 Thomas Docherty:** Well, you would effectively move the sitting hours of the House of Commons. There is a debate about subsequent knock-on effects for Bill Committees and so on starting at 8 or 8.30 in the morning but, fundamentally, if you move the sitting hours of the Chamber of the House of Commons to, say, 10 to 6 on Tuesday rather than 2 to 10, obviously you do not get tours during the day.

**Jonathan Drori:** You would probably get a slightly different group of people, which might be good. That might not be a bad thing.

**Q204 Nigel Mills:** You would not get many school kids at 7 pm.

**Jonathan Drori:** If people wanted to watch some of the proceedings live via video or what have you, that would be easier for some people and more difficult for others. The more you have a variety of hours, the better, because at least people will be able to participate or come on tours on some of the days. The key thing would be variety rather than having the same hours every day. If you have some days where it is different, that would probably be helpful, but I would think that there are people within the Education Service in Parliament who have thought about this and would be better qualified than I would be, just off the top of my head, to answer your question.

**Q205 Chair:** The straightforward implication behind Mr Docherty’s question is that if Parliament is in business at 10 o’clock in the morning that wipes out the possibility of a tour for school children. Now, surely it is implicit in what you are saying and in what the Council has been saying that we should be welcoming children here. If by the sitting hours we deny them that privilege of wandering through the whole building and having the thing brought alive to them in that way, that would be running counter to the philosophy you have been expounding.

**Jonathan Drori:** Thank you, yes. That is true. But on the other hand there may be another group of people, maybe not children, who may be able to engage with what is going on in Parliament better as a result of the movement in hours. That needs to be weighed up.

**Q206 Chair:** It certainly does, yes.

**Jonathan Drori:** It is not just about children. That is an important audience, but it is also very important for the rest of the public to engage with what is going on in the Chamber.

**Q207 Chair:** Yes.
Jonathan Drori: There is a weighing up to do.

Q208 Mr Spellar: Sorry, how do they engage better as a result of the change in hours?

Jonathan Drori: It may be that what is available on video feeds, whether it is Parliament TV or whatever else you decide to put in, is more exciting and more of interest if it is live and depending on what people wrap around that feed.

Q209 Mr Spellar: That is when most people are at work.

Jonathan Drori: Except if you vary it. There will be some people who actually find it easier. There will always be some people who can get access at different times of the day.

Q210 Mr Spellar: Yes, so it is not really relevant to the argument. If the argument is that it is a live feed, it is more relevant, depending on which area of the country you are in, somewhere between 5 and 6, and on into the evening. More people would be likely to watch that at home. I doubt their employers are encouraging them to watch it on their screens at work. I am not saying whether it is a good or bad thing in that context. I am merely saying it is an utterly irrelevant consideration in that context.

Q211 Simon Kirby: The theatre analogy is that it is a big, historic theatre. Is the visit to look at the architecture and history more important than enjoying the play?

Jonathan Drori: I think it is dangerous for people to see the place as preserved in aspic. The more that visitors and the public in general can see Parliament as a place where work is done, rather than just as a beautiful building with nice paintings in it, the better.

Q212 Simon Kirby: I often wonder quite why people do come and visit. Of course, people visit for lots of different reasons, but I am exploring your motivation. Is it the access to the building or the access to the people’s representatives that is important?

Jonathan Drori: I think they are both important. There are other ways of accessing one’s Member of Parliament and that is all extremely important as well—the access to surgeries, the ability to write to them and get a response and so on. That is all extremely important. But I think that the buildings here are seen by the public as representative in a way, not only of democracy with a capital D, but also of the collection of their representatives in it. That is an important thing for people, as a matter of principle, to be able to come and visit, within the bounds of what is practical. That is not just me saying that it should be important; it is important to people.

Q213 Mr Watts: Professor, can I ask you what the brief is for this? Obviously there are a number of issues. One that you are involved in is about how you get visitors in and out of the building. Are you involved in some discussion with other people? How do you weigh those different factors—MPs, guests, people giving evidence and so on, against, for want of a better term, the run-of-the-mill tourists or visitors? How is that co-ordinated, and is someone looking at the totality of how we open up the place so that we do not have logjams for everyone—visitors, Members’ guests and so on?

Jonathan Drori: The practicalities of how all the bits of it are co-ordinated would be happening in Parliament itself by people who are responsible for public engagement. As a sort of ginger group up until now, our role has been to suggest ways in which Parliament might engage more with all its different audiences. While we might have a view on some of those audiences, others, and we can give our reasons for that, I would expect the decision to be made within the building.

Q214 Mr Watts: So really you are not engaged with getting people in and out of the building?

Jonathan Drori: The actual mechanics of how many security gates you have and all that kind of thing? No, we are not.

Q215 Rosie Cooper: This is motherhood and apple pie. I have got to say to you that I used to be Lord Mayor of Liverpool and I operated an open-door policy. If anybody passed the door that wanted to come in, they were welcome. In principle, I do not disagree with you. In practice, what we have is motherhood and apple pie because the difference between what you said and the Honourable Gentleman who spoke before said is that you are saying that we should gain the maximum number of people into the building as is practicable. You have no idea what practicable is, but you would like it “plus-plus”. That is the gulf that exists—not, as you suggest, that it is the difference between us wanting to preserve the buildings in aspic and not allow people in. I want as many people in as possible. The problem is about the people who you are relying on to make those decisions about how you get people in and the level of security—in my six years here, I have got to tell you I would not let them run a cattery. Everything becomes 30 times more difficult, 20 times more expensive and unbelievably complex. You would not run a business like it, and you are sitting there and saying, “In principle, this is what I want.” I totally agree with you. Members of Parliament do not actually really get to make many of the decisions. They happen somewhere else, up there, in a cupboard, and they are fed down and we are supposed to rubber-stamp them. I open the newspaper and I find out what is going on in here. The very people you are suggesting can organise this have got consultants coming out of their ears with madcap ideas on every line and they are the people you expect to make this work. So, in principle I agree with you. In practice, start again.

Jonathan Drori: Actually, I do not think that was a question, but can I respond to it anyway? My experience of the people running the Education Service here and the Outreach Service is very good.
Q216 Rosie Cooper: I agree with you.  
Jonathan Drori: I would like to make that very clear.  
I do not have direct experience of the people to whom I think you are referring, who probably run the security or the procedures of getting people in and out. That is, unfortunately, not my business. I cannot comment on it.

Q217 Rosie Cooper: Forgive me, I, too, agree with you that the Education people are superb, but the problem is they are operating in this constrained environment. All the things you cannot comment on, you cannot quantify, are the exact difficulties we keep hitting. It really is a problem.  
Jonathan Drori: When you say that you personally want more access—and you said it, I think, meaning physical access—if we include physical and virtual access and all the other ways that technology might be used to include more people, do you think that all your colleagues would agree with you?

Q218 Rosie Cooper: Some may and some may not, but that is not for me to say. Actually, I think the majority would. I love engaging with my constituents, I love being in my constituency. I see that as the better part of the job, but I actually also understand that being a Member of Parliament requires me to be here, to work very hard when I am here, to be here three or four days a week working maybe 8 or 9 until 10, 11 at night. And if, in that time, we can have the building—the Members of Parliament—as accessible as possible, then yes, I would be very happy by whatever degree you want to do it. There will be people in that bell curve, but most of us, I think, want to engage. That is why we are Members of Parliament: we like to engage with the public. I love it. Forgive me, but I just want you to go away with a slightly more measured view. There are people here who want this to happen but find it very difficult. I do find it really difficult to open my Sunday newspaper and find all sorts of madcap stories, which someone somewhere has decided and we are told that we have done it.

Q219 Sarah Newton: I think you are absolutely right. Our democracy is precious and it is more fragile than people think it is. The most important thing is to get people to understand it, value it and participate in it. A huge amount of what this Government has done, and is doing, is devolving decision making from here to local authorities, to the very important institutions like the NHS, like schools and opening up local participation in those organisations as well as giving them more power. There is more direct representation of the communities on trust boards, in academy schools, and this is going to be a continuing theme. Given that, if you want to get people who are not now engaged in the democracy, I think you are more likely to do it on things that are directly relevant to their daily lives—what is happening in their hospital, what is happening at the council. It would be a really good starting point to look at how you can actually get more engagement of people in their communities on decisions relating to them.  
Chair: Sarah, is there a question there?

Q220 Sarah Newton: Will you really think about the very changing sense of Government direction in your work?

Jonathan Drori: The brief answer to your question is yes. The slightly longer answer to your question is we already have, to some extent. There are lots of things that we would like to see happening more, which I think chimes with what you are asking, whether that is debates around the country or the Committee process being more obviously seen to happen in other places. It would be great to have the right kind of relationship with more media so that there are reports framed in the right way for what is going on both here and around the country that are relevant to their audiences. Newsround, which serves children, would be a great outlet for stories that are relevant to them. We would like to see young people as ambassadors and champions. We would like to see some of those young people around the country take an interest in the iconography of Parliament. The symbol on the chair here is hardly a welcoming one. I know it has a great history, but it is seen by the public as a gate to keep people out. If one was coming from a standpoint of greater accessibility one would be considering all these things. I completely agree with what I think was the thrust of your question: is it all about Westminster? No, it is not. It absolutely is not all about Westminster. Neither have we been thinking all about Westminster, nor will we continue to do so. It is just the way that our conversation has gone.

Q221 Rosie Cooper: I was astounded about how you described the portcullis and our history. Frankly, is your aim Disney on the Thames? I just do not understand where you think you are taking us.  
Jonathan Drori: It is not for me to say whether the portcullis is the perfect symbol for Parliament or not, but the public see it as a gate.  
Q222 Rosie Cooper: From where do you draw that absolutely astounding conclusion? In all my thousands of years on this earth I have never heard anything like that in my life.  
Jonathan Drori: I believe that was research that was shown to our Group.

Q223 Rosie Cooper: From whom?

Jonathan Drori: I will come back to the group with the source.  
Rosie Cooper: Chairman, this is really difficult in that we are having people give evidence who—forgive me, I am not being rude—but unless we have got some basis for some of these—

Q224 Chair: Order. I think the remarks you want to make are better made in private, not in public. We have invited the witness and we should take the witness at face value, and that is on the record. Could I just ask one final question? You did refer to Parliament Square. What do you envisage might be done there?

Jonathan Drori: It does not feel to us as a Group as a particularly welcoming space at the moment, ringed by traffic. One of the things that we would recommend thinking about is how the traffic works in
that space and then whether there is any structure, or perhaps interpretation, about Parliament that could be put in the centre there.

Q225 Chair: Have you taken any advice as to whether it would be feasible to make great changes there? You refer to Trafalgar Square. Are you envisaging some new traffic scheme or closure of Parliament Square to traffic?
Jonathan Drori: Everything is possible if people will it strongly enough. For years people said that Trafalgar Square was something that really could not be altered but it seems to work okay. There are always good reasons for not doing something, but if you feel strongly that that space in front of Parliament is valuable and should be used better by the public, there are always solutions.

Q226 Nigel Mills: One of the issues we have to balance in getting people in here is whether we have public coming in for tours and whether we have people coming in for events, maybe organised by charities or other lobby groups. Which one of those two do you think should have more priority: the chance for people to come in here and get a cause promoted and to see MPs trying to do good work, or actually letting people come in and see what happens in a freer way?
Jonathan Drori: I don’t know. There should be a balance between the two. I guess, The people who need to do work with Parliament need to have access here. They cannot be excluded if they need to see MPs on business. If I have understood you right, that is absolutely critical. Otherwise the parliamentarians cannot do their job.

Q227 Nigel Mills: Yes, the flipside is we can leave here and go to five receptions tonight for different charities where there will be wine and food on show and they will want a photograph of us with their campaign board or something. By letting that happen with their 30 guests, that means that 30 members of the public cannot come in and have a more informal visit and see what happens. Now, you can portray that as a lobbying event that excludes ordinary members of the public and lets in the great and the good, or you can view that as being an important part of our work because all manner of good causes get access.
Jonathan Drori: They are both public benefits aren’t they, but they are public benefits on different axes. It is a matter of taste and opinion where you draw the line.

Q228 Nigel Mills: As a Committee we have kicked around for a long time the idea of allowing a broadcaster to come in and follow some MPs around and see the whole gamut of parliamentary work. I think that causes different concerns about how you get balance and not just create media stars, and how you avoid ending up with a sensationalised programme. Are you saying that a programme like that, which showed the full aspects of an MP’s role, would be a valuable thing that perhaps does not exist now and that the public would be interested in?
Jonathan Drori: It would be absolutely valuable. Many people would learn an awful lot from that. I would certainly bear in mind the risks that you have mentioned, but again, it is about erring on the side of access. There are other kinds of access that you might consider on top of that. You might have a sort of open house and allow people to come in and report for a day, to blog, to take pictures, to report on what is going on. They will have all sorts of crazy political views of their own, but you might weed out some of the extremes at either end. Within the confines, without damaging or risking security, people would post material on the web and the deal might be that anything that they publish and put up would be Creative Commons so that anyone could go and use it and re-use it and so on. Again, it is a way of getting quite quick access. Some people would concentrate on the paintings, some people would concentrate on the people they see, but I think it would be another way of opening up Parliament.

Q229 Rosie Cooper: The Speaker’s Advisory Council on Public Engagement—are your meetings open? Can anyone go?
Jonathan Drori: As far as I know.

Q230 Rosie Cooper: Do you have members of the public at it?
Jonathan Drori: I would like to.

Q231 Rosie Cooper: No, do you? I am suggesting that perhaps you should walk the walk. If you have not done it already, my question is, why not?
Jonathan Drori: My reason is that I have been in post for days, as far as I know, and I have not had a chance to make those decisions. I think it is an excellent idea and I will take you up on it.

Q232 Rosie Cooper: Publicly advertised. Let us all go and have a view. That will be cool, won’t it?
Jonathan Drori: I think there was a question about how the public regards the iconography of Parliament and the feel of the buildings and so on. I think that the research on that is reasonably robust and that people feel quite put off by the iconography and design. On the other hand, there is a balance to be made between that and the heritage and respect that the organisation has, so I do not want to be seen to be advocating just chucking everything away, but you have to understand how many members of the public feel when they come into this building.

Q233 Chair: If you went away with a mind to reinforce the case for a visitor centre and justification for the expenditure, we would be well pleased. Thank you very much indeed for your time.
Jonathan Drori: Thank you.
Monday 23 January 2012

Members present:
Sir Alan Haselhurst (Chair)
Rosie Cooper
Thomas Docherty
Graham Evans
Mr Mark Francois
Mr Kevan Jones
Simon Kirby
Nigel Mills
Tessa Munt
Sarah Newton
Mr John Spellar
Mr Dave Watts
Mike Weatherley

Examination of Witness

Witness: Bernard Donoghue, Director, Association of Leading Visitor Attractions, gave evidence.

Q234 Chair: Good afternoon, Mr Donoghue. We are very grateful to you for coming to give evidence to this inquiry. You are the director of the Association of Leading Visitor Attractions. I am not quite sure whether the Palace of Westminster should be categorised in that way, although we are certainly looking at ways of ensuring that more visitors can come, because we feel that is part of the democratic process. Access to the Palace is very important, but we are not unmindful of the income generation aspects of it, and we know that the House of Commons Commission is looking at it. Is there any opening statement you would like to make to the Committee?

Bernard Donoghue: First, thank you very much for the invitation to assist your inquiry, which is important because it goes to the heart of what a visitor attraction could and should be.

Initially, I would like to make three brief points. The first is to explain what ALVA is: it is the Association of Leading Visitor Attractions. We have 42 members and each attracts about 1 million visits per year. They range from the Palace of Westminster to all of the national museums, galleries, cathedrals, castles, stately homes and also the National Trust, National Trust Scotland and English Heritage. Collectively, they attract about 100 million visits to visitor attractions in the UK. The 42 members of ALVA are the principal reason cited by overseas visitors for coming to the United Kingdom. They want to see our museums, heritage, tradition and galleries. In that context, the Palace of Westminster is a very welcome and important member, though I suggest it is unique in that it has other considerations. The first is that, as a working institution, visitors need to be managed and attracted so that the work of Parliament is unhindered, and that is something to which we pay a great deal of attention.

Second, like most museums, galleries and stately homes, being a commercial attraction is not its principal purpose for existing. Its principal purpose for existing is largely one of education, information or curatorial work. Similarly, here at the Palace the education work in explaining the role of Parliament and the importance of democracy is the principal one. Third, it provides money, and particularly at this point of economic constraint, the ability to derive more income in a sensible and sensitively and sustainably managed way is very attractive, not least because the income derived by Parliament from visitors could be ploughed back into the upkeep of the fabric of the institution but also education about what Parliament does both here in the United Kingdom and around the world. I am delighted to contribute to your inquiry in any way I can.

Q235 Chair: From your knowledge of this place, have you formed a view as to how we do, bearing in mind we are here to welcome people who come specifically to contribute to or observe the proceedings of this legislature; others who come here for what might be loosely termed recreational purposes; those who come here for educational purposes; and those who are ordinary visitors who want to admire the Palace? How do you think we cope? What impression do we give?

Bernard Donoghue: I have my own experience. I worked in the House for a number of years as a researcher, and latterly in tourism at VisitBritain, the National Tourist Board, and, for the last two years, in the Royal Household, which, akin to this, is also an institution that has a dignity to maintain but welcomes visitors because it also has a commercial imperative. In order to get exactly the kind of experience referred to in your question, I paid for and took a tour on Saturday—almost as a mystery guest experience—to find out what it was like to pay my £15 and be a visitor to the Palace. My observations are these. The content of the tours is incredibly good and rich. £15 for a guided tour of an hour and a half represents incredible value for money. If I am being brutally honest, you may well be undercharging for the experience, not least because when I left the Palace on Saturday I walked straight past Banqueting House. That is essentially is a one-room building, albeit a very impressive one, with no audio guides, and that charges £5. Therefore, you are only three times more expensive, but the quality of the experience is decidedly impressive.

The experience is let down, however, by the logistics. My first observation is that one buys a ticket on the website through Ticketmaster. That is a good and easy process akin and comparable to most other commercial operators. You pick up your ticket at the Jewel House across the road where, if it is raining, you stand in the open. There are no covered premises; you are at the mercy of the elements.
Second, there is a lack of formal welcome to the Palace. Going through security at Cromwell Green is relatively straightforward. This is a Saturday experience, quite different from the normal working day experience during the week. It is relatively quick and straightforward. It is not explained to you what you are going through, but enough people have travelled through airports to get the general impression. There is no word of welcome as one enters the Palace of Westminster. I deliberately looked out for it. The first sign you see on leaving security is about regulations relating to serious organised crime. Therefore, the first information you get is that these are all the things you are not allowed to do rather than a welcome.

Third, for me Westminster Hall is not only the architectural but the political pinnacle of the Palace of Westminster. Yet it is treated as a mediæval airport departure lounge with very good information, but the overall impression, if this is the mother of parliaments, is that it is slightly cluttered and messy. The fourth observation is that, when the guide meets you—the guide on Saturday, who did not know I was coming, was excellent and absolutely brilliant—there is no word of welcome but a list of a number of things you cannot do. Therefore, your first impression of Westminster is restrictive and prohibitive rather than welcoming and enabling.

The fifth point is a serious logistical oddity at the Palace. One is then taken through all the rooms at a hurried pace to begin the tour at the other end of the building. One is then brought back through the rooms through which you have already walked. I knew where I was going, but the people in my group worried that they would never see those rooms again because it was not explained to them that essentially they were doubling-back on themselves. Were it possible to start the tour from the Royal end, through to the Commons and then out through Westminster Hall, not only would that be an entirely logical and linear approach, but in terms of the narrative of what Parliament is about—Royal, Lords, Commons, Westminster, St Stephen’s Hall—it makes much more sense to the lay person, too.

The sixth point, which you will know about because you have been to visitor attractions, is that you exit through a gift shop for very good reasons. Here, you bypass the gift shop, which is in St Stephen’s, and end the tour in Westminster Hall. Most people, because they have been on their feet for an hour and a half, relatively few people, at least in my group, went back to the gift shop. The gift shop is good. It is my honest opinion that it could be a lot better. I am assuming that it has a limited range of products only because it has a limited floor space to occupy, but the lack of opportunity to sell additional tour guides and books, souvenirs, or indeed additional tours of, say, Big Ben, is completely lost.

My final point may seem slightly curt but I think it is important. You have attracted these visitors, many of whom are constituents, into the building. When they depart there is nothing that says, “Thank you. We have enjoyed having you here. Do you have any more questions? Please come back.” From all the research we have undertaken, visitors come back to those organisations who thank them for coming in the first place.

In summary, the content of the tours is fantastic and slightly underpriced, but the logistical arrangements that surround them are confusing and do not allow prime opportunities for maximising both visitor experience and income.

Chair: That is a very telling statement, which will resonate with the Committee. For the record, the tours for which people buy tickets take place only during a limited part of the year, and at the moment large numbers of people who come as guests of Members are escorted around free. Whether that changes is another matter, but that is the situation at the moment.
script on those audio guides very easily and quickly; you are not dependent on tour guides to do visitor and traffic management, which takes up quite a lot of time; and it also means that at both Buckingham Palace and St Paul’s Cathedral you can have two different pricing structures. You can buy a normal audio-guided tour, which might be £15, but you can have a premium tour as well with a tour guide. Believe me, people do like to pay more for the premium experience of having a tour guide to take them round. Therefore, there are a couple of things in terms of both logistics but also what they mean in maximising marketing opportunities.

Q238 Simon Kirby: Picking up on the gift shop, do you have any statistics about spend per head, because it seems to me that often, looking at businesses elsewhere, most of the profit comes from that last port of call?
Bernard Donoghue: Yes.

Q239 Simon Kirby: Can you quantify it?
Bernard Donoghue: I cannot today, but I do have the figures and can provide them to the Committee. ALVA provides a benchmarking service for all of its members. Therefore, everyone, from Chester Zoo through to Blackpool Pleasure Beach and the National Trust, contribute their retail and catering figures. We have learnt in the last couple of years that spend in gift shops has gone down in the last four years, largely because of the economic climate. Spend in catering establishments has gone up, because people still want a cup of tea and need to eat. That is not universally the case. Where you have very good products in a gift shop, retail spend has gone up dramatically, but it depends on having good products and making sure the gift shop is well managed and stocked.

The last factor is the pester power of children. If you provide a gift shop and retail experience that gets the product right for children, you know from your own experience that you end up buying slightly more in a gift shop than you thought you would because the kids want it. We always say at St Paul’s, slightly heretically, “Give me a child at seven, and I will show you a visitor and purchaser for life.” Therefore, attracting young people is enormously important, not least because this is their first experience of politics and Parliament. On my tour on Saturday there was just one child of about seven or eight called Ben. He was told very candidly by the tour guide that it was completely possible that one day he would end up here as an MP or Member of the House of Lords. How extraordinarily inspiring it is for a young person to have that experience.

Q240 Simon Kirby: You referred to a “thank you” at the end of the tour. Should we be giving out a party bag at the end?
Bernard Donoghue: I doubt it very much. All people really want to know is that their time, effort and money have been appreciated, and a very simple, “Thank you very much for coming. Please come back again,” is sufficient.

Q241 Mr Watts: First, what would be your guess about how much more effort could be put into the sale of souvenirs? Second, what do you think about online sales? Is that something of which you have any experience, and how much does that generate compared with shops?
Bernard Donoghue: First, we know from ALVA members such as the British Museum, the Natural History Museum and the Science Museum, all of which are free to enter, that they put a huge amount of effort into getting their retail product correct. The profits they are now generating from their retail shops are absolutely enormous, particularly when it is allied to a blockbuster exhibition like Leonardo or whatever. Getting the right retail experience can be hugely important. The savvier members of ALVA, the large museums and heritage sites, are learning lessons from John Lewis and IKea about packaging, marketing and retail as they do from some of their contemporaries within the tourism and attractions sector.

Second, online is absolutely the way to go, particularly if one can buy tickets to the visitor attraction in that way, because it is cost effective; it reduces queues at site; and you can manage and predict your visitor traffic in advance. In addition, if you use the website that manages those tickets to sell online products—frankly, at Westminster that could be anything from House of Commons cufflinks through to Speaker’s whisky but also potentially Oyster cards—there is the enormous possibility of providing a one-stop retail shop that is not tacky but is sensibly managed and still projects the dignity of the institution.

Q242 Mike Weatherley: I can show you our gift shop, which is open to Members and has all those things in it; just it is not on the tourist route. When you bought your ticket, was it a souvenir-type ticket, or did it just refer to today’s entry? Following Simon’s point about having something to take away with you, was it a memento? There are lots of museums, institutions and so forth around the City. The British Museum has 5 million visitors, for example. Is there a benefit in our partnering in some way, for example if you have been to the British Museum you can have 10% off the House of Commons, or some reciprocal advertising or link?
Bernard Donoghue: That is a very good point. As for the ticket, I can remember it having a logo on it, which I think was purple. Beyond that, it was prosaic and factual and I did not keep it, and also part of the stub was taken off. I suppose you could make more of that. As to cross-marketing, one of the things that surprised me on Saturday was the continual reference by the tour guide to other museums and galleries not only in London but across the UK. Rather brilliantly, they were all ALVA members, so I applauded it. For example, when we were in the royal gallery, which contains the fresco showing the death of Nelson, the guide went out of her way to say where the fatal bullet is housed, which is Windsor Castle, and where Nelson’s uniform is, which is the National Maritime Museum. She was referencing all of these points, which prompted you to visit those places too. Therefore, the text is already within the script, if you
like. What I do not think happens, though there is no reason why it could not, is more cross-selling between institutions of a similar quality and dignity. I think that could work very well.

Q243 Nigel Mills: When I did the tour with family guests, I was not convinced that the tour was very tailored to different ages and interests. If you are doing it with a collection of school-age teenagers, they are quite like the House of Commons and seeing where the king had his head chopped off, or at least the trial. They, and certainly younger children, were not quite so concerned about some of the art. Do you think there is more scope for tours to be tailored and perhaps booked at different times that are suitable for younger children and teenagers, or for art specialist tours? At the moment, it is just a standard offering that does not suit everybody perfectly.

Bernard Donoghue: That is a very good point. One thing that quite impressed me on Saturday was that those thinking they were going to see Parliament in aspic and a museum of politics did not get that. They got a clear enunciation of what Parliament means and stands for, and so it is more than the building and the contents. I was impressed by that. You are right that there was an age range of between probably seven and 80 in the 20 people in my tour group. It was by definition blanket coverage for everybody. What an audio guide would enable you to do is make specific those bits of information. If the Committee is interested, I can recommend one in particular: the Roman baths at Bath. That has an audio guide, which you would ordinarily employ here, and is partly chronological and partly history, certainly in terms of what Parliament is about, but you can also add in former or current Members, or Members of the Lords, giving their anecdotes of what it was or is like to be in the Commons. You cannot get that on the current tour, but with an audio guide you can build in all those things.

If someone wanted purely an arts or paintings in Parliament tour, or whatever it is, they could opt for that, so an audio guide would allow you to be much more creative and tailored in the products you are providing to the visitor, and therefore enrich their experience.

Q244 Rosie Cooper: What difference do you believe charging or not charging makes to the attractiveness of this particular building, not just in general?

Bernard Donoghue: It is a very good point. When the Labour Government introduced free admission to national museums and galleries 10 years ago last month, I was working for VisitBritain and the National Tourist Board. We had a duty to advise DCMS on the likely impact. We said that the vast majority of visitors, particularly overseas ones, to national museums and galleries would happily pay because they paid for the same experience in their own countries. Therefore, levying a charge of £15 to £20 is not in any way a deterrent to accessing a visitor attraction such as a museum, gallery or somewhere like here. The only note of caution is that the kind of people who want to go on a guided tour are very happy to pay and look for value for money. Visitors are pretty savvy shoppers, so they understand what they are getting and what they are paying for. I do not think it would make economic sense to have this as a free attraction, because the case is proven that people are happy to pay, and I am pretty confident they would be happy to pay more if the product was suitably arranged for them.

Q245 Rosie Cooper: Do you think it is schizophrenic on the one hand to talk about openness, transparency and getting the taxpayers of this country into this building, and then say to families or schools that want to come in, “We are now going to charge you”? Is there not a contradiction there?

Bernard Donoghue: On the surface there is, but it is the same dilemma faced by national museums, galleries and in particular cathedrals, in that you can certainly experience them for the purpose for which they were built entirely free, but there is a supplementary, different experience for which people are ready to pay. I think they understand the dilemma you are identifying.

Q246 Rosie Cooper: Do you see it as a particular dilemma in that we are not talking about a building in aspic but the theory is about trying to engage with and bring people into the parliamentary process and what their appetite to be more involved, and then you say, “If you haven’t got money or can’t afford it, don’t stop here”?

Bernard Donoghue: Paying for a ticket and going on a tour is not the only way one can access Parliament. I think the two are entirely different but complementary ways of accessing Parliament. The very fact of having a good, rich and sensibly managed visitor experience that is paid for does not undermine at all the nature of free access by all constituents to their MPs.

Q247 Rosie Cooper: I am not suggesting that. Free access to the mother of Parliaments—to see this building, go round it and be involved in the history. All those things people are currently telling us. I am concerned because I want openness; I want as many people to come into this building as possible, but I am concerned about cost and silly ideas about the portcullis being offensive to people out there—all that kind of thing—which build up another layer of impenetrable fog through which people have to pass.

Bernard Donoghue: My experience of visitor attractions in ALVA is that, if you make yourself as attractive as possible at commercially sensible prices and provide an opportunity and experience that is rich and welcoming, people entirely pay for that, and that is not necessarily at odds with free access. For example, there is a very good case up the road at the National Gallery. That is free to everybody, but if you want to go to the Leonardo exhibition—by the way, good luck because it is completely sold out—you can pay additionally for that, so it is supplement and complement, not instead of.

Q248 Rosie Cooper: In your view, would you charge everybody to come here, even during the working week? Do you think that is how we should operate?
Bernard Donoghue: No, because I think Parliament is a very different institution, in that it is founded on openness, transparency and access. At the same time, it realises that it has elements that are a tourist attraction and therefore it can capitalise on that too.

Q249 Rosie Cooper: I phrased that really badly. You would want to charge everybody who went on a tour, even during the working week?
Bernard Donoghue: Not necessarily. That is a business decision entirely for the Committee and the House. I think the two work very neatly together, so if you want to access Parliament and see it on a tour arranged by your Member of Parliament, that is entirely free.

Q250 Rosie Cooper: I mean a proper tour during the week of the kind you paid for at the weekend. I often sign requests from people who come in free, so it would be the same tour but free during the week and you would pay at the weekend. Do you say we should charge all week?
Bernard Donoghue: I would not, because I think the kinds of tours that you get are qualitatively different. The nature of the institution is such that you can have paid-for tours that sit happily alongside free ones, and a free tour is your right as a constituent.

Q251 Rosie Cooper: I was not aware that I was sending my constituents on a second-class tour.
Bernard Donoghue: No; I did not mean that.

Q252 Rosie Cooper: What would be the difference between a tour during the week and one at the weekend?
Bernard Donoghue: I have not experienced the one during the week. I am merely identifying the fact that Parliament is already deriving income as a good, thoroughly paid-for attraction, to call it that for the moment. They tend to differentiate the two. That makes a great deal of sense, a significant contribution to the running of this House.

Q253 Graham Evans: My colleague here mentioned different age groups—children, young people, middle-age adults and senior citizens—and different areas of the Palace appealing to certain groups. Certainly, for young people it is an opportunity, I do not know whether you are familiar with Horrible Histories.
Bernard Donoghue: Yes.

Q254 Graham Evans: That sort of tour may appeal to them. I am not thinking necessarily of school children and school tours, because that is very much educational, but there is perhaps an opportunity for birthday parties and that sort of thing. One quick win would be not to charge the great British taxpayer to come to this place but charge foreigners a reasonable sum, and the clue could be in the prices. It could be in euros, dollars or whatever, so British citizens would not have to pay a bean, but lots of tourists could make a significant contribution to the running of this House.

Bernard Donoghue: They could indeed. The idea of hypothecated price ticketing is not one that ALVA members currently undertake. It is either an attractive proposition as a visitor attraction or it is not, and it is either free or not. The idea of differentiating that is not normal, but entirely possible. It would be quite difficult to do logistically, not least because most people buy their tickets online. Therefore, trying to identify where these people come from, what passports they possess and their nationality would be hugely complicated. Ultimately, visitor numbers tell me that people are very happy to pay for a good quality tour of Parliament. My own commercial sense is that they would also be happy to pay more for that if the presentation of the tour was slightly differentiated and tailored specifically to children, young people, those interested in arts or whatever.

Q255 Chair: What is your impression of our security processes? Probably all the organisations within your association have the problem of security to overcome.
Bernard Donoghue: Yes.

Q256 Chair: How do we do it? Do we do it efficiently? Do we put off visitors by the process?
Bernard Donoghue: Everyone from the security side that I encountered on Saturday was entirely helpful and polite, and some were real characters. I do not mean that in a dismissive, pejorative way. They really engaged with the people who came in. Like anybody who does a job in a repetitive fashion, particularly security screening, there is no explanation given for what is being done, what you are going through and why you need to wear a badge. It is just assumed that you would know that kind of thing, and therefore there is almost no conversation between the visitor and the security personnel at the initial point. My own experience is a good one, but it provides another opportunity for everybody who interacts with members of the public to think that they are the first face of Parliament that the person is experiencing. The first face of Parliament that the visitor experiences could be a police officer, a tour guide, or someone standing outside in the road directing people in, but that initial experience of Parliament is an important one to get right because of all the welcome connotations that come from that.

Q257 Chair: Do you have experience of buildings and places that have a problem similar to ours, in that people are coming in for what might generally be called business reasons, while others are coming in for entertainment and the interest of a tour? Do you know how that is best coped with?
Bernard Donoghue: Yes. The best and most meaningful examples are parliaments: the Scottish Parliament; certainly Capitol Hill in Washington DC; similarly, the Canadian Parliament; the Israeli Parliament, which I have just identified; and Dáil Éireann in Dublin. All manage their security, welcome, logistics and screening in a different way for conventional visitors to the parliament, as opposed to those who come as paying visitors to a tourist attraction, to call it that for the moment. They tend to differentiate the two. That makes a great deal of sense,
because a person coming for a business meeting to, say, a Select Committee could end up being in the queue for 45 minutes alongside a whole host of people, which may include paying visitors who could be more successfully managed, processed, oriented and given a welcome and screened at an entirely separate building or venue. Their needs as visitors could be met in quite a different way as opposed to the generalised, holistic process through which one goes, I think you could differentiate it. Many organisations have done exactly that. In some cases, while maintaining the dignity of the institution and being careful with the fabric of the property, management of those who come for business and those who come as tourists is done most successfully by establishing a separate charitable trust as a managing entity to handle all of those things, almost as an outsourced management exercise. That is what Buckingham Palace does through the royal collection; it is also what Historic Royal Palaces does for unoccupied palaces.

Q258 Chair: Knowing the Palace as you do, would you suggest that an education centre has any more importance as an additional facility than a visitor centre, or is the distinction a hard one to make?

Bernard Donoghue: I think the distinction is a hard one to make, not least because everybody coming for an educational experience of Parliament is by definition a visitor. Every paying visitor—the classic tourist, if you like—who comes here will ultimately get an educational experience. While the philosophies of the two objectives may be somewhat different, the experience for the individual is incredibly similar.

Q259 Chair: Do you believe the portcullis is a barrier between the public and Parliament?

Bernard Donoghue: As a logo?

Q260 Chair: Yes.

Bernard Donoghue: No.

Chair: Are there any other questions?

Rosie Cooper: Do you want a job?

Simon Kirby: Very funny.

Chair: Thank you very much for your evidence, which has been both interesting and highly relevant.
Monday 30 January 2012

Members present:

Sir Alan Haselhurst (Chair)
Rosie Cooper  Tessa Munt
Thomas Docherty  Mr John Spellar
Graham Evans  Mark Tami
Mr Mark Francois  Mr Dave Watts
Simon Kirby  Mike Weatherley
Nigel Mills

Examination of Witness

Witness: Dr Ruth Fox, Director of the Parliament and Government Programme, Hansard Society, gave evidence.

Q261 Chair: Dr Fox, thank you very much indeed for coming to see us. Can I apologise for the delay in beginning this public session on our access inquiry? We appreciate what you have prepared and we would like to invite you to make any opening remarks. That would be most helpful.

Dr Fox: I thought it might be useful very briefly to say a few words about the Hansard Society. I know you are very familiar with our organisation, having chaired our AGM on a number of occasions, but other Members may be less familiar. The Hansard Society is the UK’s leading independent, non-partisan political research and education charity. We are part think-tank, part education service provider. We were founded in 1944, and strengthening parliamentary democracy and encouraging greater public engagement in politics has been at the heart of our mission since then, in the belief that democracy and civic society are stronger if citizens are better connected with the institutions and the individuals that represent them in the democratic process. We have long been regarded as Parliament’s critical friend, and one of the areas where we have had most impact in terms of our recommendations over the years has been on the public engagement agenda. Many of the initiatives now in place in the House over the last few years have had some of their origins in the recommendations made by the Society. Reflecting on the past, we find that all too often visitor-related initiatives have been introduced on an incremental and often piecemeal basis. What has been lacking is an overarching vision that properly recognises and takes account of many of the different and often conflicting requirements on this place. Our latest report, which I know was provided to you in your packs, sets out how we believe Parliament, both independently and in partnership with other stakeholders, might unlock the potential of the parliamentary estate and deliver some of that vision.

I have looked at the previous evidence sessions and I think that we can be of most help to your inquiry in five key areas where we can add value to the work you have already looked at: first, in relation to visitor access and the line of route; secondly, the education centre, because it is clear that a facility for 100,000 pupils on the parliamentary estate is not possible at the moment, and a new approach is needed; thirdly, the World Heritage Site in Parliament Square; fourthly, the issue of stakeholder collaboration—there are other buildings in the Westminster area that are facing many of the same challenges in terms of visitor management that you are. Westminster Abbey and the Supreme Court face similar problems. We have identified a local example where we think a visitor centre could be provided. Finally, there is the issue of revenue generation and how that might be used to best effect, in light of the budget cuts but also in light of the need to invest in the heritage and conservation of the building and public engagement, alongside the essential elements of Parliament in terms of its legislative work. Those are the five core areas where we can be most helpful to you.

Q262 Chair: What do you think should be the top priority? You identified five areas of particular interest. Which of those do you think is the most important?

Dr Fox: In part, some of them flow into each other. You cannot solve one without the other. For example, I would say that sorting out the education centre would be a priority, but I do not see how that is going to be sorted out under our plan unless you address the line of route. Some of those issues cannot be sorted out unless you resolve the access at the security entrances. I would see the education centre as a priority in the short to medium term, not least because the House has made it a priority: there is an extant resolution of the House that says that there should be a facility for 100,000 pupils.

Again, I do not think you can necessarily see them as separate. You can sort out access and security issues at the entrances and simply focus on that, and that would be a small step but an important change, in terms of the welcome that visitors receive, rather than having to be stood out in the rain on a Wednesday evening for 45 minutes, waiting to get in because of the queue. That would be important to solve. But the next step then is, if you can sort out the line of route, you can also sort out the education centre location as well, potentially. I would make the education centre my priority, but you need the other incremental steps in place first to enable that to happen.

Q263 Chair: Do you think we have a public engagement problem?

Dr Fox: In terms of public perception of this place?
Q264 Chair: In terms of how the public perceives us?
Dr Fox: What does “us” mean? Parliament as an institution is sometimes seen a little differently from MPs. If you ask what people think of Parliament, many of them will see Parliament through the prism of you as individual Members. We find that every year in our annual audit of political engagement and the research we conduct every year for that. But then, if I may just reference my notes, two years ago we asked the question, “To what extent do you agree or disagree that the Westminster Parliament is welcoming to the public?” Only 27% either strongly agreed or tended to agree with that. There is an issue in the sense of how this place is perceived in terms of its openness and accessibility, but that is a slightly different question from how Parliament in terms of MPs and their work is seen, and how the public perceive Parliament through that prism. Therefore, there are different lenses, if you like, in the way in which people perceive this place, but I do think there is a problem to varying degrees.

Q265 Chair: Do you think those numbers would improve by stretching a welcome banner over the building, or by removing the portcullis, which some saw as a barrier?
Dr Fox: I did see those reports. I do not think there is anything lost by putting up signs that are welcoming, but I do not think you are going to deliver necessarily the problem. If you are outside Portcullis and policemen with guns and so on. That is not necessarily the problem. If you are outside Portcullis House or College Green entrance and you have to wait for 45 minutes in the rain because you cannot get in, and then when you get inside the building you discover that there is only one open security point, and that is the reason why you have been stood out there, that is the problem. People are not daft; they appreciate and understand that this is one of the great target buildings for security, not just in this country but the world. For example, when people come on tours or turn up for democratic participation in the House—whether that is coming to Committees or going in the galleries, whatever it may be—information could be provided to them in terms of information on the website and whatever information is sent to them, that this is what they should expect the experience to be and some explanation of why that is.

In many parts of London we live with heightened security; that has become an accepted part of visiting buildings like this. If you go to the National Gallery, some of our major museums or even St Paul’s Cathedral you have to go through a security check. People are accustomed to that. It is about the information you provide and how it is done. Maybe there is a gap there in terms of the information that the House provides, in terms of that experience expectation that they arrive with, that you could address, but I do not think lowering security is the issue.

Graham Evans: I am just thinking about the welcoming. There is not a single welcome sign, but the moment you walk in there is an armed policeman. It is the contradiction; you cannot fluff things up. In terms of queuing, this Committee has discussed the security arrangements in this place, because we agree those things are perhaps avoidable by investment in more security equipment to allow people to go through.

Q266 Graham Evans: I have a couple of quick points to make in terms of welcoming. We have a mismatch here: if I turn up at this place without a pass I do not get made very welcome by the officers to allow me into this place. The other thing is you have armed policemen strategically placed around with semi-automatic rifles. With the best will in the world, as soon as you walk into this place it is a secure area. A couple of weeks ago there was an interesting programme on the death of Airey Neave, which was in the Members’ car park; he was blown to bits where you walk through those gates, within yards of where the public are walking. As MPs we want our constituents to come down here, and we advertise visits, but you have to bear in mind that people have been killed in this place. We have to have a certain amount of security there, rightly so. How do you expect to be able to change that, bearing in mind we need to be aware of outside threats?
Dr Fox: It is not an issue for the public who arrive here in terms of the fact that you have security people and policemen with guns and so on. That is not necessarily the problem. If you are outside Portcullis
movement and footfall that is not coming into this place.

The reality is that neither this place nor Westminster Abbey nor the Supreme Court, at the moment, could really meet the demand that is there. That does not, it seems to me, mean that nothing can be done in terms of engaging with those visitors that do not come into the building. Think about the experience of visiting Parliament Square as a visitor, rather than a Member. What is the experience like, if you want to take photographs of the place, step back and look at the buildings, if you want know what the buildings are, what they do, what the relationship between them is, or if you want to know something of the history of the area? It has some of the most fascinating history, not just the democratic history but the broader national history of anywhere in this country. Yet nowhere here can you find any information about it outside of this building. There are all sorts of opportunities being lost in terms of interpretation, education and information provision that could be delivered in partnership with the other stakeholders but is not. It would give you opportunities to broaden the public engagement activity without imping on the primary work of the House. If more could be done outside you would feel less pressure in terms of people wanting to come inside.

Simon Kirby: Can I just say that is a very interesting point and you are absolutely right. A lot of the attraction of the Houses of Parliament is from the outside, and we seem hell-bent on rushing into the inside. Clearly the area Parliament occupies has a fascinating history and is of great interest in itself. I am very pleased to hear you articulate that fact.

Q268 Chair: Turning to your recommendation on income generation and the Parliamentary Bookshop becoming a visitor centre, surely the alternative would be the case that we have now, which is a Parliamentary Shop, as opposed to a bookshop. The types of items we are now starting to put in there are more likely to attract the kind of clientele that is in Parliament Square. It has been a theme of this Committee that there is a huge potential to be tapped there.

Dr Fox: Absolutely. To my mind, it is a valuable piece of engagement activity and parliamentary retail estate that is underutilised. I say this is as somebody for whom the only form of shop I like is a bookshop, so I would personally miss it, but it is grossly underutilised.

A couple of points: we have not proposed that it should be a visitor centre but more an information centre and retail facility. For example, if you think of it in the context of the suggestions we had about how you might develop guided walks around the area—right down from Trafalgar Square, through Parliament Square to Tate Britain, for example—or if you want to provide information about the sculpture and history of the area, something as basic as a map setting it all out with guided walks would help manage the footfall around the area advantageously. If you wanted that, that would be a location where some of that might be provided. It is not big enough to be a visitor centre, and it is not well located, in the sense that it is behind the colonnade at the moment. We would not recommend it for that, but as an information centre and for the souvenirs, it is absolutely vital. One of the problems with it now is that it does not operate in accordance with visitor times; my understanding is that it is closed on a Saturday. You have to align the retail—souvenirs, catering and so on—with visitor throughput; it is a huge lost opportunity if it is not, which I do not understand.

Tessa Munt: I also picked up your comments about extending out to the edge of the curtilage. If you like, so you use the colonnade bit inside the shop. That was fantastically useful, as it just gives you a shop front, because it is extraordinary.

Q269 Chair: Turning to a line of route, what is the optimum to be sought after?

Dr Fox: I do not much care whether it goes from the Lords to the Commons or the Commons to the Lords, but it should go one way. My preference of the two, given that you have Cromwell Green set up as the secure entrance, is that, in terms of a long-term vision, the ideal would be people would come into Cromwell Green, into Westminster Hall. You start there on your tour, with the foundations of the building, this magnificent hall. You move through from Commons to Lords to the Royal Rooms, and you could build your tour around the procedural process: Commons to Lords to Royal Assent, if that is the preferred route you take. There are ways, both historically and in terms of legislative procedure, that that is rational. But the reality is, to make that happen, people have to exit at the Lords end. A solution has to be found to get people out of the building at that end. To my mind, the best route, as we set out in our report, is that you would exit through the Lords, into Victoria Tower Gardens and into a facility there that provides the catering and retail and so on, and you have some kind of facility there. It can be done, because we have seen it done at other royal parks, such as the facility in St James’s Park. It can be done sensitively and in keeping with the area. You exit there, and all your end-of-route visitor facilities are provided.

The advantage of that is it frees up what you do with the Jubilee Café, that is at the beginning of the current tour when you enter the building. Would that be needed? This is where resolving the line of route helps you resolve the education centre problem, at least in the short to medium term, in that there is nowhere on the parliamentary estate at the moment where anyone has been able to find a satisfactory single location that can accommodate 100,000 pupils per year. We have to face the fact that that just does not exist on the site at the moment. You need a short-to-medium-term interim measure to improve provision and try to reduce the movement of pupils in other parts of the House.

The Education Service needs some kind of permanent facility. They deliver excellent services, but it would be so much better if they had a permanent facility. The combination there in Westminster Hall of the Jubilee Café, redesigned and refurbished, combined with the IPU room, the CPA room and the W meeting rooms—there are some negatives attached with all of that in terms of meeting space, I recognise, but they are relatively small in number and limited in impact.
You could take out that area and redesign it as your short-to-medium-term education centre, with a view to improving the facilities that the Education Service has at the moment, and look longer-term to provision, which we would link to a proper, full-scale visitor centre in collaboration with other partners.

Chair: In the context of that answer, I had better place on the record the fact that I am the chairman of the UK branch of the CPA, and I might have views about that.

Q270 Tessa Munt: Part of the evidence we had last week was about the logic of moving visitors from the Lords to the Commons end to look at the precedents of the Commons now and that historical shift of power. I wondered about your thoughts about whether education should take place at the beginning or the end of the tour, and therefore, if one was to bring people in through the Lords end, whether in fact you might have something as your education centre in Victoria Tower Gardens. I am agnostic on this, but it would be interesting to know what your thoughts were about keeping the café—or maybe moving that into Westminster Hall so people can see it—for their end-of-tour experience and starting off with education there, or maybe bringing young people and those involved in education visits in through the Lords and then finishing with something educational at the end. Do we start or finish with education?

Dr Fox: In all honesty, I am probably not the best person to ask about that. I do not deal with the education groups and the small groups. I am not terribly well qualified to comment on that. I am fairly agnostic, like you, about whether it begins or ends in the Commons or the Lords—you can make good arguments for both directions—but just treating it as line of route misses an opportunity to resolve the education centre problem. I do wonder whether you could do much with the Jubilee Café in terms of moving it into Westminster Hall. There are all sorts of issues that would arise; I can see English Heritage, for example, not being terribly supportive. There are all sorts of heritage and conservation issues that would perhaps come into play with that.

You would need to think about how big the facility is at the beginning and in terms of Victoria Tower Gardens, and whether that could be accommodated. I suppose the advantage that I can see to our approach is that if you had a more general visitor facility in Victoria Tower Gardens at the end, because it is joined to the parliamentary estate, but not on it and part of it you could use it at other times, such as during the evenings. We reference in the report—we did not come up with the phrase; Foster + Partners originally came up with the concept—this “People’s Terrace” idea, and that you would use a facility more than just during the official tour hours, many of which finish at five o’clock. There are times in the evenings when you could use it for other things. You would be more limited in scope in terms of what you could use an education facility for at other times than you would in a more general visitor facility. It depends on what you want to prioritise, what it costs and what the capacity is.

Q271 Chair: Should we have any truck with English Heritage?

Dr Fox: You do not have much choice. They have an important role in relation to this place, and in relation to the World Heritage Site. We did talk to the people at English Heritage who deal with the World Heritage Site status issues. I found them much more open to ideas and partnership than I would have expected, given what I had heard about them and what I had been told about them by other partners in the World Heritage Site Steering Group. I was very surprised at how open to ideas they were. They have strong views about certain locations and what is acceptable at certain locations, but they recognise the problems that this House and Parliament face in relation to management of numbers. For their part, they would respond and say that they are intensely frustrated, as part of the Westminster World Heritage Site Steering Group, with the lack of progress that is made with anything. Some partners undoubtedly blame English Heritage for that. They undoubtedly have their own view on the reasons why there is very little progress.

To give you one example. Mr Chairman: this is the Westminster World Heritage Site Steering Group Management Plan, which is supposed to manage the area. It was first written in 2007; it has about 28 recommendations in it. Almost none of them have been implemented. The Steering Group is just hopeless: utterly dysfunctional. Parliament is one of the partners in that, but not the only one: the Parliamentary Estates Directorate represents this place on that group. English Heritage would say that part of the problem in terms of taking an agenda forward for the area is the lack of leadership and the lack of functionality within that group. What I would say to this Committee is you have an opportunity in terms of setting a lead and a tone that that group is up for review. This management plan is to be reviewed in 2012/13. You are only one player in this, but you are a very important player. In terms of the tone and the sense of direction and vision you set out and would like to see, and the kinds of changes that could be made to that steering group and to the management plan, you could make quite a bit of difference in terms of breaking through the deadlock on some of these issues.

Q272 Graham Evans: How many recommendations did you say?

Dr Fox: It is about 28 in total.

Q273 Graham Evans: Could you just give us an example of what one is and why it has not happened?

Dr Fox: If I can get to the exact recommendations in here, one of them—just in a very general sense—is that there should be interpretation in and around the Heritage Site area. Bear in mind, the Westminster World Heritage Site is Parliament; the Abbey; it encompasses the Jewel Tower and the Dean’s Yard area of Westminster School. It does not include Parliament Square, to be clear on that. One of the issues was about interpretation. Nothing has happened on that.

The group only meets once a year; it is chaired by Westminster City Council. The biggest issue in terms
of the functionality is the disputes between the political players—and it is not a partisan point; it is an issue about views on who ought to be running that part of London, and there are differing views within parties as well as between parties on that. The protest issue has become the focus of so much activity that a lot of other things have fallen by the wayside. Part of it is also who is in charge, who coordinates, who makes things happen. There is no clear organisational structure to it: it is just a collection of people who meet once a year, discuss and move on. We have recommended that there are other ways in which World Heritage Sites are managed better that could be looked at.

Q274 Chair: Would the Hansard Society robustly defend us if we recommended and the authorities approved the idea of spending quite a great deal of money on a proper visitor centre and education centre to the southern end of the building?

Dr Fox: Yes. My research team are on record as recommending it in the report. I did an interview with one of your colleagues, Phillip Lee last week on the PM programme, and I talked about the need for a visitor centre. The more you can work in collaboration with stakeholders as well helps you offset the risk in terms of media criticism and so on. There are others who would also support you in it, and the people with whom we engaged in discussions, who are identified at the back of our report—Historic Royal Palaces, Tate Britain—could all see an advantageous approach to more interpretation, more information and more visitor provision externally to the site that would link in to their facilities. Historic Royal Palaces have an interest in the Banqueting House and the Jewel Tower; Tate Britain would like to see more visitors who get to Parliament Square and never get south; they would like to see more footfall going down through Millbank. There will be others who will be prepared to speak up as well.

Chair: Thank you very much indeed. It has been very helpful evidence and we appreciate your time.