



House of Commons

Select Committee on  
Modernisation of the House of  
Commons

---

**Connecting Parliament  
with the Public:**

**Paper from the House  
of Commons Board of  
Management**

---

Written evidence



## Progress on Modernisation Committee recommendations November 2005

The purpose of this note is to provide an up-to-date summary of action taken following the recommendations of the Modernisation Committee in its Report on *Connecting Parliament with the Public* (HC 368, Session 2003–04 (June 2004)), the response of the House of Commons Commission (HC 69, Session 2004–05 (December 2004)) and the Resolution of the House of 26 January 2005.<sup>1</sup>

### Work with schools (recommendations 5, 7 & 8)

- 5 *We recommend that the Education Unit be given precedence in the Macmillan Room when the House is sitting in September (paragraph 22).*
- 7 *Outreach work is the core of the Education Unit's work, and rightly so. The vast majority of young people will not have the opportunity to participate in a school visit to Parliament, and Parliament's educational activities must therefore be tailored to those who wish to learn about Parliament in the classroom. To supplement existing resources such as the website, outreach facilities such as a Parliamentary roadshow could have the potential to reach many more young people than currently are able to visit Parliament. We recommend that before any further consideration is given to establishing an educational roadshow, the House should examine the scope for a Parliamentary partnering scheme with, for example, local authorities. Parliament's contribution to the teaching of political literacy could be delivered to people in their own communities (in schools, libraries and council premises) by way of joint enterprise (paragraph 27).*
- 8 *The Education Unit already does a great deal of work building links with individual teachers, schools and colleges. We recommend that it should do more to publicise its work to Members and to build links with education authorities.*

The Education Unit has had priority booking for the Macmillan Room throughout the year since Portcullis House opened.

Two additional posts have been created within the Education Unit to focus on outreach to young people and liaison with local education authorities. Both were filled in September and the post-holders are currently familiarising themselves with the work of the Unit and establishing links with other organisations working in the field of citizenship before going out to local education authorities and schools in the New Year.

In addition, research is currently underway with schools (surveying both those who have previously participated in the Unit's programmes and those who have not) to provide feedback on possible improvements and on issues that prevent them taking up places on the present visits programme.

A proposal to extend the Education Unit's Autumn Visits Programme to run all year, in effect to provide a form of "Parliament-in-action" tour for young people, was agreed earlier in the year. Two additional Visits Officer posts have been recruited and will start in February, with three new Visitor Assistants already in post in the Central Tours Office (see 6 below) to support the work of the Education Unit, while work has been carried out to

---

<sup>1</sup> That this House notes with approval the First Report of the Select Committee on Modernisation of the House of Commons of Session 2003-04 on *Connecting Parliament with the Public* (HC 368) and the First Special Report from the Committee containing the House of Commons Commission's response thereto (HC 69); agrees that the House should make itself more accessible, make it easier for people to understand the work of Parliament and do more to communicate its activity to the general public; welcomes the steps taken or planned as set out in the Commission's response, including those planned to bring about the radical upgrade of the website envisaged by the Modernisation Committee; endorses the Committee's conclusion that further consideration should be given to facilities such as a Parliamentary roadshow in the light of evaluation of other outreach initiatives; authorises the House of Commons Commission to fund the publication and distribution of a new voters' guide; and would welcome more proactive promotion to the media and the public of the House and its work.

improve the facilities in Room A in 1 Parliament Street. The existing visits programme will steadily be extended from January and should hit full capacity after Easter 2006.

A mailing will go out to all schools at the end of the year promoting the educational programme for 2006. For schools containing a sixth form, the mailing will also publicise the new films on the work of committees and on the general election, DVDs of which will be provided free on request.

The Library is currently conducting a series of visits to new Members to discuss the services it can provide, including those of the Education Unit.

### **New voters' guide (recommendation 10)**

*10 We recommend that the House devise a new voter's guide to be sent to all young people around the time of their eighteenth birthday (paragraph 32).*

Funding for this was authorised by the house in January 2005. In July 2005 the House of Commons Commission noted the results of the qualitative research undertaken with panels of young people into the form and content of a guide and authorised further work on its production. The research findings were that the guide should: be brief, with 'bite-sized' chunks of text; make extensive use of pictures and graphics; have a conversational (but not patronising) tone; and be presented in a manner which would be appealing to a young audience.

We have been working with the Central Office of Information, who have considerable experience in this field, to manage the New Voters Guide project. The draft guide will be considered by the Commission in February 2006 and distribution of the guide to 18 year olds should begin soon thereafter.

### **A Commons newsletter (recommendation 15)**

*15 We recommend that the House make available to those interested in receiving the information (by post, email or other convenient method of communication) a weekly newsletter. Aimed at the general, non-specialist reader, it should summarise the business of the previous week and set out forthcoming business for the following week. In due course, it may be possible to extend this service to allow for communication of other information by email (such as the daily list of papers available in the Vote Office) and regular, subject-based updates for which users could subscribe. A printed form of the newsletter should be made available to visitors at various points around the Parliamentary Estate, including the Bookshop. Electronically, it should occupy a prominent position on or near the front page of the Parliamentary website (paragraph 63).*

Six limited trial runs of a newsletter, entitled Commons Knowledge, were produced by the House of Commons Information Office during January and February. These were distributed in key locations and feedback from users sought; as a result the presentation of future business has been made clearer and there is now a glossary to explain some of the terms used.

The newsletter is now produced on a weekly basis in hard copy and electronically as a pdf file, prominently displayed on the Commons home page of the Parliament website. Five hundred paper copies are distributed weekly in key locations selected as being the most convenient and readily accessible for visitors and journalists. The House of Commons Information Office receives feedback from users which continues to shape the design and content of the newsletter. It is hoped to incorporate a small map into future editions, to help visitors find their way around the estate.

## Media and communications (recommendation 31)

- 31 *We welcome the progress that has been made in recent years to improve the House's communications strategy; in particular the establishment of the posts of Communications Adviser and Media Adviser and the Select Committee Media Officers. The Group on Information for the Public has likewise played a vital role. But we believe that there is scope for greater co-ordination of the House's media and communications resources. We therefore recommend the establishment of a central press office for the House of Commons, to take a more active role in promoting the House and its work.*
- 32 *We recommend that the Board of Management and the House of Commons Commission urgently consider whether there is scope for further improving the co-ordination of the House's media, educational and communications resources and planning, with effective Member oversight and close liaison with appropriate officials and the House of Lords (paragraph 122).*

Because the House is not a homogenous entity with a single unified set of interests, "press office" may not be the most useful description for the central point of contact. The Board's approach has been to co-locate staff under the supervision of the Communications Adviser to act as a central point of contact for journalists. The Communications Adviser leads the Media and Communications Services (MCS) Team which currently has seven members including three Select Committee Media Officers and a placement from the House of Commons Information Office (HCIO).

MCS now provides the services which internal and external stakeholders would expect from a central press office, while also working directly to the priorities identified by committees and other internal "clients".

The Media and Communications Service (MCS):

- Provides a media liaison service for journalists and serves as a central point of contact for media inquiries;
- Provides media and communications advice and support to all House Departments and Committees;
- Works with officials across both Houses to improve public information and access and promote better public understanding of, and engagement with, the work and role of the House and its Committees.

Almost all Select Committees now use the media service to inform journalists of their work. The three Select Committee Media Officers (SCMOs) focus on actively promoting the work of Select Committees by:

- Providing strategic and tactical advice and support to select committees on media-related aspects of their work;
- Publicising evidence sessions and reports;
- Liaising with lobby journalists and specialist correspondents to improve awareness of committee work and to highlight and explain the main themes of published reports or evidence sessions; and
- Developing media best practice across a range of committees.

The team's role has recently expanded to include publicising European Standing Committees debates to the media, though it should be noted that within current staffing levels the effort is necessarily a small-scale one.

Demand for the Media and Communications Service has steadily increased. In November 2004, the House of Commons Commission agreed to provide a modest increase in staffing up to £45,000 to £50,000. Some of this has already been allocated to an additional

administrative support post, and a review of staff resources is currently being undertaken, to assess whether a further post is required, how it might most effectively be used, and, if necessary, to make further recommendations for additional staffing in the medium term.

### **Co-ordination of externally-facing work (recommendation 32)**

32 *We recommend that the Board of Management and the House of Commons Commission urgently consider whether there is scope for further improving the co-ordination of the House's media, educational and communications resources and planning, with effective Member oversight and close liaison with appropriate officials and the House of Lords (paragraph 122).*

Since the start of the new Parliament in May 2005 the Group on Information for the Public (GIP) has had an enhanced co-ordination role. It is now chaired by the Librarian, who is a Member of the Board of Management. Its membership has also been expanded to include two representatives from the House of Lords who are involved in all discussions except those which relate solely to the House of Commons. Involvement of the House of Lords will be enhanced further when the newly appointed Head of Information Services and the Library takes up her post at the end of January 2006. GIP has taken the lead in drafting a strategy for improving the provision of information to the public for the period 2006–11 following the decision of the House of Commons Commission to make this issue one of the six "priority areas" for action within the new corporate plan.

### **Reception and security building (recommendations 18, 21 (a) & 21 (d))**

18 *We welcome the work of the Administration and Accommodation and Works Committees and the House's endorsement of the proposals for the construction of the reception and security building (paragraph 80).*

21 *Participants in the Hansard Society's Connecting Communities programme suggested a number of ways in which visitors' experience of the Parliamentary Estate could be improved for a very modest cost. The main proposals were:*

(a) *More staff on-hand specifically to welcome visitors, tell them what they could see and point them in the right direction, handing them a written guide, perhaps including a plan and an indication of what visitors were able to do.*

(d) *Improved queuing systems for the gallery.*

The Final Sketch plan for the reception and security building was received on schedule on 28 February, supplemented by a model which was approved in principle by the Accommodation and Works Committee in the House of Commons, and the Administration and Works Committee in the Lords. It has also been shown to Joint Committee on Security. Designs for the roof which spans the kiosk and entrance to the ramp and the roof to the search building have been refined to reflect feedback from Committees and operational requirements. Formal planning permission has been sought from Westminster City Council. Construction is due to commence early in January 2006.

With a full design, costings have a firmer basis, and have been estimated at £8.5m (previously £5 million). This has been reported to the Finance and Services Committee.

In advance of the completion of the Visitor Reception Building in late 2006, six Visitor Assistants (VAs), recruited specifically for their customer service skills, have been employed since July 2005 to trial methods of working, the services to be delivered and to support the expanded school visits programme.

The VAs have been deployed outside St Stephen's Entrance and within St Stephen's Hall, where they provide information to the public, from waiting times to the day's business in both Houses and Committees. Since October 2005, they have taken over responsibility for calling the queue forward to maximise the usage of seats in the Public Gallery. Separate queuing facilities for the two Houses have also been implemented.

Initial monitoring has shown that the introduction of VAs has been a success. Outside queues are greatly reduced when they are present, as visitors are presented with information which enables them to decide whether to wait or not, and the flow to the Galleries has been enhanced. Security staff are thus able to focus on their core function, rather than be distracted by looking after visitors.

### **Visitor Centre (recommendations 19 & 20)**

- 19 *We recognise the several unique difficulties involved in establishing new visitor facilities near the Palace of Westminster, but urge that all possible options are explored (paragraph 81).*
- 20 *Our starting point is that any Visitor Centre project should have four main objectives:*
- (a) it must provide a welcome to visitors*
  - (b) it must provide an interesting and friendly environment*
  - (c) it should make Parliament more accessible, allowing visitors to see at least something of what Parliament is and does without necessarily having to visit the galleries or take a tour, and*
  - (d) it must improve public understanding and knowledge of the work and role of Parliament.*

*The new reception and security building will help to meet the first of those objectives; it will use visitor staff so that visitors' first contact with the House will come from someone whose primary concern is to greet them and make them feel welcome. A major review of signage, currently under way, should also help to make the environment more welcoming. There may also be scope to improve the current facilities designed to meet the other three objectives but in our view the need for a dedicated Visitor Centre remains. Once the overdue improvement to Parliament's welcome and access has been addressed, attention can focus on meeting the other three main objectives of the Visitor Centre Project through planning for a dedicated Visitor Centre (paragraph 82).*

An outline strategy has been prepared which takes the planning for a full Information and Visitor Centre ahead in stages. Research commissioned over the summer should help to identify the numbers and type of people who would be interested in visiting an off-site visitor centre and the expectations they would have of it. On the basis of this analysis of demand, committees are to be consulted in the New Year on priorities for the facilities which might be provided. If Members so decide, this process could be developed so that outline proposals are put to both Houses later in the year to establish a brief.

In addition, steps are being taken to make use of external expertise in the planning of the project. A seminar was held in June to bring together some experts on visitor attractions, and these contacts are being developed into an ongoing source of advice.

Issues that remain to be resolved include accommodation for any future Centre, the scale of education facilities, and the need for additional staffing; the future operational structure, including links with the summer opening and other tour support; and any links with neighbouring attractions including the Jewel Tower.

## Signage (21 (b) & (c))

21 *Participants in the Hansard Society's Connecting Communities programme suggested a number of ways in which visitors' experience of the Parliamentary Estate could be improved for a very modest cost. The main proposals were:*

(b) *A sign at the entrance saying "Welcome to the Houses of Parliament".*

(c) *Better signage in general, including such things as toilets, the Jubilee Café, the Grand Committee Room, Committee Corridor etc.*

£800,000 over the years 2005–06 to 2008–09 has been identified for the implementation of the recommendations in the 2004 Atkins Report into Signage in and around the Parliamentary Estate. A consultant has been appointed and has conducted a detailed survey of the Back of Chair area and consulted on fire safety, disabled access and security. A summary of the requirements is currently out to consultation and detailed design work is progressing. Sample signs are in production with the intention of establishing a system which is adaptable, durable and useable throughout the Palace. It is anticipated that the first tranche will be installed during the next recess.

Contact has also been established with the bodies responsible for external signage and negotiations are continuing. Some minor adaptations have already been carried out - most notably the change of 'strangers' to 'public' in the Commons' Galleries, the provision of temporary signage and better directions to the Travel Office.

## Parliament-in-action tours (recommendations 6 & 23)

6 *We also think it would be desirable for the CTO to offer, in addition to its current tours, a Parliament-in-action tour which would help visitors to understand how Parliament works and give them a brief taste of select committees, standing committees, adjournment debates and Westminster Hall as well as the Chamber (paragraph 23).*

23 *We recommend that further consideration be given to ways in which groups of visitors touring the building might be able to pass through the gallery as part of a tour so that they are able to witness aspects of Parliament in action (paragraph 89).*

The House of Commons Commission agreed in 2004 that these recommendations would not be feasible, particularly in the current security climate. However, what is in effect a parliament-in-action tour for young people has been agreed and will be developed by the Education Unit in early 2006—see section 1 above.

## Visitor tours (recommendations 24 & 25)

24 *We recommend that the Administration Committee consider Saturday opening of the Line of Route—for Members' parties as well as paying groups—to assess its feasibility (paragraph 91).*

25 *We further recommend that the Administration Committee consider the feasibility of allowing Members to book guided tours of the Line of Route throughout the Summer opening on a similar basis to that on which they can book tours on sitting days (paragraph 91).*

The House of Lords has now approved proposals for opening on Saturdays following on from the Summer Opening of 2007. It was agreed by both Houses that this would be for

paying visitors only: the possibility of one group of constituents, having bought tickets, found themselves alongside others coming in for nothing might lead to difficulties.<sup>2</sup>

The issue of Members' Tours throughout Summer was discussed by the Administration Committee, which supported the status quo. Existing Members' mornings, though popular, remain undersubscribed, especially mid-season. Similar concerns were expressed regarding paying and non-paying visitors, as above.

### **Standing Committees (recommendations 26 & 27)**

- 26 *We recommend that the Procedure Committee consider how better to present the information from the bill, explanatory notes, amendment paper and selection list, either on paper or electronically, so that when an amendment is being debated Members and visitors can see the original clause, the clause as amended and an explanatory note on both, so that the issue under debate is clear to all (paragraph 94).*
- 27 *We recommend that a guide for visitors to standing committees on bills should also be produced (paragraph 95).*

The Procedure Committee has concluded that attempting to combine the bill, the explanatory notes, the amendments and the selection into a single document would be both impractical and confusing. The Committee has requested that further work be carried out on other ways of making it easier for Members to follow proceedings.

A guide for visitors to standing committees has been made available since 2004.

### **The Parliamentary websites (recommendations 11 & 16)**

- 11 *We are convinced of the need for a radical upgrading of the website at an early opportunity, which will require significant investment in systems and staff. The financial implications of this are for the Finance and Services Committee and the House of Commons Commission to consider (paragraph 50).*
- 16 *We recommend that, as development of the website progresses, the House authorities, in consultation with young people, develop the website in a form which is more accessible to them (paragraph 65).*

Following the results of qualitative research commissioned to ascertain how the site might better reach out to young people and other non-specialist target audiences, in April 2005 the Clerks of both Houses agreed that a business case for a "radical redesign" of the Parliament website should be prepared. This will include consideration of: the need for new content and functionality (including look and feel, navigation etc) as required; adapting the new intranet content management system for the creation and management of internet content; and providing effective search and retrieval functionality based on Parliamentary Information Management Services (PIMS) tools.

To support this business case officials have been developing a strategic vision for the website that will inform developments over the next few years and this is currently being consulted on. A business case to support this strategy is in an advanced state of preparation and will be considered by the financial authorities in both Houses in the next few weeks. The outcome of this consideration will determine the scope and pace of the "radical redesign".

---

2 The House of Commons Administration Committee resolved that further research on Saturday opening should be based on the summer pattern at their meeting of 17 March 2004. This was approved by the Lords Administration and Works Committee at its meeting on 22 March 2005.

Pending this major project there have been a number of short and medium term improvements to the website. These include:

- An improved Stationery Office (TSO) search engine went live in March 2005, and initial minor problems have been ironed out;
- The Parliament, Commons and Lords home pages have all been revised;
- A select committee calendar is now available, providing advance information on evidence sessions and reports, and a current inquiry list is currently being tested;
- A more user-oriented, organised and consistent format for individual committee web pages has now been implemented by nearly all committees;
- "Scrutiny uncovered", a short video about the work of select committees, is available on the site;
- The new email alerting service which enables users to receive notifications of changes to selected pages now has approximately 66,000 individual subscriptions.

Further short term priorities include: improved disaster recovery arrangements; simplification and automation of the updating process, which currently takes 2 hours a day; a consistent navigation bar for all pages including TSO; redesign of the home page and next level down, with a dramatic reduction in the number of links; simplifying navigation and providing clearer URLs.

Pending further research, the question of how the progress of legislation might be more clearly explained and illustrated is also being explored.

### **Webcasting**

Around 80 hours of proceedings in the two chambers and Westminster Hall are filmed for possible television broadcast each week, along with an average of 10 Lords and Commons select committees.

The material is freely available live and from an on-demand archive on both the Internet and Intranet—which also carry audio coverage of all other meetings which are taking place in public. As many as 18 live streams are available simultaneously.

On average roughly 400 external users a day now visit [www.parliamentlive.tv](http://www.parliamentlive.tv). Some days have attracted more than 2,500 visitors—with 20,000 visitors a month on occasion.<sup>3</sup> The intranet service is multi-cast, so figures for people accessing the service via the Parliamentary Network are not available.

All material carried live, whether audio-visual or audio only, is then available on-demand from the following day. The site also carries links to background text material and information videos about the work of the two Houses.

Copies of audio-visual material are also available in a number of modern media formats through the Parliamentary Recording Unit.<sup>4</sup>

The operation of the webcasting site is constantly under review and major technical upgrades were implemented in October 2005.

---

3 The intranet service is multi-cast, so figures for people accessing the service via the Parliamentary Network are not available.

4 Video: Beta SX, Beta SP, VHS, SVHS, DVD. Audio: DAT, Audio Cassette, CD, 1/4" Reel to Reel. Computer: wmv, wma, mpg, avi, wav

The size of the video has been increased to make it easier to watch and we are now broadcasting at near broadband rates to increase the clarity of the picture. In addition, we are now broadcasting our audio only meetings at a higher bit-rate, which means the quality is comparable to that of FM radio.

Soon visitors to the site will no longer have to wait until the next day to view archived material. During the 2005–06 Christmas Recess the site will be upgraded further with the installation of specially developed "Play While Archiving" software. This will allow users to connect to a partially-archived file while the meeting is still taking place.

Proposals for 'web camera' coverage of meetings which are currently available only in audio remain under discussion. Work planned for summer 2005 was delayed to allow for a full feasibility study into the possible use of automated web camera systems linked to committee room microphones. That study is now complete and "Proof of Concept" trials should be underway before Christmas.

### **Hansard (recommendations 33 & 34)**

*33 We recommend that the Department of the Official Report aim to produce a simple index to the daily part of Hansard once the necessary technological changes have been seen through (paragraph 123).*

*34 We recommend that the Hansard report of a debate should be posted on the internet at the same time as it sent to the printer, to be replaced with the published version the following day (paragraph 125).*

The text of the debates in the Chamber has been placed on the internet throughout the day, as and when the final version has been sent to the printer, since 10 October 2005.

It is planned that the text of Written Ministerial Statements will be placed on the internet, as and when the final version is sent to the printer, by the end of November.

The Hansard pagination project which is due to complete in March 2006 will provide an expanded index for the printed Daily Part. As a forerunner to that, Hansard and the Stationery Office are discussing the feasibility of printing, at the end of the Daily Part, an alphabetical list of Members who have spoken in the Chamber and Westminster Hall. The internet version of the Daily Part still provides a full index.

## Appendix 1

### Recommendations already implemented, where no updating is required

22 *We recommend that the use of the term 'Strangers' be no longer used in referring to visitors to the House of Commons (paragraph 86).*

The House decided on 26 October 2004 to remove the term "strangers" from Standing Orders. It was announced in the All Party Whip of 20 January 2005 that the Strangers' Gallery would now be known as the Public Gallery, but that other common uses of the word "Strangers" (Bar, Dining Room and "Hats off, strangers") would continue unchanged.

Signage and documents have been changed accordingly.

28 *We believe that there is a case for the House to do more with public petitions which, if handled correctly, represent a significant avenue for communication between the public and Parliament (paragraph 95).*

29 *We recommend that the Liaison Committee and Procedure Committee consider a process whereby public petitions should automatically stand referred to the relevant select committee. It would then be for the committee to decide whether or not to conduct an enquiry into the issues raised, or take them into account in the context of a current or forthcoming inquiry (paragraph 100).*

30 *We recommend that the House accept petitions in both typescript and manuscript, although the present restriction against interlineations, deletions and insertions should be retained so that it is clear that the wording of the petition has not been changed without the petitioner's knowledge. The top sheet—the authoritative copy of the petition—should continue to be distinguished from sheets of additional signatures by the Member presenting it in signing the top right hand corner, as is the current practice (paragraph 104).*

On 19 January 2005 the House approved the recommendations of the Procedure Committee's Fifth Report (HC 1248, Session 2003–04 (November 2004)) that a copy of each petition should be sent to the relevant committee; and that the top sheet of a petition should no longer be required to be handwritten. This process, agreed with the Liaison Committee, is now in operation.