

**Report to the House of Commons Administration Committee on the findings  
of the interview study with Members on leaving Parliament**

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## 1. Foreword

As part of an ongoing programme of research, the Administration Committee commissioned a study in which Members were invited to reflect on their experiences at the end of their time in Parliament, either because they stood down, or as a result of being defeated in the General Election. We were interested to hear their views as customers of internal services provided by the House of Commons Service, but more importantly, their reflections on their work and impact as a Member of Parliament. Seeking feedback from a defined group of Members in this way presents a particular angle, of course, but it also had the advantage that participants could look back, and consider their role in the round. The study builds on two other recent research studies: on the experiences of women Members; and Members' views on services provided by the House Service.

As Chair of the Administration Committee, I am pleased to introduce this report which illustrates the range of work that colleagues from all parties do on behalf of the public. Much of the work of Members is filtered through a Westminster-based media meaning that work done in constituencies and when the House is not sitting is often ignored – presented as 'holiday time'. This report vividly describes the pressures of working both at Westminster and in the constituency, rising constituency caseloads, and the human pressures of balancing a public and a private life.

The study demonstrates too that Members themselves are acutely aware of the reputation of their profession and that of the House of Commons. They are therefore keen that we do even more to open up the work of the House to citizens, to explain, and to enable and encourage participation. My committee recently heard from the Outreach and Engagement Service about the many programmes and events it runs for members of the public to find out what Parliament does and how they can take an active part.

I hope the report goes just a little way to help explain the work of MPs, much of which happens beyond the walls of the main debating Chamber in the Commons. Next time you see an apparently empty Chamber in a tweeted photo, take a moment to consider the multiple other components of an MP's working life, including scrutinising the Government on select committees, raising issues for debate in Westminster Hall, meeting with constituents, casework, party matters, campaigning, and running a busy office as an employer. What shines through this report is what unites MPs across the party spectrum is the desire to serve the public they represent in the best way they can. I would also like to pay tribute to the staff of the House and to individual Members' staff, who do so much to support the work of an MP, as is apparent in the report.

**Sir Paul Beresford**  
**Chair, Administration Committee**  
**April 2016**

## 2. Executive Summary

This study looks at the experiences of being an MP from the viewpoint of Members as they come to the end of their time in Parliament, either by choosing to step down or by not being re-elected at a general election. This provides this report with a particular perspective on the role of MPs, the responsibilities and difficulties of the job and how the public perception of MPs might be improved.

The day-to-day life of an MP as described in this study is a highly pressured and busy one. Being an MP is a role that is not well understood either by the public or even agreed upon by Members themselves – there is no job description - and therefore identifying how to be a ‘successful’ MP is difficult.

MPs must balance a range of responsibilities in order to be effective. There are two areas in which MPs find this balancing act most difficult to achieve. Firstly, dividing their time and resources between their work in Westminster and that in their constituency. Constituency caseloads are increasing, which leads to pressure on the time that MPs can devote to being in Parliament. Secondly, balancing this busy life with having a private or family life was seen as almost impossible. Amongst those MPs who gave a reason for choosing to step down, the most common one was the effect being an MP was having on their family life.

MPs were very conscious that the public perception of them and Parliament had been significantly and negatively affected by the expenses scandal. As a way to counteract this, they felt more must be done to make the workings and processes of Parliament more open and accessible so that the work that MPs do is better understood.

Generally the services that the House provides were seen as high quality. There were three key areas that were seen as needing improvement: how accommodation for MPs inside the House was allocated; the information technology provision and support; and the services that support staff based outside Westminster.

### 3. Introduction

In May 2012 the Administration Committee recommended to the House of Commons Management Board that it replace the annual survey of Members and Members' staff with a series of in-depth interviews conducted by trained House Service staff. The first report, a wide-ranging examination of the various House services was completed by March 2014 and published in June of that year; it prompted a number of changes to the delivery of services.<sup>1</sup> On 12 May 2014, the Committee endorsed the principle of interview-based research and agreed that two further projects should be undertaken: the first focusing on services to women Members<sup>2</sup> (which was considered by the Administration Committee in September 2015) and the second looking at the experiences of Members as they leave the Commons, either when choosing to stand down or when not re-elected at the General Election in 2015.

### 4. Methods

The study was designed to explore the experiences and perceptions of Members about the House as they ended their time as MPs. The specific objectives were to explore their views on:

- What the work of an MP involved;
- How well this was understood by the public;
- What support the House provided to help them be effective in their roles;
- Why they had originally become an MP and, as they ended their time in Parliament, to try and assess what they had achieved during their time here.

A qualitative approach was taken to allow both groups of participants to focus on the issues that were of most importance to them, and to obtain more detailed and complex descriptions of these issues than would have been possible using a survey with closed questions. A structured interview guide (see Appendix 8a) was developed to explore a number of key areas including:

- The nature of their day to day work and how they balanced their parliamentary and constituency work;
- How they thought the public perceived MPs and their roles and responsibilities;
- Their opinions of House services and how effectively they support MPs as they arrive and leave Parliament.

Interviews and note taking were carried out by a small group of specially trained House staff (see Appendix 8b). Internal staff were deployed so that MPs were assured they were being interviewed by people who understood the House, and to gain their full trust and confidence. Interviews lasted between thirty minutes and one hour and were conducted at a location that was convenient for the participant. Most interviews were conducted in pairs, with one interviewer taking the lead on questions and another serving as primary note-taker. Interviewer pairing provides a good opportunity for validity checks on the accuracy of written transcripts.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.parliament.uk/documents/commons-committees/admin-committee/Members-and-Members-staff-interview-project-doc.pdf>

<http://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/administration-committee/news-parliament-2015/members-interview-project/>

Participants were assured that the data would be held securely and treated confidentially, with access restricted to the study team, and that individuals would not be identified in the reporting of data.

The interview transcripts were analysed independently by two coders (Jane Tinkler and Nitin Mehta). Themes were identified in each question responses, so that the themes that were referred to most frequently by respondents were identified. Themes were compared across the two coders for verification. The themes identified in the two groups of respondents were then compared to identify differences or similarities. The report was written by Jane Tinkler, an academic who is currently a member of the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology. She is therefore both independent but embedded and this enabled her to bring both these perspectives to producing the report.

Section 5 describes the experience of being an MP including what the role includes, the pressures it entails, and the achievements that MPs feel most proud of as they leave Parliament. Section 6 describes what MPs feel is the public perception of them collectively, how this has changed over time and what might be done to improve the status of MPs in public opinion. Section 7 focuses on the services that the House provides and how useful these are found by MPs. Throughout the report issues that are covered have been raised by some, many or all of the interviewees. Where issues were less frequently mentioned, but were included to provide more detail or colour to a particular point, this has been made clear.

#### **a. Participant characteristics**

This research involved interviewing MPs from two groups: those who had chosen to stand down at the 2015 General Election and those who stood for re-election in May 2015 but lost their seat. For the first group, all those planning to stand down were contacted in the run up to the election to ask them to participate in the research. Of the 90 in this category overall, 30 agreed to participate. As mentioned, the research was not designed as a quantitative survey, but even so, we were encouraged that one third willingly participated, giving us a good number for a qualitative study. This group were interviewed during February and March 2015. As this is a self-selecting group that is not randomly sampled, it will not be fully representative. As Table 1 shows, the particular issue is that it includes more Labour MPs than other parties. Although the number of Labour MPs interviewed was relatively higher we did not discern any party differences in response as the survey focused more on individual than party issues; many of the themes emerging in the research have surfaced in other studies

**Table 1: Standing down MPs**

	Stepping down	Participating
Conservative	38	6
Labour	40	18
Liberal Democrat	10	6
Other	2	0
Total	90	30

The second group consisted of those who had stood for election in 2015 but had not been re-elected. They were interviewed in the short window straight after the election when defeated MPs attended winding up meetings with officials in the House. Unsurprisingly, proportionally fewer were willing or able to be interviewed, but 23 interviews were achieved.

**Table 2: Defeated MPs**

	Defeated	Participating
Conservative	9	1
Labour	39	11
Liberal Democrat	38	10
Other	6	1
Total	92	23

Table 3 shows those interviewed by gender. These characteristics are not broken down into the above two groups or by political party as it might be possible to identify those involved.

**Table 3: All those interviewed by gender**

	Females	Males
Total	14	39

Table 4 focuses on the length of time that interviewees from both groups had been in Parliament. Those interviewed had varied length of service; 18 years was the most common, but two interviewees had been in Parliament less than five years, whereas one had been a Member for over 40 years.

**Table 4: All those interviewed by length of time (in years) in Parliament**

	Number
Under 5 years	2
6 to 15 years	21
16 to 25 years	19
26 to 35 years	7
Over 36 years	4
Total	53

## **b. Limitations**

As this survey sought the views of those who were leaving the House, during what was for some a very pressured and emotional time, we were not able to achieve a representative sample of the wider House in terms of party composition or those who were standing down or defeated at the 2015 General Election. We were able to interview a third of those standing down and nearly a quarter of those who lost their seats. As a qualitative piece of work, the study is designed to bring to life the range of lived experiences of Members of Parliament. It is not a quantitative survey designed to give precise quantitative information.

Because of the nature of these participants, the study does not include those MPs who experienced the induction process following the 2015 General Election. So the views outlined here on induction and training will not reflect the most up to date services within the House. The House Service has separately conducted an evaluation of the 2015 induction process with positive results.

Owing to the qualitative nature of this study, participants were invited to discuss those areas of most importance to them, or those where they had strong praise or criticism, and were not asked to discuss every aspect of the House Service. As such, the lack of data on some areas cannot be taken to mean that they are or are not important: the data was not collected in such a way as to allow assessments of this kind to be made. However, the strength of the qualitative approach is that the real experiences of MPs who are leaving Parliament are able to be examined and some lessons learned as to how current and future MPs can be better supported.

## 5. Being an MP

### a. The work of an MP

MPs described a busy, hectic life that has to balance a range of responsibilities: between parliamentary and constituency work, between appearing in the Chamber and other parliamentary roles such as being on select committees; and running an office, which brings with it staffing and budgetary responsibilities.

#### ***“There is no job description”***

Interviewees felt that the work that an MP does day to day is not well understood by those outside Parliament: *“As an MP, your interview panel is made up of thousands of people with different expectations and there is no job description.”* These expectations could lead to conflicting requirements and expectations of an MP that would be difficult to resolve to everyone’s satisfaction.

This lack of consensus on what the role of an MP involves was also relevant inside the Commons. In practice, it is left up to individual MPs to decide what aspects of the job they particularly want to focus on. And what they choose to do is influenced by a range of factors: an MP’s own interests, what part of the country they represent and its distance from Westminster, whether they are in government or opposition, and their personal circumstances such as their family situation. MPs also felt that there had been a loss of respect from the public for their role that had led to a loss of status for the job of MP. This loss of status, alongside some concerns about salary level, was seen to be making the job less attractive thereby perhaps making it harder to attract excellent candidates to stand as MPs.

One MP outlined what he believes are the five key components of being an MP:

- *Working with and for local people (constituency work): meeting with them, knowing your patch, casework.*
- *The publicly perceived aspects: speaking in the Chamber, being on select committees, taking part in all party parliamentary groups (APPGs), seeking amendments, speaking in the House and elsewhere, and issuing press releases.*

- *Work for your political party: fundraising, member development, feeding into manifestos, acting as a spokesman, or being a Minister or Shadow Minister.*
- *Using the role to pursue particular interests: charity work, campaigning and lobbying (on issues of particular interest or concern to the MP).*
- *Being an employer: recruiting and developing staff, handling HR, budgeting and finance, and renting accommodation.*

Some MPs felt more immediately able to handle this range of responsibilities than others. For example, one interviewee felt that running a small business before becoming an MP had given him a better understanding of the staff management and budgetary pressures that his role involves than others who had not had similar experiences.

### ***High pressure and long hours***

The second key focus for interviewees was the pressure of being an MP. Although changes to sitting times mean fewer late nights for MPs, the working week was still described as being up to 70-80 hours. Interviewees felt there was a similar lack of understanding about these time pressures amongst constituents and critics, especially when discussing the salaries that MPs receive. Long-standing MPs talked about the increase in workload over the course of their careers. This was most noticeable in the amount of casework that MPs and their offices dealt with, which was especially linked to the increase in email correspondence. The use of social media was seen as a positive tool in allowing the public to “*say more and be heard*”. But it also meant an increase in workload both in constituents choosing this method to contact MPs but also in handling requests from the media. MPs felt the pressure to have to respond to public debates more quickly and yet carefully as “*views can be circulated as a furious pace*”.

External pressures were also discussed. Long-standing MPs felt that the influence of the media had grown over the time they were in Parliament: “*The polarities are reversed - Parliament used to set the terms of the debate - and the media reported it. Now the media set it and we take the steer from them*”. For example, being an advocate within Parliament for local infrastructure projects was key part of an MP’s role, but this advocacy could be seen to be as much about publicity in local or national press than because it led to genuine constituency benefits. However, the public expects it, so it “*becomes a deceit that everyone is in on . . . you have to do it – it goes with the job*”. This in turn contributed to a feeling among some that Parliament and MPs are tending to look at more issues but in less depth instead of looking in detail at key issues or being able to take a longer term view. Media focus also had personal consequences for MPs: “*I was also astonished at the level of press intrusion into my life, which happened as soon as I was elected. I had not expected them to offer my kids money for stories or to launch clear personal attacks.*”

**Decreasing influence**

There was a sense that what was possible to achieve as an MP had reduced over time; that the powers that MPs had were decreasing: *“When first elected I could do things for my constituents - for example get them council houses, grants or later loans, furniture, get them out of detention - now I can do nothing for them.”* At the same time, the public expected more of MPs which meant what they could achieve was also seen as less valuable. As a result, one interviewee outlined that MPs, especially those on the backbenches, needed to get used to failure: *“The whole system is geared up to make it hard for backbench MPs to succeed at, for example, passing or amending legislation . . . most MPs start as an idealist and leave as a pragmatist.”*

**b. A Balancing Act**

As suggested by the list of five key components of being an MP above, MPs must balance a range of responsibilities in order to be effective. Interviewees highlighted the difficulties of this balancing act in two areas: the breakdown of time and work between Westminster and their constituency; and the ramifications of the long hours needed to be an effective MP on family or private life.

***“Am I a legislator or social services?”: Balancing Westminster and constituency work***

For a few MPs, balancing their Westminster and constituency work was broadly achievable. They were able to spend sufficient time in both places and felt supported by excellent staff who made balancing these two priorities achievable. The majority however felt that throughout their careers they had not been able to get this balance right, and it was getting more difficult to achieve. There was seen to be pressure from political parties for MPs to be in Westminster for at least three days a week to take part in parliamentary activity, which left less time for constituency work. This left MPs choosing between *“politics vs local issues”*. Changes to sitting times meant fewer late night sessions so MPs were less *“exhausted”*, but the timetable was seen as much more suitable for those in London and the South East. MPs with constituencies further away highlighted a preference for fewer longer days so they could spend more time in their constituencies. This was especially the case for MPs in marginal seats where they needed to be seen in their local area. This pressure on marginal MPs was felt in some cases to be *“not well understood by the whips”*. But geography also presented problems for MPs with large constituencies. For some MPs their patch was so large that they could travel far enough to require a night away from home and still be in the constituency. This meant that less time was spent in their constituency office.

*Nature of constituency work.* The nature of constituency work was thought to be changing. There were fewer enquiries that were purely information based, where constituents asked for help in finding out about their rights or service provider responsibilities. This type of advice is readily available online and from other bodies so constituents do not need to come to the MP for this. Instead MPs felt there was an increase in very difficult cases that needed their attention and support – *“for example, child protection, domestic violence, threats of suicide, people with no money and nothing in the cupboard”*. One MP described feeling as a *“last resort social service”*.

This made dealing with these cases very difficult for both the MP and her/his staff. In one case, a MP's previous role meant they were able to draw up procedures for their staff to follow when a particular issue presented itself. For example, knowing when the police should become involved in a case. But this was not possible for all MPs. MPs also had to deal with the toll upsetting cases took on staff: *"staff should not have to go home at night knowing that a constituent had no heating and nothing to eat"*.

*MPs' staff.* All interviewees saw staff as crucial to being an effective MP and helping to manage this balance. A number of MPs argued that different skills sets were needed from staff in Westminster as opposed to constituency offices. The issues dealt with in Westminster were more political and so research staff who were more focused on activism or campaigning were seen as useful. Whereas it was more useful for constituency staff to have experience in providing advice on issues such as benefits, immigration and housing. Interviewees also argued for some MPs to be able to employ more staff, especially for those with large constituencies. The point was regularly made that the staff budget for MPs does not reflect their caseload.

For MPs with larger or urban constituencies, correspondence could be between 500-1,000 calls/emails a week which needs a larger staff resource to manage. And developing, managing and retaining staff was a problem. MPs felt their staff were *"grossly underpaid"* for what they did, particularly for those living in areas with high living costs. This often meant staff were young and mobile, and so they tended to move on quickly. This high turnover added to MPs' workloads as they often had to recruit and train new staff.

*Balancing work in the House.* Because of the increase in constituency work one MP said *"he felt less of a parliamentarian"*. He believed the shift was due to a number of factors: constituents had less trust in their MP but conversely expected more from them and in general there was more scrutiny of MPs. Balancing the party political nature of debates and voting in the Chamber with the more consensual nature of work on Committees was discussed. All party parliamentary groups were singled out as another site of cross-party working: *"APPGs provide a salutary example of how to work across party lines"*. And more issues where MPs were able to vote with their conscience rather than along party lines were supported:

*There are certain issues where the vote is clearly one of conscience, and there should be more of this – where a vote genuinely reflects a personal view on a big issue. For example, a recent amendment to change the abortion law was a matter of conscience, there was no whip . . . Opinions could be expressed freely across the house and there was less 'Punch and Judy'. This is not necessarily a better quality of debate but a different kind of debate.*

For many MPs, they preferred the consensual work of the select committees although this way of working was not always understood by constituents. And having to be both a legislator within Parliament and a social worker in the constituency was a difficult stretch. Parliament was seen as a competitive place, where support from fellow MPs was invaluable but because of the competitive nature of the role, was not always forthcoming.

Overall, time management was seen as key:

*I had been told at the outset that it was impossible to get the balance right between constituency, party and Westminster, but in the end it was for me to make those decisions.*

### **Balancing being an MP with private or family life**

The consensus across a majority of interviewees was that being an MP was not conducive to a good work-life balance. One reason for this was the long hours that the job entailed. The House had made some progress on becoming more family friendly, with MPs now able to take children through the voting lobbies being praised as a good example of this. But some argued that more is still to be done as the previous report in this series, looking at the experiences of women MPs, shows. That report also highlighted the problems of long hours and splitting time between Parliament and constituency. And it found that, as women often took the role of lead caregiver to children, they faced particular challenges as a result.

Some examples of how this issue affects MPs were:

- *“It can be lonely living in two places, apart from your family.”*
- *“It has been difficult being away part of the week and so busy. My husband has had to manage alone with the difficulties of having a teenage daughter. Although my daughter has not said so, I felt she has resented her mother being away such a lot. Family life has suffered.”*
- *“If Parliament thinks it is important to support family life, it should do this for MPs as well.”*

Some of the difficulties of this balance stem from those outlined in the previous section. Staying in London and then having to travel back to constituencies at weekends meant less time with family and children. There was some criticism of the removal of spousal travel allowance, thereby making it more difficult for family members to join MPs in London or to join them on work related trips. Other MPs outlined how they would not have been able to undertake the job without the help of their partner, whether in taking the main responsibility for raising children or providing significant support for running a constituency office, sometimes to the detriment of their own career.

Among the MPs who gave a reason for standing down, the most common one given was the impact being an MP had on family life: *“I wouldn't have done it [become an MP] if I had realised how hard it was to be an MP with young children in the constituency.”* This issue both affected serving MPs and was also seen to deter those who might otherwise put themselves forward for election. It was argued that the age and to some extent gender balance of Parliament would not improve until it was possible to achieve a more positive work-life balance by being able to control the number of hours worked each week.

For these interviewees, who had all recently left Parliament, the time that they could now spend with family was a positive outcome of this change: *“I really enjoyed being an MP, but will now I will get my life back.”* One MP described how his children were worried about him not having a job after the election, *“but they're also pleased now that I've been defeated that they'll see more of me”.*

### c. MPs' achievements

There was a clear difference here between MPs who had chosen to step down and those who were leaving Parliament because they had not been re-elected. The first group were able to look back across their careers and were able to discuss their accomplishments, and valued being able to step down on their own terms. Those who had been voted out understandably felt somewhat differently:

*How can I consider myself effective as an MP when we have just been defeated so badly as a party? This has to cloud everything.*

But others emphasised that it was important for MPs to realise that some may lose their seat through circumstances beyond their control and it was not a reflection of their effectiveness or abilities as an MP. It was still, one said, “*overwhelming*” even if it was expected.

Due to the lack of agreement on what the priorities for MPs should be, what counts as being a ‘successful’ MP is difficult to judge. For some, being re-elected was counted as one measure of success. But for others success was not straightforward. For example, if you were an effective constituency MP, it could lead to your workload dramatically increasing: “*Success can be a double edged sword. You do good work, your reputation improves, more people come to you, and your work load goes up*”.

This range of roles was mirrored in the accomplishments that MPs described as being those of which they were most proud. Some felt most satisfied with their work on particular pieces of legislation and the benefits that had resulted from them. Others felt working in a collaborative way on a select committee had been most rewarding as it allowed them to look across particular issues over a sustained period of time. Those who had held ministerial roles felt that they had made most difference in these positions whereas some MPs felt they had accomplished more as a backbencher than they could have done holding a ministerial profile.

Others though felt they had had most impact at the local level, where they had for example focused on being “*a really good constituency MP . . . I thought it an honour to work in Parliament; to represent my constituents in Westminster*”. Or for example during significant times for constituents, one MP outlined how proud they had been to be able to come to Parliament and say something that would resonate with the people in their constituency. MPs who were most proud of their constituency role felt they were leaving their local area in a better state than when they had been elected and highlighted benefits like bringing in new industries, new investment or a greater sense of community to the area. Some who had focused more on campaigning felt that raising the profile in the public consciousness of a particular issue was their greatest achievement.

## 6. How MPs see their public perception

*Perception of MPs.* All interviewees acknowledged that the public perception of MPs had been significantly and negatively affected by the expenses scandal that broke in 2009. The effects of this on public opinion were still very much being felt. The public's lack of trust in politicians collectively was thought to have increased as a result and was felt to be "*a blow that I don't think we will recover from in a lifetime*". Some MPs said they were treated with "*plain hostility*", others that they had been described as "*crooks*" and "*greedy*": "*Quite bluntly for my constituents, Westminster is a swear word.*"

For many MPs therefore the setting up of an independent body to regulate their expense claims was a legitimate response to this strong reaction from the public. However the reputation amongst MPs of the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority (IPSA), the body that was created in the wake of the expenses scandal, could be stronger, in this study at least. Some interviewees even perceived that IPSA's default position was unhelpful.

*It was designed more to catch MPs out than to help them do their job. The staff administering the scheme are good, and provide good advice, but the scheme itself suggests all MPs are 'guilty until proven innocent'.*

Some felt that despite the good reasons behind IPSA's creation, it may even have gone too far: "*We just want sufficient support not special treatment*". Some MPs felt that the public nature of IPSA's activities directed a narrow focus on the expenses that MPs claimed, which did not allow Parliament to move on from the expenses issue or for the public to consider their work in the round. Another source of public concern was seen as, rightly, a focus on MPs salaries: one interview highlighted that for most people, the amount paid to MPs was "*a lot of money*" and they had to be seen to be working hard for it.

*Perception of Parliament.* In addition to expenses, MPs outlined other factors that contribute to the negative public perception of Parliament. Of these, the tenor of discussion and behaviour at Prime Minister's Questions was seen as most detrimental to the image of Parliament and MPs. Some MPs outlined how they felt the public did not understand the political point scoring and party political nature of some debates in the House. Constituents instead wanted their MP to engage in debates that were more constructive and consensual.

More generally, interviewees felt that increasing levels of disengagement from politics and the political process was a very serious problem. What was described as "*constant negative media reporting*" was thought to be unhelpful when many organisations, Parliament included, were trying to re-engage with the electorate or reach out to non-voters. MPs were concerned that this not only encouraged people not to vote but also deterred some sections of the public from standing to become an MP. As the media had focused on the backgrounds of some MPs involved in the expenses scandal, it had contributed to the view that being a Member of Parliament was only for those from wealthy backgrounds.

***MPs' proposals for changes***

Some MPs did not think it would ever be possible to recover the esteem of the public that had been lost. Others though felt that there were measures that could be taken. By being clearer about the work that Parliament and individual MPs do, it would show the hard work and dedication that goes into being an MP.

*The public does not understand that the Chamber sits all day, without a break, and that committee meetings sit in parallel. It is difficult to convey this to the public as they see an empty Chamber and think no MPs are working while it could be they are either sitting in a committee or attending another meeting.*

A key recommendation that a number of interviewees made to try to counter some of these problems therefore was to make the work of Parliament more understood, and also to make its processes more open and accountable to the public. Suggestions included inviting more of the public to come into the Parliamentary Estate to see the day to day working for themselves, as well as ensuring that information included on the parliamentary website was accessible and interesting. There was also discussion about whether changes to some of the procedures, language and dress could be made in order to modernise them and make Parliamentary workings more understandable and accessible to the public. Or that Parliament should have more of a collective voice on the importance of voting and how political participation worked and its effects. It was felt that voting information often focused on party leaders and the position of Prime Minister rather than on electing a local MP who could bring benefits to local communities. If the public did understand the role of MPs and Parliament more fully, it was felt that Parliament could then be more robust in defending itself against some public criticisms.

Interviewees felt that there had been some progress by House authorities to allow quick parliamentary responses to issues that were of high public concern as a way to increase accountability. Some praised the Backbench Business Committee for improving the range of debates that were held. One example given was the debate on prisoners' voting rights, which one MP believed would never have taken place had the Backbench Business Committee not been created. Others highlighted the increased use of Emergency Debates and Urgent Questions during the last Parliament under Speaker Bercow in order to focus on issues of public concern. Another initiative that was praised by interviewees was holding select committee hearings outside London, which despite some logistical problems in taking MPs away from Westminster or their constituencies, were felt to facilitate more diverse voices being heard in parliamentary activities. It was also seen as vital that where processes were in place for the public to come into the House and engage with their MP, they must work well. The system of green cards in the central lobby for the public to request and lobby their MP was seen as not working when MPs were so busy:

*It's really upsetting when someone has made the effort to come to Parliament and you miss them; they don't realise that all sorts of things are going on at once — they see an empty Chamber and think that the MPs must be off eating and drinking.*

The suggestion here was to arrange meetings digitally so that constituents could get in touch online and MPs could then arrange to meet at a convenient time for both parties: *"Then the electorate might feel less cut off."*

The recent BBC series 'Inside the Commons' was seen as a good example of showcasing parliamentary procedures as a way of increasing interest in parliamentary activities. But interviewees felt that it was the responsibility of individual MPs to highlight the substantive work they have done for the local community within their constituency. And to take a high-profile, engaged role at a local level – suggestions for this included holding surgeries in supermarkets and the town centre on a weekend, or taking on front-line jobs for a day. This was seen as crucial because some MPs reported having personal experience of finding that constituents had negative views about MPs collectively but they were supportive of their local MP as they could see more clearly the work that they did.

## 7. How well the House supports the work of MPs

It is important in this section to start with the finding that generally, interviewees praised the services provided by the House: *"Frankly, the quality of the services we get is outstandingly good ... I think we are very lucky."* Some areas, such as the Commons Library and Committee Office staff, were spoken of very highly. The Library especially came in for praise, with some interviewees describing it as *"world class"*: *"The Library is wonderful - one of the things I will miss particularly. The access to the really high quality research and information."* Even so, a few MPs felt that briefings and debate packs had become longer and were therefore less accessible in the short time they had to look through them. Select committee staff were seen as effective and producing high quality work.

The Education Service was also strongly supported, especially the benefit that was gained from travel grants that allowed students from outside London to visit Parliament.

Those MPs who had stood down praised the exit arrangements that the House had put in place. The support provided was seen as very well organised and sensitively handled. And Hansard was also praised: *"This is an excellent service. It is never inaccurate, and the staff are always courteous and quick."*

It was important, interviewees felt, for the House to focus on what will help MPs do their job and to have impact. There was sometimes an impression that House services were not designed for the benefit of MPs – and one even suggested that perhaps *"MPs were an irritation who got in the way of them running their departments"*. One suggested reason for this might be that a gap exists between MPs and some aspects of the House authorities – at least in this quote:

*MPs want services that will help them carry out their duties more effectively but don't know if these services exist; the House Service provides services but does not understand the work of MPs.*

There were two key suggestions for how House departments could be improved overall. Firstly by making the services that are already available more visible. For example, one MP felt that the Library needed to be more proactive in showcasing what they offered, including sending out debate packs, which were currently hard to find. Or that all House services could make more use of 'drop in sessions' to showcase what they offered for both MPs and their staff. The second key suggestion was to increase the support available for constituency staff. Some practical examples included making more use of short videos so that constituency staff, along with the public, could see how the House worked and what MPs' time was taken up with in Westminster. Or the House could consider running webchats to enable constituency staff to ask questions of officials about House processes.

Note that following the 2014 research, a number of actions were put in place to respond to MPs' detailed comments on services. The appointment of a Director General is also focused on ensuring responsiveness to the needs of MPs and the implementation of the forthcoming Director General's review will strengthen services further.

There were four key sections of House services that MPs discussed in more detail: the arrangements for induction as they arrived in Parliament, along with training and development services more generally; accommodation allocation, especially rooms when MPs first arrived in Parliament; the digital technology and support provided by the Parliamentary Digital Service; and the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority.

### ***Induction, training and development***

When asking about induction, interviewees recalled their own first experiences of Parliament, which it is important to note that for some had been many years before. As mentioned above, the House Service brought in a radically different induction schedule for the 2015 intake, which of course interviewees will not have experienced, and subsequent evaluation has been very positive. Our sample were of course reflecting on previous inductions. Some described how previous employment had helped them make a smooth transition into working in Parliament. For example, some had been a local councillor, or a parliamentary intern or an academic.

For other MPs though, their first impressions of the House when they joined in earlier Parliaments were not as good: some described the process of trying to get established in the House as "*complete chaos*", others that it had been an "*extremely difficult time*" with "*little support*". Even those MPs who had good first impressions did feel that it took a long time to learn about how Parliament operated and finding the support that they needed to start being an effective MP.

MPs who had been in Parliament for some time already felt that the induction that the House provided was significantly better than it was, whereas previously it had been "*minimal*". Something mentioned specifically as an excellent innovation where interviewees were aware of it was the 2015 'buddy scheme', where new MPs in 2015 were paired with a member of House staff who are able to show them around and answer initial questions as they try to get to grips with working in Parliament. There was similar support for the mentor scheme that political parties offered to new MPs.

For some interviewees, there were so many aspects of the role of MP that no induction could adequately cover them and so "*learning on the job*" was the only option. Others felt that MPs may not take advantage of the induction services that are on offer for reasons of pride. This led to some resistance to inductions and training in general: "*most MPs are completely self-skilled and not good at attending training*". There was also a feeling that MPs are too busy to be able to fit in time for continuous professional development (CPD).

Others however felt that it was the very breadth of issues that MPs needed help on that meant induction, training and CPD was vital. The areas suggested that the induction programme should cover included: parliamentary procedure; understanding the House; legal, finance and accounting; press management; public speaking; running their office including HR and staffing support, budgeting; time management; handling policy areas such as the economy, foreign affairs and welfare; providing support to constituents; and handling those with mental health difficulties.

What MPs felt least in need of support in often related to their previous experience: those who had for example run their own business felt more able to cope with setting up their office, staff recruitment and budgeting. One very practical solution was that the House could develop a sat nav to help MPs find their way around the parliamentary estate, in the same way that the US Congress does for its members. (Security issues of course would need consideration.)

Some MPs felt that the timing of some induction sessions as they arrived - when they were really trying to get to grips with getting offices up and running and staff recruitment – would be better being provided in a phased way during the first six months to a year. They had found it difficult to know during initial induction what would be most useful. But after some time they had more context so as to get most from the training sessions they had subsequently attended. However it was pointed out by one interviewee that ‘refresher courses’ can be difficult to access if an MP had been in post for some time and feels they should already know about a particular issue.

Where the House did provide training, interviewees wanted it to be targeted and provide concrete help, with examples taken directly from areas that they might have to deal with, and how the House might assist them. This method was also suggested when MPs began to take up additional roles within the House, such as becoming a member of a select committee so they fully understood their roles and responsibilities. Inductions and training for MPs’ staff was also strongly supported. This was especially useful when, as one MP described, he employs staff that complement his own skills in order to ensure a broad skills set within his team. The previous reports in this series have also identified similar issues as those discussed below and the House has created additional courses and services to tackle these issues.

### **Accommodation**

Almost all of the interviewees discussed the length of time it took to be allocated an office when first arriving in Parliament. Having to hot desk while this took place was a key barrier to be able to start working quickly. Some spoke of having to “camp out” in the Pugin Room while others described sharing very cramped offices until more suitable accommodation was found. There was frustration expressed that the allocation of rooms was undertaken by the party whips and some suggestions that this role should be instead given to House authorities. Others highlighted that the financial aspect of being a new MP is very difficult. After fighting an election campaign, with all the expense that entails, the new MP then finds themselves having to find accommodation in London as well as set up their office. (This was addressed for the 2015 intake by providing pre-booked hotel rooms.) It was thought that the House compared badly to private companies in how well it handled new staff arriving, and being helped to find accommodation and provided with offices, phones and email addresses so they could start work quickly:

*I had no office, no staff, no telephone or PC for some time. I did, however, have a ribbon on which to hang my sword.*

**Information technology**

The other key problem was information technology and related support provided by the Parliamentary Digital Service (previously called the Parliamentary Information Communication and Technology). MPs felt that they needed excellent IT and support in order to be able to do their jobs effectively. At the time of interviewing in 2015 they did not yet feel that the required quality of support was provided: *“This [the increased use of email] emphasises the need for top quality IT support – at times the House do not provide this. Systems fail, or run at a snails’ pace and the team you contact to deal with it are extremely variable in their ability to help.”* Issues took too long to resolve, the network access was slow, and recurring issues were treated as new each time so were not cleared. Constituency staff were felt to be particularly unsupported by IT staff. These comments will not come as a surprise to the Digital Service, since the changes of 2015 are designed to start the programme of improvement and implementation is well underway.

There was support for using digital technologies to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of Parliament. MPs liked the roll-out of iPads as they now found it easier to read and respond to emails. But it was thought that the use of digital tools could go further. A number of MPs highlighted electronic voting, as long as it could be done securely, as a way to improve the efficiency of House business.

**IPSA**

The IPSA rules for claiming expenses were seen as not very accessible and more guidance or training for MPs and their staff would be welcomed. Despite being in place for six years, there was still significant uncertainty about what could be claimed and what could not. The rules were experienced as overly bureaucratic and inflexible. There was a concern from interviewees that IPSA did not yet have sufficient understanding of how MPs operated, for example having to split their time – and therefore expenses – between Westminster and their constituency.

This sometimes led to MPs paying for legitimate expenses out of their own funds, placing an additional burden on them. As claims made were public, MPs were conscious that mistakes in their claims would be reported, leading to negative press reports. They noted that appeals, when they found in favour of the MP, were rarely reported. It was also perceived that sometimes IPSA guidance contradicted that provided by other parts of the House, for example on the redundancy preparations for staff in the run up to an election. Note too that there was support for the way IPSA had handled exit services for MPs when standing down from their positions.

On practical issues, it was felt that IPSA’s online claiming system had not been designed with the user’s needs in mind, although it was seen to be improving. The hours when IPSA could be contacted had been extended which was significantly more convenient. And although individual staff were helpful when speaking to them on the phone, MPs often reached a different member of staff each time and so had to explain their situation frequently. It was thought that the time taken to make a decision could be improved, especially in cases where payment for an MP’s staff was involved where delays could lead to financial difficulties. Many MPs said that they had delegated dealing with IPSA to staff. But that it was now taking up a significant amount of staff time each week. This was not good value for money when the staff could be dealing with constituents or other issues.

## 8. Appendices

### a. Interview template

#### Interview Guide - Exit Interviews

##### Interviewer introduction

Thank you so much for seeing us. On behalf of the Administration Committee a research study is being undertaken to understand the experiences of Members in office who have decided to stand down at the end of this Parliament/who have not been re-elected at the end of this Parliament. MPs' experiences can offer tremendous insight into the successes and failings of the House service while they were in office and what should be done to improve the services for newly elected MPs.

We wish to approach this in a very open way so that you can tell us what is important rather than presenting you with a long list of narrow tick-box questions. The interview should take less than an hour and during it my colleague will be taking notes of the session.

All the information will be treated confidentially and when we report back to the Administration Committee, we will anonymise all comments and suggestions. We will take great care to protect your confidentiality. Of course, you don't have to talk about anything you don't want to and you may end the interview at any time.

Please let me know if you would like to know more about this exercise or, are you happy if I start off.

##### About you

We need to know:

- what motivated you to become an MP
- your expectations when elected
- your first impressions when you started as an MP

##### About your work

We need to know:

- the nature of the job, including how you contemplated the role
- the factors that helped you to be effective and the barriers you faced
- how you balanced and managed Parliamentary and Constituency work
- how the Parliamentary experience can be improved
- where the House could have helped to make you even more effective or to alleviate any of the challenges and pressures
- the knowledge, skills and abilities needed to fulfil an MP's responsibilities
- how (if) you achieved a work-life balance
- what you viewed as your accomplishments as an MP

**About IPSA**

We need to know:

- the quality of service provided by IPSA
- experience of dealing with IPSA staff
- views on pay, pensions, expenses being handled independently
- views on the guidance document/scheme for Members standing down at the General Election (probe on MP Bulletins, IPSA website, IPSA General Election website and specific finance communications)
- any suggestions for improvements

**About Hansard**

We need to know:

- the quality of service provided by Hansard
- views on Hansard's accuracy and timeliness
- impact of Hansard to a new Member
- how their office staff use the Official Report

**About Public Perceptions of Parliament and Politicians**

We need to know:

- the public perceptions of Parliament and Politicians and how this affected you
- how do we improve public perceptions
- how do we make Parliament more open and responsive

**Additional comments, next steps and thank you**

- is there anything more you would like to add
- as mentioned earlier, all the information will be treated confidentially and we will anonymise all comments and suggestions
- thank you for your time and best wishes for the future

**b. List of House staff involved in study**

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