



House of Commons
Administration Committee

**Information and
Communication
Technology Services
for Members: Response
to the Committee's
Second Report of
Session 2006–07**

**First Special Report of
Session 2007–08**

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The Administration Committee

The Administration Committee is appointed by the House of Commons to consider the services provided for and by the House and to make recommendations thereon to the House of Commons Commission or to the Speaker.

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

Mr Bob Ainsworth MP (*Labour, Coventry North East*)
Mr Mark Harper MP (*Conservative, Forest of Dean*)
Helen Jones MP (*Labour, Warrington North*)
Mr Andrew Robathan MP (*Conservative, Blaby*)

Powers

The committee is one of the departmental select committees, the powers of which are set out in House of Commons Standing Orders, principally in SO No 139. These are available on the Internet via www.parliament.uk.

Publication

The Reports and evidence of the Committee are published by The Stationery Office by Order of the House. All publications of the Committee are on the Internet and can be accessed via www.parliament.uk/ac

Committee staff

The current staff of the Committee are Kate Emms and Rhiannon Hollis (Clerks), Dawn Brown (Senior Office Clerk) and Jane Lauder (Secretary).

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First Special Report

We published our Second Report of Session 2006–07 on Information and Communication Technology Services for Members as HC 498 on 8 May 2007. The response to this Report was received from the House of Commons Commission on 26 November 2007. It is set out below.

Response

Introduction

Committee Recommendation 1

The feedback we have received from Members since we were appointed in July 2005 has made us aware of a significant undertone of dissatisfaction with the ICT services provided by Parliament. We want to ensure that processes are in place to enable appropriate Members' services to be delivered efficiently and to an agreed standard. (Paragraph 3)

1. PICT monitors closely Members' feedback on its services. It is aware that while some Members are very satisfied with the service provided, others are deeply frustrated because the service does not always meet their expectations. To some extent this arises because a significant and growing proportion of Members expect a type and level of service which goes beyond what PICT is funded and mandated to provide.

2. We support the need to ensure that processes are in place to deliver efficient, appropriate and agreed services. Since the beginning of summer 2006 PICT has begun a series of service improvement initiatives. The timing of the inquiry means that some of the improvements that have been achieved will not have been reflected in the evidence that was submitted. For example, the Service Desk has reduced the average waiting time for callers from approximately 4 minutes a year ago to 30 seconds now. Further initiatives are underway as part of an ongoing performance improvement project within PICT.

Departmental structure and goals

Committee Recommendation 2

There is undoubtedly a risk that PICT will be perceived as less personal and less understanding of the needs of specific groups of customers than the smaller dedicated services that preceded it. Members and other customers of PICT will not appreciate the benefits of a centralised IT service if it is unable to deliver the disparate and distributed services they expect and to support them in a timely and efficient manner. (Paragraph 31)

3. Noted. PICT recognises this risk, and actively seeks to counter it. At Westminster, PICT has recently launched a local drop-in service for Members and their staff in room 112 Norman Shaw South, known as PICT Local, where simple service faults can be fixed quickly. There is also a model office where equipment that is available for loan and purchase is displayed and can be ordered. Comments under item 24 also relate to this.

Committee Recommendation 3

We recognise that a number of the recommendations in this Report may require additional funding from various budgets. However, the re-organisation and rationalisation carried out by PICT since its establishment should have liberated resources, both human and financial, for redeployment. We ask that PICT should report to us on the savings achieved to date from this rationalisation, on the redeployment of resources and on the extent to which additional funding may still be required. (Paragraph 32)

4. Noted. PICT will prepare an annual report at the end of each financial year covering, performance, new developments and financial activity during the preceding year. This will include a report on savings and how resources have been redeployed.

Committee Recommendation 4

We recommend the establishment of a Members' ICT customer forum to discuss the development of Members' ICT services. (Paragraph 35)

5. We welcome this recommendation and recognise that establishing better lines of communication with Members and their staff will be mutually beneficial. Once the Committee has selected a Chair, PICT will work with him or her to establish the Forum. This will include liaising with the Advisory Panel with regard to their representation, as well as helping to identify other Forum participants.

Committee Recommendation 5

We recommend that a small number of dedicated PICT staff should be responsible for communicating with Members and their staff, gathering feedback on existing services, and understanding how services might be improved. (Paragraph 36)

6. Agreed. The IT needs of Members and their staff currently account for a large proportion of PICT's work. For example, approximately 80% of the Service Desk, Service Engineers and Customer Relations teams' time relates to providing services and answering queries and faults reported by Members and their staff. In order to improve the co-ordination of this service, a dedicated member of PICT staff, the House of Commons Members' Computing Officer, is based at our new local service in Norman Shaw South and is Members' key contact in PICT, concerned only with the requirements of Members and their staff. To give greater management focus to Members' IT, the PICT management board roles have been re-organised to ensure that a Director will have the time to lead work in this area. This will include the development of plans and proposals for the provision of more responsive services in constituency offices.

Committee Recommendation 6

We and the customer forum would benefit from being able to consider key statistical information which PICT should collect on its work with Members. (Paragraph 37)

7. Agreed. PICT will report on its performance to the Administration Committee and the Members' ICT Forum in addition to periodic reports to the Advisory Panel on Members' Allowances. Reports on PICT's performance are already prepared, and these will be given a

sharper focus towards Member needs. The clearer identification of agreed service levels with Members will ensure that PICT reports against the things that matter to Members and their staff. The annual report referred to under item 3 will cover PICT's performance. Additional reporting will be offered to the Forum and Committee on a quarterly basis.

Committee Recommendation 7

A revised Members' ICT strategy now needs to be developed in consultation with us and other relevant bodies, together with a roadmap for delivery. This roadmap needs to be tested against Members' genuine needs and expectations, then overlaid with clear deliverables with dates and milestones. Appropriate service levels should be agreed with us, widely communicated, and regularly measured. There must be a process of regular reporting back to us on achievements and failures. (Paragraph 38)

8. Agreed. The recommendations made in this report lay a firm foundation for a strategic approach. PICT will prepare a Members' ICT strategy and roadmap for implementation in consultation with the Administration Committee and Members' ICT Forum, and report on its progress regularly.

Stability v flexibility

Committee Recommendation 8

No-one should be allowed to connect systems to the Parliamentary Network or to carry out activity on these systems which might endanger the security of other systems or compromise the stability of the Network. PICT should, however, aim to provide as flexible a service as possible within this one constraint. (Paragraph 50)

9. We welcome this recommendation. Within its budget, PICT will seek to provide as flexible a service as possible. Where current budget levels do not permit, this will be reported to the Committee.

Committee Recommendation 9

We recommend that PICT, in co-operation with us and with the Advisory Panel on Members' Allowances, should explore extending the range of equipment and service options available to Members. One option for exploration should be the possibility of procuring more than one specification of standard desktop or laptop from which Members might choose. Another should be the extent to which non-standard peripherals, such as printers, should be allowed to connect to machines with Parliamentary Network connections. (Paragraph 51)

10. Agreed. PICT will consider additional service and equipment options and report back to the Committee and to the Advisory Panel. PICT will also consider alternative specifications of personal computers and laptops, but would recommend that these are acquired from a single manufacturer or reseller to ensure that the processes for support and contract management remain manageable. PICT recognises that the same manufacturer may not always be the best provider of printers and other peripherals. PICT will explore the options available under the current contract and will also ensure that more

flexibility is available in any future procurement. PICT notes that recommendation 29 is also relevant.

Committee Recommendation 10

Members who install their own applications locally may, by doing so, make it more difficult for PICT to guarantee them the same core service level it is expected to provide to other customers. (Paragraph 52)

11. Noted. We are grateful to the Committee for reminding Members of this issue.

Committee Recommendation 11

Rather than reducing Members' flexibility to install applications on centrally provided equipment, there should be greater clarity as to the level of support PICT is able to provide and the specific applications it is resourced to support. (Paragraph 53)

12. PICT does not apply any restriction to the amount or type of software that Members and their staff can install at present. PICT's conditions of supply note that we reserve the right to remove any software that is found to interfere with the proper operation of a piece of equipment or with the Parliamentary infrastructure. PICT needs to retain this condition. In the future PICT proposes to work with the top five or so suppliers of software to Members (including the main providers of casework software), to allow them to test their products on PICT's standard build. This would also provide an opportunity for them to share their development plans with PICT, and for PICT to share its plans with them. In this way Members will be able to maintain their flexibility and PICT will be able to offer a more helpful support model. The development of a service catalogue will help to confirm the level of support that Members and their staff can expect and will provide the basis for future consultation on services and their communication. PICT proposes to convey and reinforce this information via a number of channels: the proposed ICT Forum; the Administration Committee; a three-times-a-year news bulletin to all Members; and on the intranet. Recommendation 23 is also relevant.

Committee Recommendation 12

There should also be a greater effort to communicate to Members and their staff the implications of installing unsupported applications on centrally provided equipment for future support of this equipment. (Paragraph 53)

13. Agreed. We welcome this recommendation and PICT plans to use the communication channels mentioned in item 11 to provide regular updates and guidance.

Committee Recommendation 13

Individual Members, not PICT, must be held responsible for ensuring that any software they or their staffs install on parliamentary equipment is properly licensed. (Paragraph 54)

14. Noted. PICT's conditions of supply already highlight this, but more communication is required. PICT will not install any Member's software without confirming that it is properly licensed first.

Committee Recommendation 14

Development of browser-based services would allow those Members who choose not to use centrally provided equipment to access some centrally provided services. (Paragraph 55)

15. We welcome these observations. PICT will be reviewing its remote access services during this financial year and planning for the next generation of access. The advantages of browser-based services will be a feature of that assessment. In addition PICT's overall ICT strategy will be promoting web-based access to Parliamentary and other applications and information sources. It should be noted that browser-based services will not eliminate the need for hardware support, nor will they avoid system issues if other applications are loaded to a personal computer or laptop. There will remain a substantial support requirement. If PICT is expected to provide support for this equipment, then the argument for maintaining a degree of standardisation remains.

Constituency provision

Committee Recommendations 15

If there is to be a reliable service in the constituency, PICT will need to clearly define and closely manage standards for elements of the service outside its direct control. (Paragraph 60)

16. Agreed. PICT is meeting with its third-party suppliers on this matter. In the case of constituency connections, PICT aims to avoid the need for Members and their staff to have to deal directly with third-party suppliers. Future plans will present costed options to achieve this.

Committee Recommendation 16

We recommend that PICT should further research and seek to extend the availability and functionality of browser-based services, including 'browser-based VPN'. (Paragraph 61)

17. Agreed. The comments on recommendation 14 apply here also.

Committee Recommendation 17

We welcome the proposal that support services should be provided at times when Members are likely to be in the constituency, as well as when the House is sitting. (Paragraph 64)

18. We welcome the Committee's support for its approach. PICT already has work in hand to assist in this area and recently agreed with its third-party provider to offer Saturday installations at Members' home addresses. This was publicised in PICT's June 2007 news bulletin. PICT is also working on plans to offer longer opening hours and support to Members and their staff at weekends. This development will be included in the roadmap. PICT's constituency support project will be developed on the assumption that on-site support may be needed at weekends at both Members' home and constituency addresses.

Committee Recommendation 18

We welcome the proposal that the PICT Service Desk should become a single point of contact for all services related to Parliamentary ICT, with PICT staff rather than Members managing the interface with contracted services. (Paragraph 65)

19. We welcome the Committee's support for this initiative. The comments made under recommendation 15 are relevant here also.

Committee Recommendation 19

We recommend that PICT should continue to improve the speed, quality and range of support and training that can be provided by remote means to Members' constituencies across the country. (Paragraph 66)

20. PICT's training strategy identifies remote training as a key objective. Proposals are currently being developed which will be included in the Members' ICT strategy and roadmap. PICT will work closely with the Department of Finance and Administration to complement the existing training arrangements.

Committee Recommendation 20

We recommend that PICT should commence market investigation so that we and other relevant bodies can be presented before the end of the year with a range of costed options for the provision of regionally based support units. (Paragraph 67)

21. We agree with this recommendation and PICT will provide costed options by the end of 2007/08 financial year. However, an increase in the provision from the Members Estimate to fund an extended service would have to be agreed by the MEC and the House. This will need to be in the context of the recommendations of the forthcoming SSRB report.

Committee Recommendation 21

We recommend that PICT should conduct initial market testing of clearly specified options for managing local area networks in constituency offices and should return to us in due course with the results. (Paragraph 71)

22. Agreed.

Committee Recommendation 22

We invite the Advisory Panel on Members' Allowances to consider whether to pursue the idea of differentiated service levels for constituency office ICT support and to investigate how Members might be charged for this. (Paragraph 73)

23. PICT will explore options for this with the Advisory Panel. Differentiated service levels could be linked to Members' choices about more, or less, standard equipment. The Director of PICT and the Director of Finance and Administration will seek the advice of the Advisory Panel on Members' Allowances on the principles to be applied in this area.

Committee Recommendation 23

PICT cannot be expected to support the wide range of software that Members choose to install on their centrally provided computers, but it makes eminent sense for them to work more closely with the principal suppliers of software to Members to identify and resolve support issues. (Paragraph 75)

24. Agreed. The comments under recommendation 11 apply here.

Committee Recommendation 24

We look forward to visiting the 'model' constituency office being set up by PICT, and invite other Members who are interested to do the same. (Paragraph 76)

25. Comments under recommendation 2 apply. PICT has now established a presence in the northern Estate close to Members' offices which Members and their staff can visit and where they can discuss their computing needs and issues with PICT staff. The location includes a full suite of the equipment that Members can either receive as loan equipment or purchase. The model office is configured to reflect the way an office in a constituency could work. The encouragement that the Committee has given to other Members to visit it is most welcome.

Customer Service

Committee Recommendation 25

Service levels need to be agreed for those cases where the Service Desk is unable to resolve a problem at initial contact: these should cover both call back times, and the way in which the issues raised are logged and processed. An issue should only be regarded as closed once resolution has been achieved to the customer's satisfaction. There must be clear and widely publicised steps of escalation that flow automatically if an issue remains unresolved beyond a specified period of time. Ultimately escalation should reach the Director of PICT. (Paragraph 83)

26. PICT has begun to address these matters and recognises that it is an area where the quality of performance needs to improve. Last year PICT started a series of initiatives to improve the handling of calls to the Service Desk. The initiatives, which are ongoing and extend into all parts of PICT, aim to address, amongst others, the matters raised in this recommendation. To date this has included clarifying the processes for handling calls and ensuring that calls are not closed before the customer has confirmed that the matter has been resolved. PICT will ensure that the levels of service offered and agreed are subject to consultation with the Committee and, when established, the Members' ICT Forum. PICT will publish a formal complaints procedure to be used if any Member remains unhappy with the service provided. The final point of escalation is to the Director of PICT.

Committee Recommendation 26

We recommend that PICT should continue to offer 'best endeavours' back office support in areas for which it is not responsible, where it can do so safely and within its existing resources;

but where this is the case, the situation should be made absolutely clear to the customer, to avoid creating unrealistic expectations of support in future. (Paragraph 87)

27. Agreed. An agreed understanding of what ‘best endeavours’ means will assist with achieving the clarity that is requested. PICT will develop some definitions and review them with the Committee.

Providing IT equipment to Members

Committee Recommendation 27

If it has not already begun, we recommend that work should commence at once on ensuring that there are no contractual obstacles to the speedy roll-out of ICT equipment to new Members after the next general election, whenever it may take place. (Paragraph 95)

28. Work is already underway as part of the House’s response to the Administration Committee’s report on Post-Election Services. Any early election would be covered by the existing contract of supply. The lessons learned from the last election will be reflected in revised processes. PICT contracts of supply run for up to five years. Any new procurement will need to be started soon to allow any new supplier, if one is selected, sufficient time to establish themselves before they were invited to support an election.

Committee Recommendation 28

Other planning issues should also be decoupled from the roll-out, and we recommend that PICT’s proposals for a dedicated engineering team trained to understand Members’ requirements, an agreed (and contractually enforceable) service level on which we and the Advisory Panel on Members’ Allowances should be consulted, and a more closely managed deployment schedule should be implemented as soon as possible. (Paragraph 96)

29. Agreed.

Committee Recommendation 29

We recommend that PICT should investigate cases in which other public sector organisations have procured ICT equipment from a pool of suppliers rather than from a single supplier, should seek information on whether this procurement method was successful, and should return to us with a recommendation as to whether it might be applied in the parliamentary environment. (Paragraph 97)

30. Agreed. The comments under recommendation 9 are relevant, and PICT will examine how other public sector organisations have arranged their procurement of these services and equipment. PICT is taking advice from the Office of Government Commerce (OGC) on best practice in ICT procurement. PICT will report back to the Committee by the end of the year.

Committee Recommendation 30

The price of centrally provided equipment includes a substantial element for licensing, and for four years of maintenance and support. This is far more extensive than that normally included in the price of equipment available from other sources. (Paragraph 99)

31. The Committee's recognition that the total package which PICT provides should not be compared with high street prices is welcome.

New Services

Committee Recommendation 31

We recommend that options should be brought to us before the end of 2007 for increasing the availability of audio-conferencing facilities at Westminster—both in Members' offices and in meeting rooms—and in the constituency. (Paragraph 106)

32. PICT will explore the options and report back to the Committee on audio-conferencing. On a related matter, PICT has started to give the subject of video-conferencing consideration and plans to bring forward options within the context of the improved constituency support project by the end of 2007/08.

Committee Recommendation 32

We recommend that the wireless network in Portcullis House should be made permanent. (Paragraph 109)

33. The interim solution has been upgraded and made permanent. Existing wireless users will be upgraded before the new service is publicised more widely.

Committee Recommendation 33

We look forward to the imminent extension of wireless networking to areas including the House of Commons Library and Committee Corridor. (Paragraph 110)

34. This work has been completed. Existing wireless users will be upgraded before the new service is publicised more widely.

Committee Recommendation 34

We recommend that PICT should continue to extend wireless networking across the Estate, and invite PICT to draw up costed proposals for consideration by the Finance and Services Committee. These proposals should include the provision of wireless access in meeting rooms in the Palace, Portcullis House and other outbuildings, in the Library in Derby Gate, and in larger shared offices where existing cabling is a limitation to the efficient use of space. We also welcome PICT's plans to test wireless networking in constituency offices, and we ask PICT to come forward with proposals to allow the wireless functionality of Members' centrally provided laptops to be used as widely as can be achieved with reasonable security. (Paragraph 112)

35. PICT can see the benefits that wireless technology can offer Members and their staff. However, the take up of wireless in Portcullis House has been modest so far, despite regular publicity. The Committee will wish to note that to justify additional investment beyond that already planned will require a clear demonstration of demand for the service and value for money. With regard to the constituency office proposals, test equipment is being acquired for evaluation at present. Members whose centrally-provided laptops have been set up for wireless access are able to use them both within Westminster and in other third party locations.

Committee Recommendation 35

We welcome the addition of mobile computing devices to the catalogue of equipment available to Members, and encourage PICT to continue promoting their availability. (Paragraph 113)

36. Agreed. PICT is currently working on the delivery of a small number of value-added services for these devices that could make them more attractive to Members.

Committee Recommendation 36

As new technologies become available, we recommend that PICT should consider conducting further pilots involving a selection of Members wherever this is appropriate. We intend to keep the development of wireless and mobile computing under review. (Paragraph 114)

37. Agreed. PICT is keen to ensure that the services it offers to Members are contemporary and meet the developing IT needs of Members. It intends to conduct further pilots when this is appropriate as the Committee recommends.

Committee Recommendation 37

We recommend that options should be brought to us before the end of 2007 for new Web-based services hosted on the Parliamentary Intranet, including the facility to manage allowances and to book Refreshment Department facilities and meeting rooms online. (Paragraph 115)

38. Agreed. The comments made under recommendation 14 apply in part. PICT will report to the Committee on options by the end of 2007/08.

Committee Recommendation 38

Electronic storage is inexpensive, and in our view increased provision would represent value for money and would be appreciated by Members. We recommend that Members' mailboxes and network drives should be increased in size: mailboxes to up to 500 MB. PICT should also ensure that Members and their staff are aware of best practice in the management of their mailboxes at the same time as mailbox size is increased. (Paragraph 117)

39. PICT has put the technical infrastructure in place to support this recommendation and this was publicised in the June issue of its news bulletin "Dispatches". At present Parliament's electronic storage costs exceed £900,000 per year. Storage may appear cheap,

but costs associated with its management and retrieval are high and can rise quickly. Whilst PICT can increase the size of mailboxes, this is rarely a substitute for effective data management. Therefore to accompany the increase in mail box sizes, PICT will also be issuing guidance on e-mail management and offering training to those who wish to receive it. PICT is reviewing and implementing improvements to its storage arrangements more generally and this will help to mitigate some of these issues.

Committee Recommendation 39

We recommend that Members should be provided on request with a second personal e-mail address on the Parliamentary Network. (Paragraph 119)

40. Work is underway to present options to the Committee with regard to the naming conventions and management of such mailboxes. PICT also intends to address at the same time a number of other issues associated with mailboxes and e-mail addresses that have been brought to their and the Committee's attention recently.