

MANAGEMENT BOARD

General Election planning and post-Election offering

Paper from John Bengler Chair of the General Election Planning Group

For the meeting on 16 April 2015

Purpose

1. The paper seeks to update the Board on the current state of preparations for the General Election and follow on activities.

Action for the Board

2. The Board are asked to consider achievements to date, current planning and future development, and assess whether these match their expectations.

Consultation and equality analysis

3. The General Election Planning Group (GEPG) and its core activities have been subject to an equality impact assessment. This has helped shape our offerings such as the NMRA and Contact Centre to ensure they can meet the needs of all new Members.

Background

4. The Board last reviewed preparations for the General Election at the January meeting. Since then:
 - a) The Members' Handbook, Members' Staff Handbook and New Members' Guidebook have been revised and published.

- b) The Dissolution Guidance for Members' staff and the Members' Staff Handbook have been revised in response to feedback received from both Members and Members' staff at party briefing events (see below) and constituency open days. The Guidance has been published in versions for Standing and non-Standing Members.
- c) Member were sent the relevant hard copy of this guidance. In addition, briefings have been provided to the political parties at their request, information has been passed on via Member newsletters and there have been a series of stands in the Portcullis House atrium promoting different aspects of dissolution.
- d) The emphasis for induction arrangements continues to be focused on how the House supports Members from the moment they are elected, in line with feedback received from the Administration Committee, Member-representatives on the GEPG, and Party Whips.
- e) Ongoing dialogue with the Political Parties has continued to refine the Election offering. This has helped ensure that the programme of induction, along with the Contact Centre and NMRA, matches the needs and expectations of Members.
- f) All newly elected Members will be contacted over the weekend following the election to discuss practical arrangements, including travel and accommodation bookings. Hotel rooms have been reserved for Members who need them. The contact team will find out when Members are likely to arrive (the majority are expected on Monday 11th May), explain what they can expect on arrival, and answer any queries they may have. Members will also be told about the staff buddy scheme which is a key part of our customer-focused approach.
- g) Offerings for Members not returned and standing down continue to be developed. All Members who have announced their intention to stand down have been contacted by the Members' HR Advice Service, offering a combined meeting with IPSA to discuss staffing issues.

Dissolution

5. Dissolution was the first of the significant milestones for the General Election Planning Group (GEPG). PDS and the Pass Office successfully deactivated the relevant network accounts and security passes. ALS and PED have supported Members standing down in clearing their offices and have commenced accommodation works during the dissolution period.

6. Special arrangements for the leaders of political parties were put in place allowing small numbers of passholders access to the Estate for non-campaigning purposes. The offer was not taken up by all of the parties.
7. The issue of Members standing again identifying themselves as Members during the dissolution period has so far generated the most work and related media enquiries. The extent to which the House should be involving itself in advice to Members on these issues is perhaps something to be considered in the lessons learned exercise. The Electoral Commission has not shown much willingness to be proactive in giving advice. We may want to discuss with the Electoral Commission well in advance of the next election what message they wish to promulgate to Members, and limit ourselves to that, and to technical issues within our purview such as the PDVN.
8. The Communications team have prepared the returning officer packs and distributed them to every returning officer across the UK. To address a key lesson from 2010 the team have been tracking the delivery of every letter and following up to confirm receipt. To further supplement this approach briefing materials have been prepared which will be distributed by the Electoral Commission as part of the Returning Officers' training pack.
9. During the Dissolution period, various rehearsals will be carried out in preparation for the Election. The main one will be on Friday 24th April when over 200 volunteers will test the New Members' Reception Area (NMRA), the Chamber briefing, Swearing In and a Chamber evacuation exercise. Volunteers have been sourced from across the House and Government Departments. The majority of volunteers come from outside the House Service, which we think will offer added realism since they will not normally be familiar with the buildings or with the administration of a Parliament. Each volunteer will be assigned an identity as a new Member and various roles will be given to them. One particular focus of the rehearsal day will be the flow of volunteers through certain pressure points in the NMRA, notably the handover of IT and the provision of information to IPSA. We are modelling for peak pressure of 40 new Members arriving in a one hour period. The GEPG will meet after the rehearsal to effect any planning changes it prompts.

Current planning

10. The project is currently ahead of target in respect of the majority of work streams. Where delays have occurred, GEPG have agreed revised forecast dates within acceptable timeframes.

11. Multiple publications have now been completed by the Communications team (p6, Annex A). Election branding has been consistently applied, and the central communications team has acted as a central clearing point for any proposed communications in line with the previous decision by the Board.
12. Substantial assurance has been received by GEPG both on the delivery and suitability of the products being produced. Planning has been subject to review by Party Whips and the Member-representatives on the General Election Planning Group with a high level of buy in secured – addressing a key lesson learnt from 2010.
13. Internal reviews carried out by the project team have provided assurance that the lessons learnt from 2010 have been acted on and appropriate measures put in place.
14. Working with the media team, an exercise was carried out to identify possible media risks in advance and agree standard media lines. This was further supplemented by a media briefing led by the Clerk of the House and the Chair of GEPG to over 60 journalists.
15. The Chair of the General Election planning group will brief senior leaders on the induction process for new Members at the next Senior Leaders' event.
16. Individual work stream reports are contained within Annex A which provides a more detailed view of current planning arrangements.

Future development and issues identified

17. GEPG have been keen to ensure that the offering provided matches the needs expressed by Members and their staff alongside the goals within the strategy for the House of Commons Service. Some concerns remain that where an enhanced service is planned for a limited period of time which will then be withdrawn or decreased soon after the Election, the perception of a decrease in service levels may be felt by Members. These include
 - a. Training and support by PDS. Current plans see the recruitment of a third-party training company which will provide initial IT training for up to 2 months after the Election. As no comparable service follow-on service is planned this may be viewed in a negative light.
 - b. HR advice provided by Members' HR advice service - The need for more proactive support for Members was identified both in the Administration Committee report and in the Members and Members' staff interview project. As a

consequence the Members' HR advice service will proactively contact every Members' office after the Election to offer support. Additional staffing will be found from within DHRC up to the summer adjournment. There is a risk that if demand remains high after this period there may not be sufficient resources to cope. DHRC have recognised this potential demand and have put mitigations in place, which includes the training of other HR staff to be able to provide extra support. (p12, Annex A)

- c. Support to Members' Staff. Since the interview project a new approach to engaging with Members' Staff both in Westminster and the constituencies has begun across the House Service. Consequent benefits to Members, and an increase in the usage of House services, have been clearly demonstrated. This approach is also consistent with our new strategic emphasis on customer-focused service. Without GEPG as a catalyst there is a danger of a loss of momentum potentially undoing the successful work so far. A number of options are currently being developed to address this between OCE, DIS and DHRC.

- 18. It currently looks increasingly unlikely that PDS will deliver a new guest wi-fi service for Members' own devices at the start of the new Parliament. Members will still be able to access Internet Direct, but this is more cumbersome than what has been envisaged hitherto. (p16, Annex A)

Financial and procurement implications

- 19. With the Board's approval further work, including a gap analysis of existing systems, will be carried out to address the points in para 17. Should further costs be identified these will be presented to the Board.
- 20. Current spending across the Workstreams are within budgets with no exceptions reported to GEPG.

Comparators

- 21. Work has been undertaken with the Northern Ireland Assembly, Welsh Assembly, Scottish Parliament and European Parliament to review and refine our offering for the election. Staff from the Welsh Assembly, Scottish Parliament and Northern Ireland Assembly will be visiting us in the week commencing 11th May to witness at first hand our approach.

John Bengier
General Election Planning Group Chair

8th April 2015