

House of Commons  
Information Committee

**DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY:  
WORKING FOR  
PARLIAMENT AND  
THE PUBLIC**

First Report of Session 2001–02

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*Report, together with  
Proceedings of the Committee  
and Appendices*

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## The Information Committee

The Information Committee is appointed to consider the services provided for the House with regard to information. The powers and constitution of the Committee are set out in Standing Order No. 142, which can be viewed on the Internet at [www.parliament.uk](http://www.parliament.uk).

### Current Membership

Mr Richard Allan MP (*Liberal Democrat - Sheffield Hallam*)  
Michael Fabricant MP (*Conservative - Lichfield*)  
Mr Neil Gerrard MP (*Labour - Walthamstow*)  
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Mr Gwyn Prosser MP (*Labour - Dover*)  
Jim Sheridan MP (*Labour - Renfrewshire West*)

On 22 October 2001, the Committee elected *Michael Fabricant* as its Chairman.

The following were also members of the Committee during this Parliament:

Mr Michael Connarty (*Labour - Falkirk East*)  
Julia Drown (*Labour - South Swindon*)

### Publications

The Reports and evidence of the Committee are published by The Stationery Office by Order of the House. All publications of the Committee (including press notices) are on the Internet at [www.parliament.uk/commoms/selcom/infohome.htm](http://www.parliament.uk/commoms/selcom/infohome.htm).

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# FIRST REPORT

**The Information Committee has agreed to the following Report:**

## **DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY: WORKING FOR PARLIAMENT AND THE PUBLIC**

### **I: Background to the inquiry**

#### *Introduction*

1. The Information Committee exists to consider information services provided for the House.<sup>1</sup> Previous reports from the Committee have generally concentrated upon the provision of computer hardware and IT networks to those who work in the House. This emphasis on the development of an efficient parliamentary information and communication infrastructure has been—and will continue to be—the backbone of our work. The vast majority of Members rely heavily on IT services provided by the House to carry out their work effectively.

2. However, this Report, our first of this Parliament, looks both at the parliamentary information and communication infrastructure as well as a much wider issue. There is concern amongst the public—and indeed amongst Members—that the House appears remote, that it does not respond as well as it might to the public, and that it could do more to hold the executive to account. Public perceptions and expectations of Parliament appear to be changing and there is authoritative evidence to indicate that public participation in the political process appears to be in decline.<sup>2</sup> When the public does engage with Parliament, its perception of it is most commonly formed from a distance, via correspondence and reports of proceedings. Other committees of this House have looked into this issue, notably the Public Administration Committee.<sup>3</sup> The Leader of the House, in his capacity as Chairman of the Select Committee on Modernisation of the House of Commons, has said that “modernisation is about enabling MPs to do a more effective job for their constituency and for the country” and that “the test of [modernisation’s] success must be whether it increases the esteem of the public for their Parliament”.<sup>4</sup>

3. Information and Communications Technologies (ICT) can play an important role in influencing perceptions and helping to meet public expectations. Indeed, they cannot be ignored. The arrival of the Internet as a mass public network is already having a profound effect on the work of Members. Technologies are developing constantly, in particular, the expansion of Digital Television through its three platforms and mobile telephony will increasingly lead people to shop, bank, learn and communicate with one another online, and Members can expect the nature of their work to change significantly over the coming years. With guidance, they can derive benefit from ICT in organising their work more efficiently and maintaining better communications with constituents. It is important that these opportunities are grasped so that the role and reputation of Parliament can be enhanced; otherwise Parliament will be open to criticism that it is falling behind other Parliaments worldwide (and devolved parliamentary bodies closer to home) in their efforts to improve contact between the public and their elected representatives.

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<sup>1</sup> *Standing Orders of the House of Commons*, HC 825 (Session 2001-02).

<sup>2</sup> *Voter engagement and young people*, Research report, Electoral Commission, July 2002; See also *Young People and Citizenship*, paper presented by Professor Robert Worcester to the ATL Conference, March 2002, [www.mofl.com/pubinfo/pdf/rmw-citizen.pdf](http://www.mofl.com/pubinfo/pdf/rmw-citizen.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> *Public Participation: Issues and Innovations*, Sixth Report of the Public Administration Committee, HC 373 (Session 2000-01).

<sup>4</sup> *Modernisation of the House of Commons: a Reform Programme for Consultation*, memorandum by the Leader of the House of Commons to the Select Committee on Modernisation of the House of Commons, HC 440 (Session 2001-02).

4. The purpose of this Report is to identify those areas where the House can assist Members in meeting public expectations. Our recommendations are addressed to the House of Commons Commission and to the Committee on the Modernisation of the House, as well as to the House Administration in general; but we hope that other Committees concerned with the workings of the House as well as members of the public, including those who are concerned with the development of e-democracy, will find the Report of interest.

#### *Course of the inquiry*

5. In order to examine these issues, we took evidence from a wide range of sources. These included:

- Members of the House, each of whom received a letter from the Committee Chairman inviting comment on a range of issues;
- Members and staff of the Scottish Parliament in Edinburgh, which the Committee visited at an early stage of the inquiry;
- Reg Alcock, a Member of the Canadian House of Commons, with whom the Committee held a video conference;
- the National Forum for the Internet and Democracy, with whom the Committee held a joint seminar;
- representatives of YouGov.com, UpMyStreet, the BBC, British Telecom and others; and
- participants in an online forum set up specially for the inquiry.

Much of this evidence is printed as annexes or as Appendices to the Report. We have also been greatly assisted by Dr Stephen Coleman,<sup>5</sup> whom we appointed as a Specialist Adviser for this inquiry.

## **II: The way ahead**

### *Background: levels of Internet access*

6. The Government has set as a goal that it intends to ensure that everyone in the United Kingdom who wants Internet access should have it by 2005.<sup>6</sup> According to the most recent figures, 38 per cent of households in the United Kingdom have Internet access, and 51 per cent of adults in the United Kingdom have accessed the Internet either at home, at work, or from a public access point. However, Internet penetration, while it is increasing constantly, has yet to make a significant impression in certain sectors, leading to a “digital divide”. Research conducted by the Office for National Statistics in July 2001 found that 35 per cent of the survey sample indicated that they would be “very unlikely” to use the Internet during the next year. A similar proportion of the survey sample had given this answer when asked in 2000.

7. An analysis of Internet take-up by households on the basis of their gross income shows that, whereas approximately 70 per cent of households in the highest income decile have home access to the Internet, fewer than 10 per cent of households in the lowest two deciles have such access. An analysis by age is also illuminating.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Director of the Hansard Society e-democracy programme.

<sup>6</sup> All information in this paragraph is drawn from the Annual Report of *UK Online*, November 2001.

<sup>7</sup> [www.statistics.gov.uk/pdfdir/intacc0702.pdf](http://www.statistics.gov.uk/pdfdir/intacc0702.pdf)

Table 1: Adults who have used the Internet, by age group

Age Group	Percentage (%)
16–24	89 %
25–44	74 %
45–54	60 %
55–64	40 %
65+	12 %

Source: National Statistics Omnibus Survey, July 2002

A comparison of these figures with figures published in July 2001 shows a rise in Internet take-up for each age group.

8. The Government has recognised that there are barriers of motivation and skills, as well as access. The UK Online Strategy, set out in the most recent annual report of UK Online,<sup>8</sup> lists a number of recommendations and commitments designed to develop the “knowledge economy” in the United Kingdom; some of these recommendations address directly the barriers noted above.

9. We raised issues of Internet access during the course of our video conference with Reg Alcock, a Member of the Canadian House of Commons. He agreed that the “digital divide” was a major concern. He argued, however, that it would be a mistake to shun technology simply because it was not available to all. His view was that it would be a matter of time before the familiarity of younger people today with new communications technologies was reflected across the age range.

#### *How this Report can add value*

10. Throughout the inquiry, we have sought to look ahead and to try to anticipate the kind the information and communication environment that will prevail ten years from now. Stuart Hill, Director of the BT Stepchange programme,<sup>9</sup> described to us his vision of how a day in the life of an MP might look in 2012.<sup>10</sup> Some features of this vision might seem over-imaginative and fantastical now, although that does not mean it should be dismissed. Ultimately, we cannot pretend to have any clear idea either of what will be possible technologically in ten years’ time, or of the extent to which the public will take up such technologies. However, it remains important that the United Kingdom and its Parliament are comfortable in maximising use of changing technologies.

11. We have therefore drafted a set of Principles for Information and Communications Technologies (ICT), which we believe would be of benefit not only to the House Administration but also to the public and to outside bodies who deal with Members or with the House in general. **The Committee recommends that the following set of principles for information and communication technologies be adopted for the House:**

- A. The House is committed to the use of ICT to increase its accessibility and to enable the public, exercising its right to use whatever medium is convenient, to communicate with Members and with Committees of the House.**

<sup>8</sup> Annual Report of UK Online, November 2001.

<sup>9</sup> Described by BT as “an initiative established to help government meet the challenge of creating a modern, integrated public sector and transform the delivery of public services.”

<sup>10</sup> See Appendix I.

- B. The House is committed to using ICT to enhance the professionalism of Members, their staff and House staff in all aspects of parliamentary life.
- C. The House is committed to the use of ICT to increase public participation in its work, enabling it to draw on the widest possible pool of experience, including particularly those who have traditionally been excluded from the political and parliamentary process.
- D. The House recognises the value of openness and will use ICT to enable, as far as possible, the public to have access to its proceedings and papers.
- E. The House will develop and share good practice in the use of ICT by other parliamentary and governmental bodies both within the United Kingdom and elsewhere, and will work in collaboration with outside bodies.

These five principles are expanded upon in detail in the rest of this Report.

12. The Committee recommends that the House report annually on its progress in implementing these principles.

### III: Draft principles: fleshing out the detail

#### *Accessibility*

***Principle A: The House is committed to the use of ICT to increase its accessibility and to enable the public, exercising its right to use whatever medium is convenient, to communicate with Members and with Committees of the House.***

#### *The general principle*

13. In evidence to the Select Committee on Modernisation of the House, the Leader of the House has highlighted the need for Parliament to do more to make its proceedings more readily accessible to the public, stating that a communications strategy is needed which “will convey the significance, the success and excitement of what goes on in the chamber and in committee”. He added that “the potential for projection of the work of Parliament is immense, but is largely unrealised”.<sup>11</sup> We agree. **We recognise the importance of a communications strategy that maximises the accessibility and transparency of the House, and indeed Parliament, and we acknowledge the work already being done by the House of Commons Commission.**

14. It seems to us desirable in principle that no method of gaining access to Members or to the proceedings of the House should be privileged over another. Both Members and the public should be able to choose methods of access that are most convenient to them. For many, access to Members or to the proceedings of the House can be speedier, richer and more interactive through advanced Information and Communications Technologies (ICTs).

#### *Access to Members*

15. It is always possible for members of the public to telephone Members’ offices, by using the Palace of Westminster switchboard. It is also possible for some to visit in person; but other methods of communication, such as e-mail, are the instinctive mode of communication for many. Mobile telephone messaging is already very popular, and Digital TV may in time become a widely-used means of sending messages. Other facilities, such

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<sup>11</sup> *Op.cit.*, paragraphs 52-3.

as audio and video conferencing, can be more convenient than a meeting in person at the House.<sup>12</sup>

#### *Access to Members by e-mail*

16. Members, and their small band of staff, receive large quantities of correspondence daily, much of it on paper but increasingly by e-mail (where the Member provides that means of access). Typically, 10 to 20 per cent of a Member's correspondence might be received electronically, but this figure seems set to climb. The Finnish Chairman of a European IT conference in Helsinki in September 2001 observed that he received 60 per cent or even 70 per cent of his correspondence by e-mail.<sup>13</sup>

17. The ease with which constituents and others can send e-mail is seen by Members as both an opportunity (in that databases of constituents and correspondence can be created and maintained with comparatively little effort) and as a threat, in that it could generate a demand that Members cannot meet with existing structures and resources.

18. One issue of concern to Members is the use of e-mail by pressure groups for mass campaigns. Publicising an e-mail address to the full membership of an organisation can prompt mass posting of a standard e-mail to any one Member. The Member and his or her staff will then have to deal with each e-mail. A Member may decide to delete each one without reading it first; but care will need to be taken to identify and preserve mail from constituents.

19. Concern about the possible impact of e-mail on a Member's work was echoed elsewhere, and Reg Alcock agreed with us that there could be real difficulties in coping with the demand.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, e-mail does not necessarily substitute for paper mail but it may add to it. A recent report produced by the Congress Online project in the United States of America stated that:

“Rather than increasingly replacing postal mail, as many had expected, e-mail is generating a whole new source of work. With individual House offices now receiving as many as 8,000 e-mail messages per month, and Senate offices receiving as many as 55,000, the burdens on staff are viewed as unmanageable ... As a result, the demands of e-citizens have been wreaking havoc on most congressional offices”.<sup>15</sup>

20. A Member might decide to rule out the use of new communication channels on the basis that there is no capacity to deal with them. This is effectively what many Members do at present by declining to publish an e-mail address. It can be argued that it is better to keep using traditional systems properly rather than to use new systems badly. However, our view is that the demand for Members to adapt to e-mail and other communications technologies is so great that a more pro-active strategy is required. The reputation of Members—and of the House—could be damaged by a refusal to embrace such technologies at a time when they are becoming standard in most other organisations. The House Administration could assist in this respect by building Members' confidence in e-mail as a means of communication. We make a few suggestions below.

21. Few Members have effective systems for dealing with the host of e-mails which come into their offices each day; yet there are a number of solutions which Members can

<sup>12</sup> Audio conferencing allows either (i) a number of offices to be linked to conduct a telephone conversation, or (ii) a group of people in one office to hold a telephone discussion with another person or a group elsewhere. Video conferencing allows two people or groups in different places to see each other while holding a discussion. Both the picture quality offered by video conferencing technology and the general reliability of equipment are improving. The House provides audio and video conferencing services, but they are not heavily promoted.

<sup>13</sup> Fourth European Conference of Members of Parliament on Communications Technologies, Helsinki, September 2001.

<sup>14</sup> See Annex 2.

<sup>15</sup> *E-mail Overload in Congress: Managing a Communication Crisis*, Congress Online project 2001, p.3.

use to protect their systems, such as barring e-mails from specified senders or barring e-mails of more than certain length. Filtering software can intercept and weed out “junk” e-mail, using specified criteria.<sup>16</sup> The Congress Online report noted above refers to the EchoMail system, currently being piloted in Senate offices, which “uses artificial intelligence to filter, sort and respond to e-mail.”<sup>17</sup> Each of these possibilities might help Members to be more confident in the capacity of their offices to deal with e-mail and accord highest priority to e-mails from their own constituents. **We will investigate the EchoMail and other filtering systems to assess their suitability for Parliament.**

22. The Parliamentary website could also publish guidelines for the public as to when it is appropriate to contact a Member of Parliament and what can reasonably be expected of a Member. For example, it could be made clear that Members of Parliament can only take up casework on behalf of *constituents*. This would reduce the instances of “spamming” that currently occur.

23. **It is possible to put in place a programme which asks senders to supply their postal address and directs them elsewhere if that postal address does not fall within the Member’s own constituency. This facility could be publicised to Members.**

24. Intermediaries may play an important role in directing electronic communications to Members. The “FaxYourMP” website is a useful model in this respect, as it will receive e-mails on Members’ behalf and forward them to Members’ offices by fax, a method of communication with which all Members’ offices are familiar. As far as we aware, only a very small number of Members have objected to this service. **The House Administration should develop protocols to assist intermediaries in providing the best medium for communicating with Members, and these protocols will be considered by this Committee.**

25. Reg Alcock<sup>18</sup>, who has used new technology extensively to enable his constituents to contact him through whatever means are suitable, warned us against the dangers of providing only those services which were acceptable to all - the “lowest common denominator” approach.<sup>19</sup> The paper mail addresses and telephone numbers of Members are well-publicised and there is a public expectation that all Members will use these means of communication. Whilst other bodies such as the Welsh Assembly and Scottish Parliament have also set up public e-mail addresses for all their Members, this has been left to individual choice in the House of Commons. Any proposal to require Members to be accessible via new communications methods, such as an obligation to publicise an e-mail address, would be likely to provoke strong opinions amongst Members on both sides of the argument. The acceptance of this principle on accessibility requires the House to address the question of whether all Members should be required to be accessible via standard methods of electronic communication. **However, the Information Committee will in future investigate and make recommendations on potential mechanisms to enable all Members—whether they choose to have their personal e-mail addresses publicised or not—to be accessible to the public electronically.**

#### *Access to Members using video conferencing*

26. Video conferencing has been used by a small number of Members—particularly those with constituencies far from London—usually to supplement constituency surgeries. Some Members have also experimented with a video link between their Westminster and constituency offices. Reg Alcock<sup>20</sup> told us that he held video conference surgeries on

<sup>16</sup> See Annex 3.

<sup>17</sup> *Op. cit.* p. 9.

<sup>18</sup> Member of the Canadian House of Commons.

<sup>19</sup> See Annex 2.

<sup>20</sup> Member of the Canadian House of Commons.

weekday evenings when he was in Ottawa, partly to provide a fuller service to his constituents and partly to reduce the demands on his time at weekends in Winnipeg.

27. The House owns video conferencing equipment which Members may use without charge.<sup>21</sup> We used this equipment for our conference with Reg Alcock, and we found the quality acceptable. Although not a perfect substitute for face-to-face discussions within the same room, video conferencing is a valuable tool when time or the cost of travel inhibits contact in person. **The House could do more to promote the use of video conferencing by Members. Regular investment may be needed to take account of developments in technology (including ISDN and broadband) which improve picture quality, overall reliability, and opportunities for simultaneous translation.**

#### *Access to the proceedings of the House*

28. Until recently, a member of the public who wanted to follow live proceedings in the House was obliged to attend in person, unless the proceedings which interested them were broadcast live by BBC Parliament. Since January 2002, the proceedings in the Chambers of the two Houses, as well as proceedings of certain select and joint committees, have been webcast as part of a one-year pilot project. The Committee strongly supports this initiative and was much impressed by the comprehensive webcasting service offered by the Scottish Parliament.<sup>22</sup> The pilot project for the Westminster Parliament will be assessed at the end of the year and decisions will be taken on whether to sustain the project on a long-term basis and whether to make it available to Members on the Parliamentary Data and Video Network. We recognise that the Select Committee on Broadcasting will play a key role in this decision; but, for our part, **we encourage the House Administration to bear in mind not just viewing figures during the term of the pilot but also the general desirability of making the proceedings of the House—and of select committees—as accessible as possible. An archive of webcast proceedings would also be valuable to both the public and Members.**

#### *Access to information about the House*

29. The establishment of the Parliamentary website has dramatically improved public accessibility to documents used by Parliamentary bodies, the record of what is said in Parliament, and decisions taken by Parliament. The website contains a wealth of information about the activities of Parliament, and there is no need to describe its contents here. We note that it is increasingly recognised as the prime source of information about the activities of the two Houses. The website is shortly to be relaunched with a different “look and feel” both in terms of navigation and terminology. These revisions have been recognised as necessary for some time, and we very much welcome them. We hope that the site, once relaunched, will be seen by the public as being more accessible and easier to use.

30. Use of the Parliamentary website could be increased by improving links from other websites, including media and government department sites. These links might be top-level links from homepages or, more usefully perhaps, subject-based links. Representatives of BBCi<sup>23</sup> described for us how a news story on adoption policy, for instance, might link directly to the page in the “Bills before Parliament” section of the Parliamentary website relating to the Adoption Bill.<sup>24</sup> Similar links could be established from Government department websites or from the UK Online portal. While the establishment of links from other websites would be a matter for the organisations running those websites, we suggest that officials of the two Houses who oversee the website and monitor its content could actively encourage and facilitate such links.

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<sup>21</sup> The House does not, however, expect to bear the costs of equipment used at the other end of the video link.

<sup>22</sup> See Annex 1.

<sup>23</sup> Formerly known as BBC Online.

<sup>24</sup> See Annex 3.

31. Besides its participation in the relaunch of the Parliamentary website, the House has made a significant effort in the last year or so to provide more information for the public about its workings and to provide a better welcome for visitors. Many of the steps taken do not generally involve use of Information and Communication Technologies, and we do not consider them in this Report; but we welcome them nonetheless as making progress in improving the visibility of, and knowledge about, the House.

### *Professionalism*

***Principle B: The House is committed to using ICT to enhance the professionalism of Members, their staff and House staff in all aspects of parliamentary life.***

#### *The general principle*

32. The Chairman's letter to Members, inviting comment on priorities for investment in Information Technology to support the work of Members, elicited a number of thoughtful responses. A common thread was the need to provide a stable Parliamentary network and secure access from outside Westminster; for many, this was more important than increasing support for new channels of communication (such as video conferencing and webcasting).

#### *Remote access*

33. **It is essential, in order to run an efficient and professional office, for Members to have reliable remote access links from outside the Parliamentary Estate.**<sup>25</sup> We acknowledge that the "remote access" service occasionally performed poorly in the past. Once initial start-up problems had been overcome, performance improved when the Parliamentary Communications Directorate upgraded the software and doubled capacity. There are good prospects for further major improvements in the remote access service. The House approved last year a number of resolutions relating to Members' Allowances; one resolution provided for the implementation of certain recommendations by the Review Body on Senior Salaries on parliamentary pay and allowances, including central funding of a Virtual Private Network.<sup>26</sup> A considerable amount of work has since been undertaken by the Parliamentary Communications Directorate to develop this project, including an upgrade to the link between Parliament and the Internet. We are optimistic that Members will have the benefit of improved links between Westminster and constituency offices before long.

#### *Mobile devices*

34. It seems difficult now to imagine how Members fulfilled engagements both inside and outside the House while remaining in contact with their Westminster and constituency offices, all without the benefits of pagers or mobile phones. The Committee held a short but useful discussion with representatives of British Telecom and Compaq, exploring recent developments in technology to support handheld devices. Products now available are generally either multi-purpose, allowing access to e-mails, diaries and address books, as well as (in some cases) a limited word processing facility; or they provide single functions but are more compact. We note that some products alert the user to the receipt of e-mails and do not require "synchronisation" with a desktop machine.

35. Members may buy such equipment using their Incidental Expenses Provision. **There is a case, however, for including a suitable mobile device as part of the standard set of equipment issued to Members, funded centrally; the Speaker's Advisory Panel on**

<sup>25</sup> Several Members made this point in their responses to the letter sent by the Chairman to all Members.

<sup>26</sup> Report No. 48 by the Review Body on Senior Salaries: *Review of parliamentary pay and allowances*, Cm 4997-1; *Official Report*, 5 July 2001, col. 466. A Virtual Private Network would allow better remote access to the Parliamentary Intranet and e-mails.

**Members' Allowances may want to consider this possibility. The Parliamentary Communications Directorate would also need to be resourced to enable Members to use any such device to access their e-mails on the '@parliament.uk' domain, and to provide training in the use of mobile devices.**

*Support for networking hardware*

36. Several Members have written to us to describe the frustration of trying to use computer hardware which was not fully networked. In the interests of enabling Members' offices to operate with maximum efficiency, **we suggest to the Speaker's Panel on Members' Allowances that it consider whether resources should be made available to assist Members in networking their computer hardware in both their Westminster and their constituency offices.**

*Dealing with e-mail*

37. In addition to their duties in relation to the business of the House, Members of Parliament are expected to offer a highly professional service to their constituents; in turn, Members of Parliament are entitled to expect appropriate support from the House in handling increased public communications, whether by e-mail, via websites or as a result of online consultations.

38. As e-mails are transmitted more quickly than letters, a sender may well assume that less time is required for a substantive response. Most Members will have experienced the annoyance of a constituent who has tried to contact them via e-mail and has not received a satisfactory response. Failure to respond to the demand within the expected time-frame can harm rather than enhance a Member's professional reputation.

39. We have in the past been concerned to improve training facilities for Members and their staff, and one Member suggested to us during this inquiry that there should be basic training for Members and their staff on handling e-mails.<sup>27</sup> We have no doubt that such training would enhance the professionalism of many Members' offices. **The House Administration could, for instance, usefully draw up guidelines for Members and their staff (and indeed House staff) on how to meet expectations of quick response times and on storage of e-mails.**

*Members' websites*

40. Members may feel pressure from the development of other new communication methods. For example, they may feel that they are expected to spend time and resources on producing their own website, or they may be asked to produce material for other web sites and online newsletters. There will also be an increasing demand for them to participate in online activities, such as interactive consultations. The importance of updating websites, to maintain their relevance, should not be underestimated.

41. We invited Members to comment on whether the Parliamentary website should carry micro-sites for each Member (following the model of devolved parliamentary bodies). The response was cautious: some were in favour, but several Members warned that they were already committed to maintaining other sites and that the establishment of yet another personal website might not be welcome. Certainly, websites which are not kept up-to-date or relevant appear unprofessional. The best solution to this might be to build links from the Parliamentary website to an existing site carrying authoritative biographical information, such as the website maintained by the Vacher Dod Publishing Group. Responsibility for maintaining the information would then rest with the publisher.

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<sup>27</sup> Evidence not printed.

*Technology and Members' constituency role*

42. **Members may wish to use a range of technologies to engage and consult with their constituents, such as via online surgeries and interactive fora. We recommend that support is given to Members to carry out their constituency role in this way.** This includes assistance and guidance with moderation and advice on participation in online activities.

43. Improved ICT facilities within constituency offices, and between those offices and Parliament, may also bring benefits to the House by enabling more staff to work effectively outside the Parliamentary Estate. The current funding of the Virtual Private Network project permits two concurrent remote connections per Member. **The House Administration may need to review the allocation of resources for remote connectivity to enable additional members of staff to work from the constituency.**

*Public Participation*

***Principle C: The House is committed to the use of ICT to increase public participation in its work, enabling it to draw on the widest possible pool of experience, including particularly those who have traditionally been excluded from the political and parliamentary process.***

*The general principle*

44. A Parliament will be better informed if it makes full use of the insights to be gained from public experience and expertise, with no sector or social group being ignored. Consultation with the general public, relevant experts and interested parties is at the heart of Members' work and of parliamentary business, and Information and Communications Technologies provide a number of tools that can be used to good effect in this area. The Leader of the House has acknowledged this point, noting that:

“there are also opportunities in which the Commons can harness the new technologies to connect with the wider electorate and with civil society. The Internet, for example, gives opportunities for two-way communication and could be used more systematically for consultation with the public by Select Committees”.<sup>28</sup>

45. As far as the House is concerned, some of these tools offer entirely new ways of working, but many can also be used to enhance the procedures currently used. In this respect, we note in passing the recent publication of a Report by the Procedure Committee on Parliamentary Questions, which includes proposals for the electronic tabling of questions.<sup>29</sup>

*Public participation in online consultations*

46. We were impressed by the efforts of the Scottish Parliament to engage those represented by it in meaningful dialogue via online fora. These include regular consultations related to Members' Business Debates, which approximate to Adjournment Debates at Westminster (both in the Chamber and in Westminster Hall); and also Committee inquiries.<sup>30</sup> Select Committees at Westminster have occasionally used online consultations to gather input, as has the All Party Group on Domestic Violence.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>28</sup> *Op cit.*, paragraph 51.

<sup>29</sup> *Parliamentary Questions*, Third Report of the Procedure Committee, HC 622 (Session 2001–02).

<sup>30</sup> The Education, Culture and Sport Committee has held an online consultation to gather evidence for an inquiry titled “The Purposes of Scottish Education”.

<sup>31</sup> The former Social Security Committee, the Public Administration Committee, and this Committee.

47. While the value of such consultations by select committees is not something for this Committee to assess, we believe that they can significantly enhance the work of the House, if conducted with care. We have gained useful knowledge of this area from our discussions during the course of this inquiry. We have also benefited from the expertise of our Specialist Adviser for the inquiry, Dr Stephen Coleman. **We therefore make the following recommendations for the conduct of consultations:**

- **the purpose and terms of the consultation should be made clear at the outset, both to those initiating the consultation and those participating in it. Consultations may range from a simple invitation to submit views to a more deliberative and interactive debate including senior decision makers.**
- **it must be made clear to participants that they are not being asked to make policy but to inform the thinking of legislators;**<sup>32</sup>
- **efforts need to be made to recruit participants, whether individuals or organisations, who can impart experience and expertise;**
- **special efforts are needed to make online consultations socially inclusive: these may include training in the necessary ICT skills and directions to public Internet access for participants;**
- **contributions to consultations need to be interpreted or summarised by an independent body or staff;**
- **a good consultation exercise will bring value to both the decision makers and the consultees. This can be tested through effective evaluation procedures, which should be built into each consultation proposal. These should be both quantitative and qualitative. Of particular value would be follow-up with a selection of both consultees and decision makers to assess the value of the consultation to them. The results of any evaluation should be produced in good time and made available to all participants;**
- **participants should receive feedback on the outcomes of the consultations.**

**In each case, the consultee should be given clear information on what they can expect, perhaps in the form of a “consultation contract”.**

48. Consultations on behalf of select committees have in the past been managed by the Hansard Society, who have recruited participants, provided technical support, moderated contributions, and summarised the evidence. **If online consultations are adopted widely by House committees as a means of gathering information, consideration should be given to providing such support, with consequences for the House’s technical support staff and committee staff. The Liaison Committee would be an appropriate forum to consider whether such a move might be desirable in principle. We encourage all those who would play a part in such a decision to bear in mind the value to the House of widening the net for evidence and of being seen to do so.**

*Consultations: bearing in mind the “digital divide”*

49. The impetus behind the adoption of new technologies for consultation is a wish to see more people engaged in the political process and a broadening of the base of consultees beyond those who have had the time and resources to participate in Parliamentary debates in the past. However, at the same time, it should be recognised that different levels of facility with technology may create new forms of exclusion. Where online consultations are undertaken, this divide will need to be borne in mind and bridged wherever possible. For example, a select committee may want to gather views from people who have no representative body but who would not want to submit views individually (or who would not use paper mail or e-mail for communication).<sup>33</sup> In such cases, a facilitator could play

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<sup>32</sup> A group of MSPs in the Scottish Parliament noted that consultations should not be seen as plebiscites; one MSP compared them to victim statements, which gave an opportunity for views to be aired.

<sup>33</sup> Examples might include children in care, or rape victims.

a part, receiving comments by whatever channel is favoured by the consultee—including audio, text and video messaging, and any other popular channel that develops—and relaying them to the committee.

50. As long as there is a “digital divide”, as described at paragraph 6, it will be important to gain a picture of how various social groups are using Information and Communications Technologies in their communications with the House and its activities. If it becomes clear that there are groups which are largely excluded, some thought can then be given to finding ways of enabling them to participate in the work of the House. **Special efforts need to be made by the House to engage younger people, who are recognised as being both more ready to use technology and more disconnected from the traditional political system.**

*Public participation in the law-making process*

51. The Government has started to use its web sites extensively to publish consultation documents. For its part, the House has in recent years conducted pre-legislative scrutiny of a number of draft bills, and the Leader of the House has stated that the Government “will continue to seek to produce more legislation in draft for scrutiny”.<sup>34</sup> A Joint Committee of the two Houses is currently examining the draft Communications Bill and, for the first time, a website has been established allowing the public to register their views on the bill.<sup>35</sup> We strongly welcome this development.

*Public participation: the Parliamentary website*

52. If there is to be a greater level of public participation in the work of the House, whether in select committee inquiries or in pre-legislative scrutiny, the Parliamentary website will be the portal. It would be possible to extend the scope of such interactivity to allow all papers published electronically on the website to be open to feedback by the public. The web pages carrying “Hansard” reports of debate could, for instance, feature a standard button allowing members of the public to comment and then transmitting that comment to the Member or to the Government department concerned. The principle could be extended to other, more factual pages (such as lists of bills before Parliament, or select committee pages), so as to offer members of the public an easy way to direct inquiries to the relevant staff of the House.

*Openness*

***Principle D: The House recognises the value of openness and will use ICT to enable, as far as possible, the public to have access to its proceedings and papers.***

*The general principle*

53. Public pressure for openness and transparency has led to an expectation that material will be made publicly available and that access to it will be encouraged rather than discouraged. The development of the Internet has almost certainly contributed to that culture. To a large extent, the House has risen to meet the challenge by placing a very wide range of documents produced by and for the House on the Parliamentary website. Nonetheless, there is a case for widening that range. The Scottish Parliament, for instance, publishes on its website papers circulated to committees. We recognise that there are questions here of privilege and committee practice which are outside our remit. We observe, however, that comparison between the range of documents available on the Parliamentary website and those available on the websites of the devolved parliamentary bodies is inevitable.

<sup>34</sup> *Op cit.*, paragraph 19.

<sup>35</sup> [www.commbill.net](http://www.commbill.net).

54. The two Houses of Parliament have obligations under the Freedom of Information Act 2000. We are aware that much thought is being given to how those obligations should be met. At the same time, important safeguards for the individual's right to privacy, such as the Data Protection Act and Article 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights, are receiving more public attention. These have very serious implications for Members of Parliament, who may hold in paper or electronic form large quantities of highly personal and sensitive information.

55. These developments mean that there is growing scope for challenges to be made to individual Members from both directions, namely those of freedom of information and those of protecting individual privacy. **If only to maintain a degree of consistency in Members' practice, the House could usefully offer Members guidance on how to meet statutory requirements on freedom of information and data protection.**

### *Relevance*

***Principle E: The House will develop and share good practice in the use of ICT by other parliamentary and governmental bodies both within the United Kingdom and elsewhere, and with work in collaboration with outside bodies.***

#### *The general principle*

56. As we noted at the start of this Report, Information and Communications Technologies are developing constantly. Unless the House maintains a high level of awareness of these developments and the opportunities that they offer, it will run the risk of being seen to fall behind other parliamentary and governmental bodies and high-profile public and private sector companies. This applies both to the infrastructure and facilities offered to those who work in the House, and to methods of communication between the public and the House. At worst, the reputation and relevance of the House could appear to be diminished.

#### *Keeping abreast of developments*

57. Commercial organisations have been in the forefront of developing online services. Now, increasingly, public sector organisations are becoming reference points in their use of Information and Communications Technologies. The Government has an ambitious target to make all its services available online by 2005. The presence of Government departments and agencies on the Internet is growing as a result. It is important that Parliament, as a central representative institution, is not in any way marginalised by direct channels of communications between the public and the executive.

58. To prevent such an outcome, we **suggest that the House Administration should:**

- **conduct a thorough and constant evaluation of its use of Information and Communications Technologies;**
- **maintain an awareness of initiatives being developed elsewhere to increase public participation in, and communication with, representative bodies (we have in mind the Scottish Parliament, the Northern Ireland and Welsh Assemblies, and local authorities);<sup>36</sup> and**
- **work with others to use technologies in innovative and effective ways.**

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<sup>36</sup> The House Administration already has well-established links with the European Centre for Parliamentary Research and Documentation, which has been active in this field.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

59. We have not tried, in this brief Report, to prescribe exactly how the House should use Information and Communications Technologies in the future. Any attempt to do so would soon make the Report dated and irrelevant. What we have sought to do is to identify desirable outcomes, giving occasional examples of how they might be achieved. It may well be that the measures outlined in this report would require significant investment, partly to allow for increased traffic on the Parliamentary Data and Video Network (PDVN) and to make the Network more robust, and partly to recruit and train staff to provide the necessary support. We believe that such investment would be richly rewarded as the effectiveness of Parliament, as a vital channel of accountability and public consultation, will be improved as a result. We have no doubt that Information and Communications Technologies will play an ever larger part in the work of the House, and that the principles which we propose will be of benefit to individual Members and to the House as a whole.

## ANNEX A

### Visit by the Committee to the Scottish Parliament on 24/25 April 2002

*Note by the Clerk of the Committee*

#### *Meeting with Scottish Parliament officials*

1. Lesley Beddie, Director of Communications Technologies, welcomed the Committee and introduced key staff from the Scottish Parliament's Communications Technologies Directorate (CTD). Unlike its Westminster counterpart, the Communications Technologies Directorate embraces not just the provision of IT hardware, services and network support but also the provision of information systems and broadcasting services.

2. MSPs are provided with a PC and laptop for their Edinburgh office, as well as an allowance to cover the cost of IT equipment for Members' staff. A remote access facility is provided - this is currently Citrix-based and has received mixed reviews. The time taken to dial in and to log in seems to be the main frustration. A move to VPN/Broadband connectivity is being studied.

3. No equipment is provided centrally for constituency offices under the existing contract: this will change in 2003.

4. CTD consulted with MSPs on what type of laptop and PDA should be provided. The PDAs are supplied through GCAT: they do not have a wireless connection and therefore need to be regularly synchronised with the local workstation. A questionnaire was sent to all MSPs concerning the replacement laptops. Responses were analysed and MSPs were offered a choice of laptops, varying from an ultralightweight machine to a large workhorse. Three types of PDA are recommended and validated for use on the Parliamentary network. These can be synchronised with a local workstation or using the MSP's laptop when dialled in to the Parliament. PDAs can be purchased by MSPs using Parliamentary allowances.

5. Case management software has been developed for MSPs but it has proved difficult to customise it to meet individual preferences. The specification for the case management met as many of the requirements as possible. Several MSPs are using the system as developed and others have requested modifications and customisations.

6. Equipment to be installed in the Holyrood building includes digital audio recording for the Official Report as a replacement for the current analogue tapes. The new system will allow the archiving and searching of the audio clips once they are indexed appropriately.

7. The Information Systems team are responsible for development of the Parliamentary website, Intranet redesign, records management and the accessibility of data for the Parliament. The website receives approx. 700,000 hits per month, mostly from central government, local government and the media. The "What's Happening" pages are the most popular.

8. Web page content management, a new project for the Web and intranet team, aims to devolve responsibility for document generation and publication to those originating the information, who will need suitable training. A project similar to the Parliamentary Information Management System (PIMS) is under way, with the aim of breaking down the storage of information in "silos" currently created by the various business teams across the Parliament. The initial approach is to increase Parliament-wide accessibility to individual data stores. This has been achieved for PQs and will be extended in the near future to Motions and MSPs' biographies.

9. The Customer Relations Management team serve as the main interface between Parliamentary users and the technical support staff. The Helpdesk is generally able to fix 80% of calls at the time of enquiry. The aim is to answer all calls within 3 rings. If problems cannot be solved immediately and are referred onwards, the Helpdesk maintains "ownership", stays in contact with the caller and contacts the caller within 15 minutes of the problem having been rectified, to see whether the caller is content.

10. Efforts are made to manage expectations and also to inform MSPs about the quality of different IT products on offer e.g. digital voice recorders and PDAs. To some extent the team have an "educative" function, making users aware of information services and of the limits of product capability. Users of new products are offered a training course or sometimes 30 minutes' onsite guidance - "handholding".

11. The Helpdesk currently offers limited support to constituency offices by way of "over the phone advice" on the use of remote access and on other matters, even though the Parliament does not currently supply IT equipment to constituency offices. It is intended that a support service contract for constituency offices should be in place for the next Parliament. IT equipment in constituency offices is bought using funds from from MSPs' allowances: it is Parliamentary equipment but is not supplied by the IT Department. The view of CTD is that the equipment is used by Members and their staff to perform essential Parliamentary work and that CTD has an obligation to support it.

12. There is no equivalent to the Information Committee: policy is generally ratified through informal contact with MSPs or, if there is a significant financial commitment, through the Scottish Parliament Corporate Body (consisting of the Presiding Officer, the Chief Executive and representatives of each of the parties).

13. There is an informal cross-party group of MSPs – the MSP IT User Group - which meets regularly with the Parliament's IS/IT staff.

14. The Parliament's Information Centre (SPICe), which is part of the Research and Information Group, does not attempt to replicate the House of Commons Library: there is no large stock and no loan collection. The emphasis is on electronic storage and delivery of information. A research service is provided both to meet individual inquiries and to serve Committees, none of which have their own research staff.

15. The Information Centre receives automatically 20 paper copies of everything published by the Scottish Executive; once stocks are exhausted, further copies can be supplied. Not all Executive documents are available electronically, and some are available only in unfamiliar (and unsupported) formats. Some ascribe this to Civil Service resistance to openness.

16. The Research and Information Group is responsible for informing the public about the work of the Parliament. This function entails management of the Visitor Centre on George IV Bridge, the publication of leaflets on the work of the Parliament, and liaison with schools. The Library has links with designated "Partner Libraries" in each constituency: these act as focal points for information about the Parliament and its documentation.

17. On-line discussion forums are handled by the Communications Directorate rather than by the Research and Information Group. The Parliament has allocated a budget specifically for the development of civic participation by the committees. The Research and Information Group's Participation Services Team (which includes all the services mentioned in the previous item) advises and assists with this.

18. The main challenges facing the Information Centre are the quality of IT links between the Parliament and constituency offices and the lack of a comprehensive in-house parliamentary information database.

*Meeting with George Reid MSP*

19. Mr Reid started by saying that there are advantages in starting a Parliament from scratch, without the inherited baggage of hundreds of years of practice and procedure.

20. This had allowed the Scottish Parliament to experiment with new forms of electronic governance and participation. However, Members were in “suck it and see” mode. The key ICT questions were: what works; what assists an MSP to be more effective; and what helps the Parliament to engage with the citizen?

21. Mr Reid said while openness is a basic principle of the Parliament, it can have a downside. Palestinian activists had obtained a list of MSPs’ e-mail addresses and had sent them pictures of headless babies. A recent webcast had shown a Member who is a lawyer apparently examining the contents of his nose, giving rise to some ribald comment in the press about the “long arm of the law”.

22. Nonetheless, Mr Reid believed strongly that openness and participation were fundamental to the establishment of links between the people and the Scottish Parliament. Citizens were not subjects and had a right to be heard. He believed that the results of experiments in participation to date had been overwhelmingly positive.

23. The establishment of fora for online discussions raised a number of new issues, for instance: should a discussion on sex education have links to the website of an organisation that offers emergency contraception to children? Should the Parliament provide e-mail correspondents with information on Members interested in specific topics or background documentation (even if this is simply giving them the appropriate page references for the Official Report or Committee Reports)?

24. Mr Reid said that civic fora were also part of the learning process about the Parliament. The Chamber, chaired by a presiding officer, had therefore featured a number of debates (most of them video-recorded) with representatives from the gipsy community, disabled people, ethnic minorities, the business community and schoolchildren (who had taken their own Health Bill through all parliamentary stages). There were examples of such participation having influenced parliamentary proposals.

25. Discussion fora are hosted on the website, linked to Members Business debates of public interest. The response is variable but in one case (chronic pain) had led to over 100,000 hits.

26. Care is needed to ensure that expectations, once raised, are met. Mr Reid said his e-mail inbox had on one recent occasion received over 200 messages in a single day — the result of having replied to a discussion forum message about sub-post offices, which had then been copied to other mailing lists. The whole correspondence had grown, uncontrollably, “like Topsy”.

27. Video-conferencing had not been as widely used as Parliamentary staff had anticipated. There had been useful hook-ups with Galicia, New Zealand, and EU representatives. In some cases, the extraction of information had been like “drawing teeth”, because of language difficulties.

28. Video-conferencing remains a cost-effective alternative to face-to-face taking of evidence. In the case of meetings with representatives in Brussels, however, it appeared that Members usually preferred personal interviews.

29. Mr Reid stressed that the use new forms of ICT should be driven, not by technology, but by “what works in practice”. Where ICT was proved to be cost effective and of practical advantage to Members, it should be adopted.

30. Looking ahead over the next 5 years, Mr Reid said that the Holyrood Building would have new equipment as “future-proofed” as possible.

31. This had led to an interesting debate in the Scottish Parliament about whether Members, as in the Welsh Assembly, should have PC terminals in the Chamber. The presiding officers in the Scottish Parliament were opposed to this, believing that the essential purpose of a plenary session was to listen, intervene, and engage in debate. Where information was requested by e-mail, that was best done via a PC in a neighbouring room.

32. There was a real concern given the “deluge” of e-mail, which threatened to swamp staff. Constituency Members could if they chose respond only to e-mails from constituents and filter out others; but List Members did not have this option.

33. The Scottish Parliament was active in promoting its proceedings: the local press was alerted when an issue of particular local relevance was debated; JPEG files were automatically despatched to the local press and contact was made with bodies in the voluntary and civic sectors.

34. As for the future of e-democracy, Mr Reid said that there was a need for Members and staff to review what had been done in Parliament over the past three years and probably “to do less better”.

#### *Meeting with Alan Smart, Head of Broadcasting*

35. The Scottish Parliament itself provided pictures to broadcasters; stills from moving images could be supplied at small cost to anyone who asked as JPEG files. This service was valued by backbenchers. Every Committee meeting outside Edinburgh was televised.

36. It was worth noting that there were fewer restrictions on rules of coverage of proceedings in the Scottish Parliament than in Westminster. For instance, the public gallery could be shown as could reaction around the Chamber. Broadcasters were trusted to use their discretion in use of footage.

37. The webcasting service was really a substitute for a dedicated TV channel; but it was claimed to be one of the best examples of its kind, if not the best. The Scottish Parliament was the sole copyright holder of the images. Overall, the cost of the service (excluding staff costs) was below £200,000.

38. The Education, Culture and Sport Committee had launched a consultation on the purposes of education; contributions would be treated as formal evidence. The task of moderating and collating evidence was normally outsourced but would be undertaken for this inquiry by the Committee Clerks. Care needed to be taken as the Scottish Parliament was liable, as a publisher, for defamation. There were, however, hardly any obscene or cranky contributions.

39. The total cost of setting up a discussion forum would include Scottish Parliament staff time, the cost of the contract with the webcast provider and the cost of the contract with Community People, who moderated most of the discussions.

40. The most successful example had been a forum which had attracted 170 comments posted over four weeks.

*Discussion with Nora Radcliffe MSP, Elaine Thomson MSP, Jamie Stone MSP and David Mundell MSP*

41. MSPs had initially encouraged communication by e-mail, imagining that quick and brief replies would suffice; but some e-mails ran to 20 pages and many were no different in substance from paper mail. MSPs managed, just, often using extra staff. It was suggested that more office staff could be needed. The Scottish Parliament provided standard-format e-mail addresses for MSPs.

42. MSPs and staff were in the main aware of new technology and were willing to use it. Some needed training, but attendance at courses was sometimes poor.

43. Looking ahead, one important issue was the connection between constituency offices and Edinburgh. If necessary, the Parliament should perhaps be prescriptive about the means by which the link was made. Another issue of concern was the handling of e-mail and filtering software.

44. One MSP said that she had spoken in the debate in the chamber earlier that day, and that all the information which she had used for her speech had been gathered electronically. Holyrood would offer new opportunities, but it was not expected that MSPs would have workstations in the Chamber: there were objections in high places.

45. One MSP said that she would welcome facilities to allow a half-hour surgery each day with her. Webcam was the preferred medium as eye contact was useful. Another suggestion was a network of video booths, where constituents could make recordings and send them to their constituency MSPs.

46. MSPs were positive about interactive fora (such as petitions and web-based discussions) but were not yet entirely clear how best to use them. As a clear indicator of opinion, they were valuable, but they were facilities for debate rather than plebiscites. One MSP compared them to victim statements, which gave an opportunity for views to be aired. The danger of raising and then dashing expectations was acknowledged.

47. Also, MSPs needed to bear in mind who was accessing discussion sites. If a Committee set up a web-based discussion, it was the job of that Committee to interpret the feedback sensibly.

48. The flow of information between the Parliament and the Executive needed to be opened up - the Civil Service was resistant to the idea of MSPs e-mailing Ministers directly.

49. The links between the Parliament and schools were already strong. Many schoolchildren attended proceedings in the Chamber and it was becoming increasingly common for schools to play back webcasts of proceedings to classes.

*The Committee then attended Question Time in the Chamber and visited the new Parliamentary Building site at Holyrood. The presentation at Holyrood dwelt on the design and genesis of the building rather than technological aspects.*

**ANNEX B****Video conference with Mr Reg Alcock,  
Member of the Canadian House of Commons**

*Note by the Clerk of the Committee*

1. The Committee held a video conference with Reg Alcock, a Member of the Canadian House of Commons, on 13 May 2002. The conference was held in the Grimond Room, Portcullis House, using equipment owned by the House.

2. Reg Alcock started by describing how he had become involved in using new technology in his work. He had sensed a decline in voters' involvement in politics, and he sought re-engage his constituents, using databases to track voters and get feedback on issues of real concern to them. As a result, he was better informed about their priorities. He believed that his efforts to engage with the electorate had led to an increase in his share of the constituency vote, against the political trend.

3. Reg noted that his constituency was an urban one (in Winnipeg) and that a relatively high percentage of his constituents were regular and confident users of IT. His initiatives had met with very little resistance. He accepted that people of above a certain age - nearing retirement perhaps - were less likely to be comfortable with new technology. He held video conference surgeries on weekday evenings when he was in Ottawa, partly to provide a fuller service and partly to reduce the demands on his time at weekends in Winnipeg.

4. He noted that Parliamentary procedures in the Canadian House of Commons enabled him to make a one-minute statement on a subject of his choice before Question Time. Reg e-mails constituents on his database and invites them to reply and suggest a topic.

5. The Committee asked Reg about the volume of e-mails which he received. He did not find numbers of e-mails 'crushing'; it was rare to receive hundreds or thousands of e-mails on any one issue and, when it did happen, it could usually be foreseen and the necessary staff support could be arranged. All e-mails were routed to his staff.

6. Richard Allan MP asked what were the barriers to more widespread use of IT by Canadian MPs in their political or parliamentary work. Reg Alcock answered that Members 'would not be led': technology required investment and some were keener than others. There was a sense that all MPs had to be 'treated the same' and that a common service level acceptable to all should be provided. This was akin to a 'lowest common denominator' approach. Critical mass was important: he believed that it would take a generation or two before the methods which he used became standard.

7. The Chairman asked about the quality of the sound and pictures offered by video conference. Reg Alcock replied that movements still appeared jerky and sound quality was maybe not perfect; but this need not be an obstacle and many people related to him in a conference as if they were in the same room. He was the only Canadian MP to have his own video conferencing facilities, and he had raised the necessary funds independently.

8. Gwyn Prosser MP said that certain constituents contacted him by e-mail and then conducted a dialogue, e-mailing on a daily or even hourly basis. This was burdensome, and Reg Alcock acknowledged it to be a 'very real problem'. If constituents were e-mailing constantly or if they were abusive, he simply ignored them.

9. Margaret Moran MP asked whether the Canadian Government had a e-democracy policy. Reg said that there were policies but no statement of principles such as that formed by the Scottish Parliament.

10. Ann McKechin MP asked about the social profile of those who corresponded with him using e-mail. She noted that most of the e-mails that she received from constituents came from 'middle-class' people or from students. Poorer and older people made much less use of e-mail. Reg agreed that this was a real concern. He believed that the usage of technological means of communication would become universal given time. To some extent, technology was used more by educated or 'well-off groups', but this reflected the general tendency of such groups to be more articulate in airing their grievances and seeking redress by whatever means, innovative or conventional.

## ANNEX C

### Meetings held on 20 May 2002

*Note by the Clerk of the Committee*

1. On 20 May, the Committee held a series of informal meetings with:

Stephan Shakespeare Nick Buckley	Director of Public Opinion Research for YouGov, and UpMyStreet, publisher of local information;
Richard Deverell Anne Sloman Martin Vogel	Head of New Media News, BBC, Chief Political Adviser, BBC, and Lead responsibility for interactivity and politics work, BBC; and
Stuart Hill Mark Gladwyn	Director, BT Stepchange; and Technical Director, Criminal Justice IT Directorate.

2. Stephan Shakespeare said that YouGov was a politically neutral community research company which used principally online methods. He believed that conventional opinion research did not allow investigation in any depth.

3. Nick Buckley said that the premise of UpMyStreet was the need to provide “joined-up” information. UpMyStreet was still developing, and feedback about the information offered was welcome. Local government had shown particular interest in the service.

4. Mr Buckley recognised that to use UpMyStreet (or any other third party) as a channel by which Internet users could reach MPs directly would probably lead to an increase in caseload, with consequences for Members’ administrative support. Peter Luff MP pointed out that Members could forestall a number of inquiries by providing relevant information on their websites. Mr Shakespeare suggested that screening of e-mails was the answer. Mr Buckley said that all web-based companies had followed a learning curve in dealing with e-mail. Members might choose to list some “Frequently Asked Questions” with generic answers on their websites; or they could redirect inquiries.

5. John Mann MP said that he did not share the reticence of some: he could not foresee any circumstances under which constituents could interact excessively.

6. Mr Buckley said that Digital TV could “shift the spectrum” and open up new channels for interaction. Some people who would not choose to pay for a PC and Internet link might be prepared to invest in Digital Television, which was easier to use

7. Margaret Moran MP asked whether it might be possible to draw up a concordat between Parliament and the people, to prevent organised (often international) campaigns. Mr Shakespeare said that it would be reasonable to build in screening measures, perhaps warning that it was not possible to deal with e-mails of beyond a certain length. Mr Buckley said that screening could be undertaken by an intermediary (such as Fax YourMP). Alternatively, filtering systems could be used: these were not so expensive if they were shared and the costs borne by an institution.

8. Both Mr Shakespeare and Mr Buckley believed that public expectations were growing. The effectiveness of Parliament in interacting with the public would be measured against others performing comparable services.

9. The Committee then held a discussion with representatives of the BBC. Mr Vogel began by saying that the BBC was looking at how the BBC website could be enhanced to offer better connections with the public. New features might include pages about institutions and how to contact them, briefing on issues of concern, and forums.

10. Mr Deverell noted some Committee members' concerns about overload and said that software could control mass access. He suggested a "database of democracy" which could explain who was responsible for what and which could redirect inquiries away from Westminster when responsibility lay elsewhere.

11. Anne Sloman said that it would be possible to ensure that Members received only e-mails from their constituents, by stipulating that those who sent e-mail should register their postcode.

12. John Mann MP said that signposting was needed: people could be pointed towards the BBC website for links to Parliamentary information or Members' voting records, and the BBC website could provide links to Members' websites. Richard Allan MP agreed that the BBC would need to do some editorial sifting.

13. Neil Gerrard MP said that he would not want to bar incoming e-mails from people who were not his constituents but who might have legitimate reasons for wanting to contact him in particular. Filtering was not always the answer: redirection was just as important.

14. Martin Vogel stressed the importance of "intelligent" links. A news story about adoption could, for instance, have links to other information pages or to relevant "deep-level" pages about the Adoption Bill on the Parliamentary website. People could register areas of interest: the BBC could then alert them when there were relevant developments.

15. Richard Deverell said that an interactive politics service would need to be kept "at arms length" from BBC News, to preserve the distinction between information and journalism. Anne Sloman agreed, noting that the BBC had to be clearly seen to be independent.

16. The Committee then held a discussion with Stuart Hill, from BT Stepchange, and Mark Gladwyn, from the Criminal Justice IT Directorate.

17. Mark Gladwyn spoke briefly about the "disruptive technology" theory, which held that new technology began by providing less than was required but ultimately did more than necessary. The communications technologies now being developed did not (yet) fall into the latter category.

18. Stuart Hill said that there was little point in using technologies when they gave no added value. He set out a vision of possible technological developments over the course of the next 100 years, and described a possible day in the life of an MP in 2012.

19. The Committee Chairman thanked Mr Hill for the presentation but noted that, whatever technology was developed to facilitate tasks or perform them automatically, personal judgment would still be needed. Mr Hill agreed.

20. Mark Gladwyn echoed this point, saying that knowledge was not the same as skill.

21. Mr Hill said that the growth of the Internet and mobile technology was making more and more information available "any time, anywhere" - the Martini syndrome. Users would be bombarded with not just information but also noise and advertisements.

22. The Committee Chairman noted widespread concerns that if MPs became ever more accessible, they could be “snowed under” with extra work. There was a need for information to be condensed.

23. Mark Gladwyn agreed that an “Intelligent Agent”, as described by Mr Hill in his presentation, would be needed to sift through and interpret information.

24. Richard Allan MP noted that some organisations were still very paper-based, and the Committee Chairman said that letters to Ministers were likely to get a quicker response than electronic communications.

25. Dr Coleman (Specialist Adviser to the Committee) asked what might be the consequences for Parliament if it did not keep up. Mr Hill suggested that it could be left out of the loop and that the legitimacy of Government might be challenged, with society filling the gap.

## SUMMARY OF CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

- (a) **The Committee recommends that the following set of principles for information and communication technologies be adopted for the House:**
- A. The House is committed to the use of ICT to increase its accessibility and to enable the public, exercising its right to use whatever medium is convenient, to communicate with Members and with Committees of the House.**
  - B. The House is committed to using ICT to enhance the professionalism of Members, their staff and House staff in all aspects of parliamentary life.**
  - C. The House is committed to the use of ICT to increase public participation in its work, enabling it to draw on the widest possible pool of experience, including particularly those who have traditionally been excluded from the political and parliamentary process.**
  - D. The House recognises the value of openness and will use ICT to enable, as far as possible, the public to have access to its proceedings and papers.**
  - E. The House will develop and share good practice in the use of ICT by other parliamentary and governmental bodies both within the United Kingdom and elsewhere, and will work in collaboration with outside bodies. (paragraph 11).**
- (b) **The Committee recommends that the House report annually on its progress in implementing these principles (paragraph 12).**
- (c) **We recognise the importance of a communications strategy that maximises the accessibility and transparency of the House, and indeed Parliament, and we acknowledge the work already being done by the House of Commons Commission (paragraph 13).**
- (d) **We will investigate the EchoMail and other filtering systems to assess their suitability for Parliament (paragraph 21).**
- (e) **It is possible to put in place a programme which asks senders to supply their postal address and directs them elsewhere if that postal address does not fall within the Member's own constituency. This facility could be publicised to Members (paragraph 23).**
- (f) **The House Administration should develop protocols to assist intermediaries in providing the best medium for communicating with Members, and these protocols will be considered by this Committee (paragraph 24).**
- (g) **The Information Committee will in future investigate and make recommendations on potential mechanisms to enable all Members—whether they choose to have their personal e-mail addresses publicised or not—to be accessible to the public electronically (paragraph 25).**

- (h) **The House could do more to promote the use of video conferencing by Members. Regular investment may be needed to take account of developments in technology (including ISDN and broadband) which improve picture quality, overall reliability, and opportunities for simultaneous translation (paragraph 27).**
- (i) **We encourage the House Administration to bear in mind not just viewing figures during the term of the pilot but also the general desirability of making the proceedings of the House—and of select committees—as accessible as possible. An archive of webcast proceedings would also be valuable to both the public and Members (paragraph 28).**
- (j) **It is essential, in order to run an efficient and professional office, for Members to have reliable remote access links from outside the Parliamentary Estate (paragraph 33).**
- (k) **There is a case for including a suitable mobile device as part of the standard set of equipment issued to Members, funded centrally; the Speaker’s Advisory Panel on Members’ Allowances may want to consider this possibility. The Parliamentary Communications Directorate would also need to be resourced to enable Members to use any such device to access their e-mails on the ‘@parliament.uk’ domain, and to provide training in the use of mobile devices. (Paragraph 35).**
- (l) **We suggest to the Speaker’s Panel on Members’ Allowances that it consider whether resources should be made available to assist Members in networking their computer hardware in both their Westminster and their constituency offices (paragraph 36).**
- (m) **The House Administration could usefully draw up guidelines for Members and their staff (and indeed House staff) on how to meet expectations of quick response times and on storage of e-mails (paragraph 39).**
- (n) **Members may wish to use a range of technologies to engage and consult with their constituents, such as via online surgeries and interactive fora. We recommend that support is given to Members to carry out their constituency role in this way. (Paragraph 42).**
- (o) **The House Administration may need to review the allocation of resources for remote connectivity to enable additional members of staff to work from the constituency (paragraph 43).**
- (p) **We make the following recommendations for the conduct of consultations:**
- **the purpose and terms of the consultation should be made clear at the outset, both to those initiating the consultation and those participating in it. Consultations may range from a simple invitation to submit views to a more deliberative and interactive debate including senior decision makers.**
  - **it must be made clear to participants that they are not being asked to make policy but to inform the thinking of legislators;**
  - **efforts need to be made to recruit participants, whether individuals or organisations, who can impart experience and expertise;**
  - **special efforts are needed to make online consultations socially inclusive: these may include training in the necessary ICT skills and directions to public Internet access for participants;**

- contributions to consultations need to be interpreted or summarised by an independent body or staff;
- a good consultation exercise will bring value to both the decision makers and the consultees. This can be tested through effective evaluation procedures, which should be built into each consultation proposal. These should be both quantitative and qualitative. Of particular value would be follow-up with a selection of both consultees and decision makers to assess the value of the consultation to them. The results of any evaluation should be produced in good time and made available to all participants;
- participants should receive feedback on the outcomes of the consultations.

In each case, the consultee should be given clear information on what they can expect, perhaps in the form of a “consultation contract” (paragraph 47).

- (q) If online consultations are adopted widely by House committees as a means of gathering information, consideration should be given to providing such support, with consequences for the House’s technical support staff and committee staff. The Liaison Committee would be an appropriate forum to consider whether such a move might be desirable in principle. We encourage all those who would play a part in such a decision to bear in mind the value to the House of widening the net for evidence and of being seen to do so (paragraph 48).
- (r) Special efforts need to be made by the House to engage younger people, who are recognised as being both more ready to use technology and more disconnected from the traditional political system (paragraph 50).
- (s) If only to maintain a degree of consistency in Members’ practice, the House could usefully offer Members guidance on how to meet statutory requirements on freedom of information and data protection (paragraph 55).
- (t) We suggest that the House Administration should:
  - conduct a thorough and constant evaluation of its use of Information and Communications Technologies;
  - maintain an awareness of initiatives being developed elsewhere to increase public participation in, and communication with, representative bodies (we have in mind the Scottish Parliament, the Northern Ireland and Welsh Assemblies, and local authorities); and
  - work with others to use technologies in innovative and effective ways (paragraph 58).

## PROCEEDINGS OF THE COMMITTEE RELATING TO THE REPORT

MONDAY 8 JULY 2002

Members present:

Michael Fabricant (in the Chair)

Mr Richard Allan  
John Mann  
Ann McKechin

Margaret Moran  
Jim Sheridan

\* \* \* \*

John Mann declared a pecuniary interest in relation to the Committee's inquiry, as follows:

Shareholder in a company concerned with interpretation, translation, microphone hire, sound systems and conference and meetings organisations.

The Committee deliberated.

Draft Report [Digital Technology: Working for Parliament and the Public], proposed by the Chairman, brought up and read.

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

Paragraphs 1 to 59 read and agreed to.

Annexes agreed to.

*Resolved*, That the Report be the First Report of the Committee to the House.

*Ordered*, That the Chairman do make the Report to the House.

*Ordered*, That the provisions of Standing Order No. 134 (Select committees (reports)) be applied to the Report.

Several papers were ordered to be appended to the Report.

*Ordered*, That the Appendices to the Report be reported to the House.—(*The Chairman*)

Several Memoranda were ordered to be reported to the House.

\* \* \* \*

[Adjourned till Monday 15 July at half-past Four o'clock.]

## LIST OF APPENDICES TO THE REPORT

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2. Memorandum by IBM .....	38
3. Memorandum by ePolitix.com .....	43

## LIST OF UNPRINTED MEMORANDA

The following memoranda have been reported to the House, but to save printing costs they have not been printed and copies have been placed in the House of Commons Library where they may be inspected by Members. Other copies are in the Record Office, House of Lords, and are available to the public for inspection. Requests for inspection should be addressed to The Parliamentary Archives, Record Office, House of Lords, London, SW1A 0PW (Tel 020 7219 3074). Hours of inspection are from 9.30 am to 5.00 pm on Mondays to Fridays.

1. Letter from the Chairman of the Committee to all Members of the House.
2. Letter from Candy Atherton MP to the Chairman of the Committee.
3. Letter from Patsy Calton MP to the Chairman of the Committee.
4. Letter from Julia Drown MP to the Chairman of the Committee.
5. Letter from Paul Flynn MP to the Chairman of the Committee.
6. Letter from Fabian Hamilton MP to the Clerk of the Committee.
7. Letter from Michael Mates MP to the Chairman of the Committee.
8. Letter from Andrew Miller MP to the Chairman of the Committee.
9. Letter from Matthew Taylor MP to the Chairman of the Committee.
10. Letter from Dr Phyllis Starkey to the Chairman of the Committee.
11. Letter from Simon Thomas AS/MP to the Chairman of the Committee.
12. Letter from Mike Weir MP to the Chairman of the Committee.
13. Letter from Betty Williams AS/MP to the Chairman of the Committee.
14. Letter from Margaret Moran MP to the Chairman of the Committee.
15. Letter from The Rt Hon Michael Jack MP to the Chairman of the Committee.
16. E-mail from Mr John Battle MP to the Clerk of the Committee.
17. E-mail from Mr David Drew MP to the Clerk of the Committee.
18. E-mail on behalf of Mr Howard Flight MP to the Clerk of the Committee.
19. E-mail from Beverley Hughes MP to the Clerk of the Committee.
20. Letter from Eric Joyce MP to the Clerk of the Committee.
21. E-mail from Ms Meg Munn MP to the Clerk of the Committee.
22. E-mail from Dr Nick Palmer MP to the Clerk of the Committee.
23. E-mail from Mrs Caroline Spelman MP to the Clerk of the Committee.

24. E-mail from Derek Wyatt MP to the Clerk of the Committee.

## APPENDIX 1

### Memorandum by Mr Stuart Hill, Director of the BT Stepchange Programme

#### THE FUTURE?—A DAY IN THE LIFE OF AN MP IN 2012

*The following outlines a day in the life of an MP in 10 years time.*

As you leave your house in the morning you put on your ACTIVE LENS (like a contact lens) and then using VOICE ACTIVATION you can view your diary for the day, your personalised newspaper and even read your briefing papers.

The technology that allows this to happen is in the fabric of your clothes (WEARABLE COMPUTING) and the power is drawn from a combination of new, more powerful types of batteries (ENERGY CELLS) and PARASITIC POWER HARVESTING.

On the way to the House you complete the mundane tasks of the day such as agreeing the flight and hotel details that your PERSONAL INTELLIGENT AGENT has suggested, before it goes and completes the arrangements. (The development of SELF SERVE technologies with a NETCENTRIC focus has made life so much easier). The consequent changes to your diary and the need to reschedule some of your meetings are automatically dealt with by your PERSONAL INTELLIGENT AGENT.

Once you arrive at the House of Commons and had a quick chat with a couple of colleagues you've bumped into, you select the first free desk in the COMMUNAL OFFICE AREA. The desk automatically recognises you through your handprint (BIOMETRIC IDENTIFICATION AND AUTHENTICATION) and customises the desktop to your preferences (PERSONALISATION). From this desk you carry out a constituency surgery and through the use of AVATAR technology and HOLOGRAPHIC projections both you and your constituent appear and can interact as if you are in the same room even though you are hundreds of miles apart.

In the afternoon you attend a session in the Chamber. Your opposite number is speaking and quoting some figures—your support team are also watching the debate and are therefore able to send you a message onto your screen highlighting that the figures are grossly inaccurate so that when you respond you can inform the Chamber what the real figures are. (This was first used over 10 years ago by the National Assembly for Wales).

As it is a Thursday afternoon it is time to complete your weekly WEBCAST to update your constituency of the weeks activities. This is completed at any of the desks in the COMMUNAL OFFICE AREA—once the desk has identified and authenticated you it is able to automatically generate your preferred backdrop and eliminate all the background noise. Fortunately the WEBCAST is not a time consuming activity as your PERSONAL INTELLIGENT AGENT has already automatically compiled the majority of the input. Your constituents can receive the WEBCAST in real time via their DIGITAL TVs or they can view it at a later time. Through the use of technology you are able to receive feedback on how the WEBCAST was received and what areas people were interested in.

One of your pet topics over the last 10 years has been COLLABORATIVE DEMOCRACY and you are still surprised that it has not been fully adopted, which you believe is due, in part, to the slow process of Parliament and a surprisingly slow uptake by citizens, although participation in democracy has steadily improved. The monthly meeting takes place in the House and due to the continuing space restrictions the same type of technology as used in the COMMUNAL OFFICE AREA is employed, which caters for both physical and virtual

attendees. As the Chairman you initially found it daunting; however the benefits become clear when one of the key speakers at a previous meeting couldn't attend physically, but the fact that he appeared virtually meant the important meeting was still a resounding success.

On the way home you complete the outstanding mundane jobs for which your PERSONAL INTELLIGENT AGENT needs your confirmation, and through your ACTIVE LENS you receive a quick update on constituency matters and a very quick read of your up to-the-minute personalised newspaper, before you settle back to read a few chapters of your novel.

At home you remove your ACTIVE LENS and then retire to bed knowing that as you will be working from home tomorrow you know that you will be able to find the time for a quick swim before you start work.

As you lie in your bed you try to recall how you managed 10 years ago—the long hours travelling, the inefficient ways of communicating with your office, colleagues and constituents, and the difficulties in trawling for information. Although you initially found it difficult to adopt the new ways of working that the technology allowed, the reasons moved from being convincing then compelling before it was almost compulsory in order to stay on top of things and complete your job. And now, you couldn't do without it—how things have changed!!

*10 June 2002*

## APPENDIX 2

### Memorandum by IBM

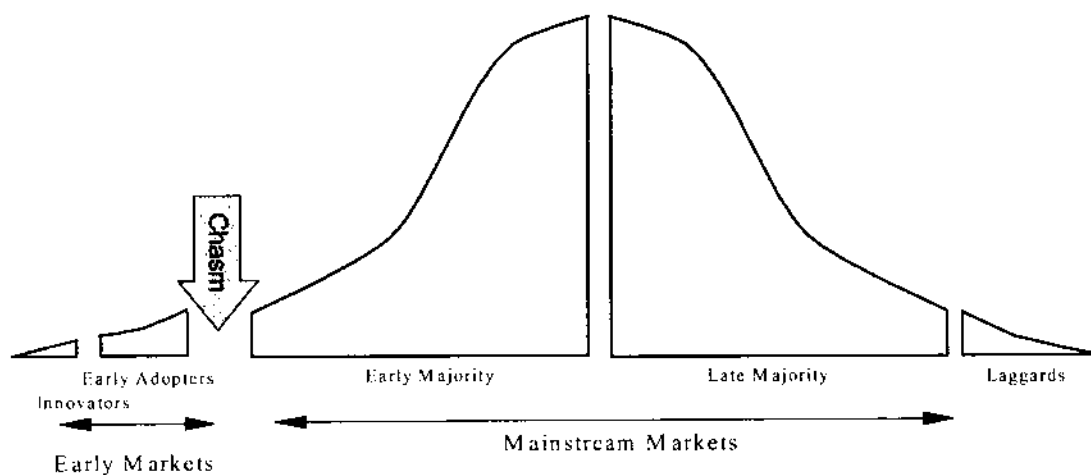
#### HOW MPs CAN KEEP IN TOUCH

There are two enabling technologies that allow users of communication systems, such as e-mail, and applications, to move out of the office and be mobile, or more flexible in their work. The first technology is pervasive computing. This moves personal computing to easy to carry devices as well as non traditional devices, such as kiosks, cars etc. The second technology is high speed data mobile networks. These include the cellular wide area networks as well as the wireless local area networks. Stephen Timms announced on 10 June the availability of the spectrum for public WLAN from the end of July. This, together with the government's Broadband initiatives, will provide for the communications needs of MPs.

MPs using applications based on these technologies will be able to do the things in 1, 2 and 4. With m-learning applications deployed on the two technologies their skill referred to in Q3 can be kept up to date. IBM Learning Services are already implementing m-learning.

#### 1. Which ICTs will be most appropriate for the work of an elected representative in five years time?

In answering this question it is worth starting by considering the process by which new and emerging technologies become mainstream. Moore has indicated that the conventionally held wisdom as to how new products and services become established and grow starts to breakdown in the fields of high technology and ICT. A more accurate model is suggested by the following diagram which identifies a 'chasm' which new technologies have to bridge to start on the process of gaining widespread adoption and use.



Technology Adoption Life Cycle

If we are to consider the present situation then we can identify a wide range of new technologies that are in use with innovators and early adopters and are approaching the 'chasm'. Given the 5 year timeframe that the question has posed we need to understand which are the most likely candidates to cross the 'chasm' and then understand which of these are likely to be the most popular and useful to elected representatives.

The candidate technologies which IBM is currently working with will include:

Mobile connection to data. This will include the use of mobile phone connection to data enabled services (GPRS and then 3G) and Wireless LAN. Within 5 years elected representatives could have permanent connection to the Internet both at their normal place of work (Via Wireless LAN) or when out and about via GPRS. This would enable them to instantly gather relevant information needed for their work and be informed of news and breaking events. Potential devices for elected representatives would include Web Pads (lightweight devices that are connected to the Internet and e-mail via a Wireless LAN that could be installed at their place of work) and GPRS connected Personal Digital Assistant (PDA). The culmination of these devices could be advanced versions of the wearable PC that is currently being deployed in a range of application today (flight check-in, ticket sales, maintenance workers). These devices would also enable them to be in touch with their communities, the press and other bodies needed to perform their tasks.

Pervasive computing devices and systems. This will include the concepts of Home Gateways and Telematics (ICT equipped cars). The UK currently has a lower percentage of homes that have access to Personal Computers (PC's) than other countries (e.g. USA). This capability is however being supplemented by the rapid penetration of Interactive Television (iTV) in the home environment (through satellite and cable systems) as well as games consoles (e.g. X-Box and PS2). These devices could provide elected representatives with the means to inform the electorate and gather feedback from them on a range of issues. For example, current iTV technology allows entertainment programmes (e.g. Big Brother) to gather millions of 'votes' every week. The capability of games consoles are likely to extend rapidly to provide an Internet connected device capable of rivalling the home Personal Computer and provide another variant of the Home Gateway.

Knowledge Management. This will include the tools needed to discover data; the tools to create knowledge from this data and the tools to capture this knowledge and make it available to interested bodies. To help elected representatives to make sense of the flood of information that is likely to be available to them within 5 years will require that they are adequately supported by ICT. Current innovators in this field (which include some local and central government bodies) are relying on the implementation of portals to aid their communities. The main emphasis of the portal is to provide an interface that is personalised and customised to the individual but takes account of their role, their interest, the communities they interact with and the relevant data sources available to them. A specific portal for elected representatives would enable them to increase the efficiency with which they perform their jobs and keep pace with the information explosion. The portal could provide information and analysis of government and industry published data and give access to a wide range of information relevant to parliamentary legislation. This portal could also provide information published by international organisations and bodies (and potentially provide automatic translation of it).

Voice enabled interfaces to ICT. Voice recognition has developed rapidly over the past few years and is currently able to handle a wide range of tasks. These include answering telephone directory enquiries, providing information on services and converting voice to text. The pace of development over the next few years will mean that elected representatives could look forward to a more natural interface to their ICT devices that can be used with more freedom and in a wider range of locations. It is also possible to provide automated translation to a range of languages that could provide a means for elected representatives to converse and get information from international bodies rapidly.

**2. How can representatives ensure that they are communicating with those they represent (their constituents) and not others, such as citizens from other constituencies or countries—or professional lobbyists?**

To be completely sure that you are dealing with the party with whom you think you are, a form of online user authentication is required.

Today there are the following options:

Have a userID and password (and the user must tediously register with every organisation—government and commercial—separately and then manage a host of passwords and IDs), buy a digital certificate (costly), and use a proprietary solution.

There is no single solution in the marketplace today that is able to deliver the open, easy to use, robust and trustable solution with a commercial model that is affordable for users and attractive for providers.

The Office of the e-Envoy has been looking at options, but this is an industry wide issue, so it is unlikely that the government will be able to or should develop its own solution. It should continue to act as a facilitator to the UK to resolve this problem. Two consultation papers on digital signatures and their role in trust and confidence for on-line users: citizens and businesses, are due to be issued soon to enable government thinking to move forward in this area.

The Office of the e-Envoy has had documented the requirements such a on-line authentication system needs to meet. A possible solution that meets these requirements has been developed as part of the EU Trust Infrastructure Europe (TIE) project and is called empowerment. The Office of the e-Envoy is studying this system in consultation with industry and other government departments.

### **3. What sort of skills do elected representatives need to succeed in the information age?**

The Information Age we enjoy is to a large extent based on major implementation programmes, so smoothly effected that we all take for granted the technology employed and the ensuing benefits. We recommend that elected Members should have a better understanding of at least the theory of large programme management and the delivery skills required to support such programmes. We refer you to the work of the Office of Government Commerce 'Skills Framework', as it includes a sensible list of skills which could become core requirements for all public servants in the future.

We differentiate between 'skills' and 'behaviours'. Elected Members will need skills, for sure. However they will also need new behaviours, and they are going to be just as important as skills.

Elected Members will need to be familiar and comfortable with a variety of technologies, and different ways of working, so as to be able to balance their benefits against associated concerns. New technologies are only enablers to take advantage of the underlying changes in the way we work, live and play. The increase of e-business means that more people are collaborating, sharing information, finding new ways of penetrating vast amounts of data to get to the important bits, working in virtual teams, flexible hours, remote from their team mates. Elected Members need to understand these behavioural and cultural shifts—and they need to embrace and adopt new ways of working themselves so that they don't suffer from the "cobblers' children" effect. As leaders of the country, they need to be leading thinking about work and lifestyles, not be on the back foot reacting to change, or—worse—unthinkingly working to impose superseded models of behaviour.

Most of all, elected Members will need enquiring minds—a thirst to understand new technologies as they emerge and what those technologies can do for the elected Members

and their constituents. Tenacity is important—the ability to stick with learning something new even if it doesn't work perfectly the first time. They will need to make the time to attend sessions to learn about new ideas, and ask people what they are doing with bits of kit or software. Wanting and liking and being comfortable with change, displaying logical thought processes and problem solving ability in increasingly complex situations, seeing the contribution that business makes to the UK and new possibilities in business challenges, verbal and numeric reasoning, making lateral and creative connections; are all competencies that IT companies are looking for in their graduate employees today. Elected Members will need the same competencies!

Joined up Government, policy making in complex environments, breakdown of old barriers between functions, processes and industry sectors will all challenge elected Members as we see that 19th century organisations, hierarchies, and processes are no longer the most economic, efficient or appropriate ways of working. Elected Members will also need to be brave and courageous, and have the strength of their own convictions to visualise, verbalise and execute real change.

#### **4. How can ICTs help MPs to be better at a) representing their constituents; b) considering legislation; c) scrutinising the Government; and d) relating to the media?**

a) Represent constituents—Understand how constituents need to shape their lives today. Get up to date constituent views and represent them in parliament e.g. check point sms text message votes on specific issues, questionnaires on web sites, phone in on local radio shows. Engage constituents, build databases of those with specific and vocal interest in certain subjects and ask them to submit opinions. Use the same technology that retailers use to collect, analyse and use data about their customers, to determine preferences, behaviours, and detect early warning signals about issues.

b) Considering legislation—collaborative computing is key here. Considering legislation is very time consuming, partly because it is important for everyone to have their say. Why not open chat rooms for people to debate specific clauses real-time, with moderators to collect group decisions and votes and then move on? Enable elected Members to ALWAYS KNOW that the version of the document they are looking at is current, who else has seen it, what those people said about it, what they wanted changed etc. The Whitehall Knowledge Network could be expanded to include applications for considering legislation in a secure, easy to use and immediately available way. The technology already exists to support the process of creating legislation—but it would appear that the processes currently in use by elected members are not being considered for changes—perhaps because existing processes are easy to use, understood and comfortable.

c) Scrutinising the Government—Much of what we have said under b) above, applies here. If the Government is to be scrutinised, it means that the processes, information, changes, updates, and final documents have to be available for people to see them. Collaborative computing, easy to navigate databases, consistent interfaces, Government wide Intranet—again all these technologies exist today but are not being adopted—perhaps because of the threat to individual or Party self-interest, fear of open information, lack of understanding of the power of collaboration, or reluctance to include 3rd parties in government processes. The private sector is more aware than ever of the value of audit trails, precise records, archived files, and organisational history—the Government needs to change to adopt these modern governance processes as well.

d) Relating to the media—A truism of e-business is that when you make processes more widely available, and faster and easier to use, they are used more often. Elected members are already drowning under the weight of information they have to process every day—web sites, reports, mail, newspapers, etc. This is also true of their constituents and the media.

Everyone is trying to sort their way through the endless information to find the bits that matter, and make ever faster decision on imperfect data.

Elected Members will be required to answer questions immediately, by text message, e-mail or phone. We think they are going to need a totally different support structure to be able to do this. Having one or two people supporting each MP isn't going to work for much longer. There is too much to read, assimilate, brief their MPs on, and find answers to. The Government is going to need to move towards having teams of specialists who concentrate on specific areas, with bridge walkers operating between the teams making lateral connections. Elected Members will need to know immediately the response to a question from the media, or the up to date brief to provide, and they will need to find it quickly and easily through the appropriate technology. But having easy to use and appropriate technology will only be of any benefit if the data that is held is right, up to date, and trustworthy. As with all specialised professions (teachers, doctors, police etc), elected members need to be able to concentrate on their core competencies and what they are trained to do—not waste time on support functions better managed by other people. Having new technology doesn't change this imperative, but will accelerate addressing the solution as both elected Members and their support staff become increasingly exhausted by the amounts of data they must process, and work they must complete.

### **About IBM**

IBM, the world's largest technology company, is the world's number one server company and information technology provider, with 80 years of leadership in helping businesses innovate. IBM helps customers, Business Partners and developers in a wide range of industries that leverage the power of the Internet for e-business.

*1 July 2002*

## APPENDIX 3

### Memorandum by ePolitix.com

#### Background on ePolitix.com

ePolitix.com was launched two years ago by Parliamentary Communications Limited—the publishers of *The House Magazine* and *The Parliamentary Monitor*. Its aim is to improve the flow of information and communication between elected representatives and the public. ePolitix.com is a free and open access politics Internet site. This makes us well placed to contribute to your investigation into how MPs can “keep in touch”. During the General Election in 2001 ePolitix.com attracted 31 million hits.

#### ePolitix.com and MP websites

Our Westminster section houses 285 MP websites—the largest single collection of MP websites on the Internet. Out of these 285 websites ePolitix.com has built over 120 sites from scratch—making us the biggest builder of MP websites. Following instructions from the MPs’ offices we are also responsible for updating and maintaining these 121 websites and we ensure all 285 MP websites are up-to-date and topical by inviting MPs to send us their latest press releases which we then add to their sites.

#### ePolitix.com’s experience of MPs’ attitudes to their websites

ePolitix.com has designed a very basic and simple template for an MP website. It can provide details about the MP, the constituency, how you can contact the MP, the MP’s interests, speeches, press releases, articles and their local campaigns. Users can e-mail their MP from a link on the website, if the MP wishes to provide an e-mail address. To build the sites, the MP e-mails us the text and pictures they want to go in and we then build it into our template and send it back for their approval. Whenever an MP wants to update their site they simply e-mail the change to us and we then update the website on their behalf.

We appreciate that our MP websites provide a basic service for MPs and that this is just the beginning of how the MP should be using the Internet to communicate with their constituents, but we believe our service meets most MPs’ current expectations of the Internet and fits in with the time that MPs can currently devote to their website. We believe there are many other ways in which the MP could and should be using the Internet to communicate with their constituents, and perhaps more importantly to position themselves to become the “electronic gatekeeper” in the e-democracy process—acting as a vital link between the public and the government. However, we recognise that this would require additional staff and resources for MPs.

#### The electronic gatekeeper—constituency forums

We believe each MP should have the technical capacity to develop a constituency forum. This forum would include all the key stakeholders within the constituency—local hospitals, schools, businesses, voluntary organisations, etc. and would also be open to members of the public. We would suggest the MP should regularly consult their constituency forum—asking for their opinions on a specific policy issue. The relevant constituency stakeholders who have an interest in the issue along with any constituent who would like to get involved could e-mail in their views. The MP would then send a report to the relevant government department detailing the key comments from some of those who responded. This means the MP would have found a new way of consulting with organisations and individuals from

the constituency on a policy issue, gets feedback from the constituency about policy areas and acts as an influential filter—sending key views from the constituents to Whitehall.

Developing the use of technology along these lines would have several major benefits. It would ensure that ministers and officials are aware of a range of grassroots opinion as they develop and implement policies, helping to make policies more effective, and would also place MPs at the centre of a renewed effort to improve co-operation between government and civil society.

ePolitix.com would like to set up a pilot project with some MPs to develop this idea of constituency forums further. However, we realise that this would require a dedicated member of staff for each MP and would require the MP to invest some of their time into this project.

### **How ePolitix.com improves MPs access to information wherever they are**

#### *News*

ePolitix.com runs a highly respected news service covering around 20 politics news stories every day. We also produce three daily e-mail bulletins per day (this service is completely free and open to all users) highlighting forthcoming politics events, announcements and reports; summarising the politics news in the national newspapers and outlining the following day's business in Westminster's Parliament, the Scottish Parliament and other devolved institutions. Our 5000 subscribers to this e-mail service include: over 400 civil servants, over 400 parliamentary staff, over 70 MPs and over 250 journalists.

The news service is also available in WAP format, allowing those who are interested to access the information wherever they are via their mobile phone.

#### *Forum*

This is the area of the site where over 300 members ranging from corporate organisations to government agencies, trade associations to charities house their specialist public affairs websites within the ePolitix.com portal. These sites are different to the organisations' regular corporate site as these tailored sites specifically deal with their public affairs message. Using XML technology we can then link these Forum sites to relevant areas of the ePolitix.com site. MPs, researchers, party workers and civil servants have found that by using the Forum they are able to find out about a key organisation's public affairs position on a specific issue far more quickly and easily than by other methods.

We have started consulting our Forum members on topical policy issues and inviting them to give an immediate response. We add these responses to their websites and we put these responses up as news stories on the site. We recently received an e-mail from the Private Secretary to a Cabinet Minister who described our Forum Brief as "Absolutely brilliant." He went on to call it: "A really useful tool. It helps to have supportive and non-supportive comments on key stories that are running through the day."

### **What some MPs have said about the ePolitix.com service**

"The website that I hold within ePolitix is a useful addition to my work as an MP—enabling my constituents and other people interested in my work to access information about me on the Web. I am grateful to them for this service."

— The Rt Hon Margaret Beckett MP—Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs

"My staff are very happy with the support they have received from ePolitix in setting up and maintaining my website."

— The Rt Hon Nick Raynsford MP—Minister for Local Government

“ePolitix.com provides a very good and extremely useful service. It makes politics on the Internet simple and accessible.”

— The Rt Hon Charles Kennedy MP—Leader of the Liberal Democrats

“It is vital for an MP to have a web presence. In the quagmire that is the Internet industry, it was invaluable to have ePolitix.com, a trusted professional organisation to assist me in establishing a website. I could not be more grateful to them for their helpfulness and encouragement.”

— Rt Hon Virginia Bottomley MP—former Secretary of State for Culture Media and Sport

“My staff and I find ePolitix.com an invaluable resource that helps us to keep in touch with events in Westminster and the factors shaping the issues of the day.”

— The Rt Hon Bruce George MP—Chair of the House of Commons Defence Select Committee

“I am regularly impressed by the quality and depth of information contained within ePolitix.com. The subscribed services are of the highest quality and each new addition to the site makes it more and more invaluable. ePolitix is now an indispensable site for obtaining the most up-to-date information on what’s happening in Parliament.”

— Nigel Griffiths MP—DTI Minister

#### **Future meeting:**

ePolitix.com would be keen to meet with the Parliamentary Information Committee to discuss in more detail our ideas about how MPs could better use the Internet to communicate with their constituents and how MPs should be using the Internet to access relevant and useful information on policy issues. We hope this will be possible.

*25 June 2002*