



HOUSE OF LORDS

Information Committee

1st Report of Session 2006–07

Improving Facilities for Educational Visitors to Parliament

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First Report

IMPROVING FACILITIES FOR EDUCATIONAL VISITORS TO PARLIAMENT

1. Both Houses of Parliament have acknowledged for some years that better facilities for visitors, including children of school age, to the Palace of Westminster are needed. Improving public access to, and understanding and knowledge of, the work of the House of Lords is one of the six objectives of the House's 2007–10 Business Plan (HL Paper 87).
2. During 2006, we worked concurrently with a sub-committee of the House of Commons Administration Committee on the issue of visitor facilities. A range of evidence was collected and in April 2007 the Administration Committee published a report, *Improving Facilities for Educational Visitors to Parliament* (HC Paper 434). The report sets out in detail the background of the inquiry, describes the history of previous parliamentary reports relating to visitor facilities and considers a number of options (A to E) for improving educational provision. Written and oral evidence is also included in the report.
3. The conclusions and recommendations of the Administration Committee's report are reprinted in the Appendix to this report. We draw the attention of the House in particular to Recommendation 17 (option C), namely:

“... that a dedicated space for school visitors of approximately 1,000 square metres (consisting of flexible accommodation of five classrooms with ancillary space for storage, toilet facilities, a lunch area and locker space) should be sought either on or off the existing Estate—the exact space depending on what becomes available and at what cost ...”
4. During the course of the concurrent inquiry, we worked closely with the Administration Committee and we are grateful to the Committee for sharing with us its papers relating to the inquiry. Prior to the agreement of its report, we were aware that the Committee was moving towards an option expressed in terms of Recommendation 17. As a result, we sent a statement to the Administration Committee supporting that recommendation in particular. Our endorsement is noted in the Committee's report.
5. Whilst we recognise that there are strong arguments in favour of a full parliamentary visitor and information centre, we consider that Recommendation 17—enhancing facilities for educational visitors—is an important and wholly justified first step to improving parliamentary visitor facilities more generally. Our conviction in this regard has been reinforced by our first hand experience of the Parliamentary Education Service. During the course of the inquiry, we were pleased to be able to visit their offices and to attend a number of the activities provided by the Service.
6. We are aware that if the proposal for enhanced educational facilities is to be successful, then it is necessary for it to have House of Lords support, as it is a bicameral service funded by both Houses of Parliament. For this reason also we support the Administration Committee's recommendation.

Recommendation

7. Whilst we do not subscribe to all the conclusions and recommendations contained in the Administration Committee's report, we draw the proposal set out in Recommendation 17 (paragraph 3 above) to the attention of the House and **recommend** that this House endorse the recommendation, subject to the final design, the location and the cost being approved by the appropriate authorities.

APPENDIX

Extract from the First Report of Session 2006–07 of the House of Commons Administration Committee, *Improving Facilities for Educational Visitors to Parliament* (HC 434)

Conclusions and Recommendations

Introduction

1. Parliament is a working institution, and while we are committed to the development of facilities for visitors, the provision of facilities that enable the House and its Members to operate effectively must take precedence. (Paragraph 5)
2. We welcome the recent improvements to some of the services available to the public, and now consider the extent to which they should be developed further. (Paragraph 30)

What should Parliament provide for its visitors?

3. The Palace of Westminster is not a museum; it is the home of a working Parliament. Visitor facilities should not compromise the efficiency and effectiveness of Parliament's work. The United Kingdom public is entitled to see their Parliament in action and to expect an open welcome with guidance and information to make their visit productive and memorable. However, the severe pressure on accommodation within the Parliamentary Estate means that it is necessary for us to prioritise among our visitors. (Paragraph 37)
4. We acknowledge that to “do nothing” is not an acceptable option. The Houses' core objectives of promoting public knowledge and understanding of the work and role of Parliament could not be achieved in the context of current services provided to visitors, particularly those provided by the Parliamentary Education Service which are already at capacity. As Parliament promotes the limited facilities and resources it has to offer, the demand for visitor services provided by the website, Education Service and Information Offices is likely to increase beyond current capacity. The Education Service in particular will not be able to continue to expand its services without a dedicated teaching space. (Paragraph 43)
5. To do nothing would bring into question Parliament's commitment, through its strategic plans, to improving the public's knowledge of its work. In our judgment, such an approach would fail to respond both to the scale of the physical challenge we face at Westminster in handling the large number of school visitors, and to the political task of re-engaging with school groups and other young people for whom Parliament may be remote and difficult to understand. Some improvement in services is necessary in order to provide both a signal of commitment and an opportunity to deliver substantial change. It is important that Parliament is not seen as exclusive, unwilling to open up and welcome the citizens who pay for its upkeep. This could be damaging to the reputation of Parliament. (Paragraph 44)
6. We consider that at the cost estimated by the Feasibility Report and Options Appraisal, published as an appendix to this Report, a new build visitor centre would not represent value for money. In reaching this conclusion, the Committee agreed to look again at the prioritisation of visitors to Parliament and to decide how best to improve visitor facilities without the construction of a new building. (Paragraph 47)

7. We are most likely to be successful in engaging with the public if we focus on those visitors we most want to reach and on what Parliament already does well (Paragraph 49)

8. It is important that we engage voters of the future in the work and role of Parliament in order to promote a lifetime's interest and participation in the democratic process. The best way to reach most young people is within an organised learning environment, with direct relevance to what they are being taught every day in the classroom. (Paragraph 55)

9. The House of Commons Commission has stated that in terms of visitor services: "visits conducted under the auspices of the Education Service should in principle be prioritised": we agree. We believe that the highest priority for an improvement in visitor services must be to provide dedicated facilities for educational groups. (Paragraph 56)

10. New educational facilities should be designed principally for school groups. But providing facilities flexible enough to be used for activities involving young people visiting other than through schools could allow for a fuller use of the space outside of term time. (Paragraph 58)

11. There is scope for Parliament to provide better facilities for all those interested in visiting. However, in the current climate of pressure on accommodation and in the interests of concentrating resources where they are most needed, we do not favour the allocation of a new dedicated space to any category of visitor other than educational groups. (Paragraph 61)

12. The redevelopment of the Parliamentary website provides an ideal opportunity to make information more accessible for people interested in the democratic process and how Parliament works, and in the cultural heritage of the Palace of Westminster, particularly for those who are unable, or disinclined, to visit Parliament. (Paragraph 62)

13. It is clear from the information provided to us that provision for visitors at Westminster has fallen behind other Parliaments and Assemblies, both in the United Kingdom and abroad. (Paragraph 63)

What should be provided in the dedicated educational facilities?

14. We do not consider that the request for more learning space is over ambitious in view of the current demand for the Education Service's services and the planned programmes of outreach. We agree that the facilities as described in paragraphs 74 and 78 would provide an educational space that would go further to meet the needs of students, teachers and Members than the current allocation of space. (Paragraph 85)

15. Based on the evidence to us from London Museums and on our discussions with the Education Service and the Central Tours Office, it is apparent that our current provision for educational visitors is impractical and uncomfortable for both staff and visitors. A real improvement in the experience of learners could be made by the provision of dedicated space. It would signal that Parliament has a real commitment towards engagement with the public. (Paragraph 87)

16. If a dedicated space is to be provided, advantage should also be taken of the opportunity to expand significantly Parliament's capacity to welcome educational visitors. (Paragraph 88)

17. Accordingly we recommend that a dedicated space for school visitors of approximately 1,000m² (consisting of flexible accommodation of five classrooms with ancillary space for storage, toilet facilities, a lunch area and locker space) should be sought either on or off the existing Estate—the exact space depending on what becomes available and at what cost. We understand that the House of Lords Information Committee supports this recommendation. (Paragraph 89)

18. We accept that in order to provide a dedicated space for the Education Centre either certain offices on the existing Estate will need to be displaced into new accommodation and the space reconfigured, or new accommodation will have to be acquired. There will be costs associated with both options. (Paragraph 90)

19. We recommend that identifying a suitable space for the Education Service should be included within the 25 year Estates strategy, as part of the accommodation strategy. We recommended the development of this strategy in our Report on House of Commons Accommodation, to manage and identify accommodation priorities on the Parliamentary Estate. Providing dedicated facilities for school parties should be a high priority but must not impact adversely on the needs of Members for adequate office accommodation within the Parliamentary Estate. (Paragraph 91)

20. A dedicated space for education in Parliament would provide a facility for Members of the House of Commons to develop the link between Parliament and their constituents. It would need to develop as a resource available to Members and their staff to interact with school groups and other learners, to communicate the work and role of Parliament. (Paragraph 92)

21. We recommend that the Parliamentary Education Service and the Central Tours Office should develop specifically tailored Members' Tours for schools and that more guides should be curriculum trained to ensure school children gain the most benefit from their visit to Parliament. Five times as many children participate in tours as are able to participate in a Parliamentary Education Service programme. Tailored tours are an ideal opportunity for Parliament to engage with school children and increase their awareness of its work. These tours could be implemented quickly, in advance of any dedicated accommodation being found for the Education Service. (Paragraph 93)

22. Members are reminded that they should give advance warning that their tour group consists of school children in order to enable the Central Tours Office to provide a tour that has a specific link to the relevant curriculum and that is pitched at the right level. (Paragraph 94)

23. Facilities that are offered at Westminster should be made as accessible as possible to schools from all over the United Kingdom. (Paragraph 98)

24. We recommend that the Finance and Services Committee and House of Commons Commission, working closely with the appropriate bodies in the House of Lords, should consider the case for subsidising school visits to Westminster from more remote constituencies alongside the proposals to provide dedicated facilities for the Parliamentary Education Service. We believe that subsidies should be linked to learning requirements to ensure that the Education Service is able to monitor the effectiveness of their teaching programmes. (Paragraph 99)

25. We recommend that the Group on Information for the Public should develop concrete costed proposals for a pilot scheme of regional outreach officers for consideration by the relevant committees before the Summer Recess 2007. (Paragraph 100)

26. We recommend that improved education facilities at Westminster should be complemented by use of the website and development of links with groups that have been identified as particularly disengaged from Parliament. This will ensure that members of these groups as well as schools are able to benefit from the resources available at Westminster and engage with Parliament whether or not they are able to visit. (Paragraph 105)

Conclusion

27. There has been a growing recognition that much of the public has little awareness of what we as Parliamentarians do, how Parliament works and how to find out more. (Paragraph 106)

28. We have examined the feasibility of an off-site Parliamentary Visitor and Information Centre. We consider that a full-scale visitor centre would prove a costly venture which could run the risk of becoming an expensive tourist attraction for overseas visitors interested in the heritage aspects of the Westminster area rather than providing a resource for visitors wishing to learn more about the role and work of Parliament itself. We share the views of the Select Committee on Modernisation of the House of Commons and the House of Commons Commission that the focus of visitor services should be on educational visitors as the most productive way to improve Parliament's engagement with the public. (Paragraph 108)

29. We believe that a dedicated space for educational visitors, on or off the existing Estate, would offer better value for money and would enable the Education Service to develop exciting programmes and workshops to engage learners and encourage them to discover more about the work of Parliament. A dedicated space for learning could be developed as a resource for Members to interact with students from their constituencies through the programmes run by the Education Service and provide support to Members' staff organising tours for schools. A decision by the House to endorse our recommendations to proceed with a dedicated space for the Education Service would set in train more detailed design work and planning discussions so that a precise and costed proposal could be brought back to us and to the House of Commons Commission in due course in consultation with appropriate bodies in the House of Lords. (Paragraph 109)

30. If we are to develop our education and visitor facilities to enable Parliament to reach out to schools and provide greater support for all learners of all ages, we should invest in a dedicated space and provide the support to do so. The development of this space should be part of a wider programme, to include outreach and a redeveloped website, of making Parliament and its work more accessible and better understood. (Paragraph 110)