The Fast Stream route to a career in Parliament
Contents

Introduction 2
Fast Stream Opportunities 4
How to apply 5
Training and Development 5
Promotion 5
Pay 5
Condition 5
House of Commons 6
  - Department of Chamber and Committee Services 7
  - Department of Resources 7
  - Department of Facilities 8
  - Department of Information Services 8
House of Lords 10
Recent Fast Streamers 12
Equal Opportunities 14
Further Information 14
Introductions by the:

Clerk of the House and Chief Executive

The House of Commons is both an historic institution and the seat of a modern democracy. The House of Commons Service has both a proud history and the ability to adapt to meet current and future needs.

Those graduates who join the House of Commons from 2011 will be recruited centrally to the House of Commons Service as the first to be appointed to the new “Fast Stream Programme”, a specialist four year training programme of the utmost importance to the House Service.

As the House Service itself develops, opportunities to display management and financial skills are increasing and are an essential part of a senior manager’s portfolio. A Fast Streamer’s career requires developing the capacity to lead and manage teams and programmes of work, and to be involved with financial management, ensuring value for money and improving the efficiency with which the organisation functions, in an environment which is financially challenging.

Initial placements will usually be as Assistant Clerks in the Department of Chamber and Committee Services (DCCS) enabling new entrants to acquire a good grounding in the business of the House. Thereafter Fast Streamers will transfer to other departments of the House Service, to benefit from the chance to gain skills and experience in a range of areas.

The main function that Clerks have is to act as advisers to the Speaker and the Chairmen of Committees as well as to each and any Member of the House who seeks assistance. When working in the DCCS, Fast Streamers will be based in directorates dealing with procedural matters (such as legislation, the tabling of parliamentary questions, the recording of the decisions of the House and the conduct of its business), on Select Committees that hold Ministers and civil servants to account, or in the Overseas Office which both accompanies Members to international parliamentary assemblies and welcomes visitors from other Parliaments around the world to the House of Commons.

Other Departments to which a Fast Streamer could be assigned during the four year programme deal with research services for Members, Parliamentary Outreach, the maintenance of the Parliamentary estate, the provision of catering and accommodation services for Members and staff and the delivery of payroll, payments, finance, human resources, pensions and other corporate services.

It will be clear to you from what I have said that a career at the House of Commons will be both rich and varied. There are, however, certain underlying qualities that all Fast Streamers will need to possess. These are intellectual prowess, common sense, and diplomacy and tact in dealing with Members of the House. Precision without pedantry, helpfulness laced with firmness when necessary; above all Fast Streamers must be absolutely impartial politically. What is more these qualities are needed from the very start of a career although, of course, like all well run organisations, training and support for individuals is a paramount concern of management.

I hope you find what I say interesting, even exciting, but I urge you to read what recent Fast Stream entrants have written about their experiences in this brochure and then make your own judgement about whether you feel a career here would suit you. And please remember that it is always possible to meet existing Fast Streamers at various open days and during the Civil Service Fast Stream assessment process.

Malcolm Jack
Clerk of the House of Commons

Clerk of the Parliaments

The House of Lords has been a dynamic and challenging place to be over recent years. Some of these challenges have of course not been easy, and as a result changes have had to be made in the internal administration of the House, in particular in the oversight and control of Members’ expenses and in the system by which Members’ conduct is regulated.

Other challenges have been less visible but no less important: making support for the House’s legislative work and its Select Committees more effective; improving access to the work of the House and its Committees; and reorganising the House’s physical estate, in particular to alleviate the often crowded conditions for Members of the House in the Palace of Westminster.

As events since the General Election of 2010 have shown, further changes are likely in the future, some possibly very substantial. We have already seen a large increase in the Membership of the House, and further increases are expected. New Members look to the Administration for high quality services and facilities to support their contribution to the work of the House. There is also an enthusiasm among some Members to review their ways of working as a legislature and deliberative chamber. We will need to balance these new drivers against current financial constraints in the public sector, and demands on public bodies for greater accountability and efficiency. Then, there is the coming debate on the proposals for major reform of the House.

The Fast Stream route in the House of Lords leads to a wide range of roles described later in this booklet. In whatever one of them you find yourself, Members will rely on Fast Streamers to advise them, and help them to play their full parts as parliamentarians. The changing role of, and demands on, the House and its Members mean that new challenges may arise at any time, and from early in your career you can expect to shoulder considerable responsibility. What you will need to have is the ability to relate to Members at a range of different levels, very high quality analytical and communication skills, and a strong awareness of political and current affairs. As we work for all Members of the House impartially, you will need to distinguish your personal views from the work you do for the House, and of course you will have to maintain absolute political impartiality at all times. If all this sounds interesting to you, as I hope it will, then please read on.

Michael Pownall
Clerk of the Parliaments
Fast Stream Opportunities in Parliament

Working in either House of Parliament is a fascinating career for anyone interested in the constitution, politics and public policy.

Careers may appeal to those whose interests are divided between the academic and the practical, and who enjoy proximity to the parliamentary process without wishing, themselves, to engage in the cut and thrust of politics. Essential qualities for all these posts include an interest in current affairs, the capacity to work as a member of a team and the ability to produce information which is clear and accurate and advice which is persuasive, both in writing and orally, when under pressure. In both Houses political impartiality is essential to ensure the confidence of Members of Parliament of all parties. The capacity to lead and manage projects and teams is becoming increasingly important to those pursuing a career in Parliament.

Fast Streamers are employees of the appropriate House, not Civil Servants, and serve Parliament, not the Government of the day, although conditions of service and the grading structure are linked to, and kept broadly in line with, the Civil Service. In recent years two or three vacancies for Fast Streamers have arisen in each House annually. Fast Streamers can expect to serve in a variety of roles across either House from supporting Select Committees to involvement in the Houses’ administration.

How to Apply

Fast Stream appointments in the House of Commons and House of Lords are offered through the Civil Service Fast Stream Development Programme. The Fast Stream competition is vigorous, open and fair and, for posts in Parliament, consists of 5 stages:

- All Fast Stream applicants will be required to undertake a self-assessment test, comprising a verbal and numerical reasoning test and Fast Stream Situations Test at the start of the online application process. This will help you gauge your likely success at the first round of online tests. There is then another opportunity to practise online verbal and numerical reasoning tests.
- Having had an opportunity to familiarise yourself with the Fast Stream online tests candidates then complete the verbal and numerical reasoning test and a competency questionnaire. These are taken within a specified time frame at your own PC. Successful candidates will then be asked to complete an application form before proceeding to…
- The “E-Tray Exercise”. This is a 3½ hour invigilated test taken on a PC at a Fast Stream test centre in the UK. An example e-tray exercise can be found at: www.faststream.gov.uk
- Successful candidates then proceed to the one-day Fast Stream Assessment Centre (FSAC). This will be held in central London and will assess candidates’ interpersonal skills, intellectual capacity and delivery skills.
- The last stage for candidates successful at the Fast Stream Assessment Centre will be a Final Selection Board (FSB) held at the Houses of Parliament in May/June. Typically FSB consists of the Chair and three or four Members. The Members are likely to be assembled from the senior service in the two Houses, together with external Members. The interview lasts about 35 minutes. The Board will have your application papers and a report of your performance at FSAC. FSB provides the opportunity to resolve, through an interview, any uncertainties arising from this earlier evidence, to explore your motivation and aptitude and to test your ability to think on your feet, as will sometimes be required in work situations. The topics to be discussed will therefore not be predictable.

Fast Stream Training and Development

Fast Streamers in both Houses receive most of their training on the job and are encouraged to take advantage of training opportunities throughout their careers on aspects of public policy, personal development, management skills and computer training, including attendance at external courses such as those offered by the National School of Government. In both Houses regular seminars are arranged for staff on aspects of parliamentary procedure and on developments in the administration and workings of the House. The majority of graduates recruited to the two Houses remain in parliamentary service for the whole of their careers though there are opportunities for secondments, including to posts in the Central Departments of the Civil Service, to the National Parliament Office in Brussels, and, for House of Lords Clerks, to the Government Whips Office.

Promotion

Promotion prospects are similar to those in the Fast Stream Civil Service.

Pay

Pay for Fast Stream Clerks starts from £25,000 to £26,000 and progresses in line with the Home Civil Service. Where appropriate, allowances are paid for unsocial hours.

Conditions

Excellent service conditions apply with generous annual leave, a choice of final salary or stakeholder pensions, interest free season ticket loan, and child-care vouchers. Membership of an in-house gym is available on payment of an annual membership fee.

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House of Commons

In the Commons, Fast Streamers will gain valuable House-wide experience to open up a variety of avenues for future career progression.

The House of Commons service is divided into four Departments:

- Chamber & Committee Services
- Resources
- Facilities
- Information Services

There is also a small Office of the Chief Executive, and the separate Parliamentary Information and Communications Technology Department (PICT), which is a joint Department.

Each Department provides specific services to MPs, their staff and the public. The Management Board oversees the House Service and is comprised of the Director General of each Department and chaired by the Clerk of the House. The service is ultimately accountable to the Speaker and the House of Commons Commission.

The four year development programme will normally start in the Department of Chamber and Committee Services and Fast Streamers will move to other exciting roles across the House during their second, third and/or fourth year.

Department of Chamber and Committee Services

The Department of Chamber and Committee Services supports the business of the House and its Committees. Three Directorates provide procedural advice and secretariat services to the House, the Speaker, and the Deputy Speakers, to the Committees appointed by the House, and to individual MPs. The Department also reports the proceedings of the House and Committees (Hansard) and is responsible for ceremonial and security services (Serjeant at Arms).

Fast Streamers normally begin their careers as Clerks in the Committee Office on the staff of a Select Committee or, less often, in a junior position in one of the procedural offices servicing the work of the Chamber or Committees dealing with legislation.

As the second Clerk of a Select Committee you would participate in organising its inquiries, preparing briefing papers, travelling with the Committee in the United Kingdom and abroad, and helping prepare its draft reports. In the procedural offices you would learn at first hand how the House works and the complexities of its procedures. The variety of different offices within the Department – the Committee Office, Table Office (dealing with Parliamentary Questions, Motions and the business of the House), the Legislation Service (concerned with the passage of Bills and other legislation), Journal Office (which maintains the formal records of the House), the International Relations Directorate (concerned with relations with other Parliaments and international assemblies) – ensures that it is unlikely that you will work in the same area of the Department in successive appointments. Clerks may expect to spend at least half, and probably more, of their careers working with Select Committees. Most Committee staff are based in an office building a few minutes’ walk from the Palace of Westminster, but new Clerks working for Select Committees also have the opportunity on evening duty in the House to gain some experience of procedural offices.

Work in one of the core ‘procedural’ offices of the Commons accounts for about one third of Clerks’ posts, and involves work on the passing of legislation, giving advice to Members of Parliament on Parliamentary Questions and Motions and the business before the House and keeping the legal record of the decisions taken by the House. The remaining two thirds of posts are involved with the servicing of Select Committees, and more strategic management posts and projects are open to Clerks throughout their careers. Clerks have also become increasingly involved in managing human resources, communications, financial and resource needs.

As well as developing the usual skills of administration – preparation of briefing, drafting memoranda and reports and participating in meetings – Clerks learn how to provide advice at times of high political pressure in such a way that it will be accepted by all opposing interests. Clerks are also called upon to provide procedural and other services for international parliamentary assemblies like the Council of Europe, NATO Parliamentary Assembly, Inter-Parliamentary Union and other bodies. They may also be required to accompany Select Committees on overseas visits.

Department of Resources

The Department of Resources traditionally provided a range of professional and administrative services to the House of Commons. These included financial services to MPs and their staff, covering pay, pensions, and allowances. These functions are now provided by the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority (IPSA).

Departments: a Department of Human Resources and Change and a Department of Finance. Both Departments support the business of the House and its Committees.

The Department of Resources traditionally provided a range of professional and administrative services to the House of Commons. These included financial services to MPs and their staff, covering pay, pensions, and allowances. These functions are now provided by the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority (IPSA). The Department still provides HR services to MPs, as well as HR, finance and other business services to staff of the House. The Department also provides leadership in the corporate development of organisational capability in the areas of finance, human resources, and procurement. The Department will soon be restructured into two separate Departments: a Department of Human Resources and Change and a Department of Finance. Both Departments will have Director Generals who will serve on the Board.

If you undertake a placement in either of the new Departments you will gain valuable skills, knowledge and experience in people or financial management. This could include:

- input into HR policies, procedures and practices;
- draft guidance for line managers;
- manage learning and development projects;
- assist with diversity initiatives;
- support the House savings programme;
- carry out an executive support role;
- or, undertake a procurement exercise.
Department of Facilities

The Department of Facilities manages the Parliamentary Estate and provides a safe and functioning environment for everyone working in or visiting Parliament. It includes long-term estate planning, the provision of expert advice on the preservation of the Palace of Westminster as a World Heritage Site, planning and delivery of maintenance work, placing contracts and management of capital projects. The Department also manages all office accommodation, cleaning, mail delivery and room bookings.

The Catering and Retail Services arm of the Department provides meals, refreshments and banqueting services and manages the souvenir kiosks.

The Department has three service Directorates:
- Catering and Retail Services provide up to 1.6 million meals every year. It operates a range of facilities from snack bars to fine dining restaurants serving over 300,000 customers, bar services and private function rooms serving over 200,000 customers. Souvenirs and gifts are available for purchase at and from the Curator of Works of Art.
- The Parliamentary Estates Directorate (PED) manages the corporate real estate, delivers sufficient office accommodation, cleaning, mail delivery and room bookings. Another facet of this role is to manage the Estates Directorate where one of the tasks would be acting as the Secretary of the Parliamentary Estate Board, which meets on a monthly basis. This would involve working closely with Senior Directors and Managers across the House of Commons and Lords, to ensure that papers are circulated timely for meetings and minutes produced. Another facet of this role is to be the interface with the Director General’s Executive Office on corporate matters which include being the primary focal point in Information Management & Security, FOI, Business Continuity and Risk. There may be the possibility for a role in one of the Service Delivery teams in an operational customer facing area such as Catering & Retail Services.
- The Corporate Real Estate Services (CRES) manages the corporate real estate, delivers sufficient office accommodation, cleaning, mail delivery and room bookings. Another facet of this role is to manage the Estates Directorate where one of the tasks would be acting as the Secretary of the Parliamentary Estate Board, which meets on a monthly basis. This would involve working closely with Senior Directors and Managers across the House of Commons and Lords, to ensure that papers are circulated timely for meetings and minutes produced. Another facet of this role is to be the interface with the Director General’s Executive Office on corporate matters which include being the primary focal point in Information Management & Security, FOI, Business Continuity and Risk. There may be the possibility for a role in one of the Service Delivery teams in an operational customer facing area such as Catering & Retail Services.

Department of Information Services

The Department of Information Services provides research, analysis, library and information services for the House of Commons. Its main responsibility is to serve MPs and their staff, it also provides public information services including outreach, education, and visitor services; media and communications services; and online services. The office of the Librarian of the House of Lords is also based here.

The Library

The Library provides an impartial information and research service for all Members of Parliament on any subject related to their parliamentary duties. It also produces briefing papers on legislation, economic and social trends, international relations, and other topical issues. Fast Streamers may have the opportunity of working in the Library as a Library Clerk. They carry out research and provide information direct to Members, and take full responsibility for their work from an early stage. Most Library Clerks are recruited directly through external competition, as many of them are specialists who work in one of eight subject-based sections which provide information and research assistance to Members, and, on occasion, to Select Committees. These posts often require a specialised background or qualification in a field such as law, economics or science; but library qualifications are not required.

The main duties as a research Library Clerk would be to respond, orally or in writing, to requests from individual Members and to prepare briefing papers. While responses to individual Members are confidential, much pre-prepared and regularly updated briefing material is made available to all Members on the Parliamentary Intranet and the Parliament website. Many requests from individual Members have tight deadlines, sometimes needing an instant answer on the telephone or requiring a response the same or the next day. Briefing papers linked to the business of the House may also need to be produced at short notice, but some subjects allow time for a more considered approach.

You will need to keep up to date with developments in the subjects which you cover and to develop contacts who are experts in these fields. Librarians in research teams compile a knowledge base of source material relevant to the subjects covered. Your sources will include relevant on-line databases as well as contacts in Government Departments and other outside organisations. All Library Clerks are expected to acquire a knowledge of parliamentary procedures and documentation, to become familiar with the procedures of the European Union and to keep abreast of European proposals in the areas which they cover. Much of the initial training is on the job or provided in-house but Library Clerks are also encouraged to attend external conferences and courses in the subjects they cover.

Parliamentary Outreach

Parliamentary Outreach serves both Houses and is in the third, of a five element programme endowed by both Houses radically to improve the connection between Parliament and the public. The aim of Outreach is to raise awareness of, and build long-term strategic engagement with, the work of Parliament in the wider community, mainly through the delivery of tailored information sessions. There are Outreach Officers based in all UK regions, establishing good links with local and community representatives of national organisations whose remit is to develop civic participation.

You may have the opportunity to join the Outreach Service and deliver a range of dedicated Outreach services and resources, offered both at Westminster and across the UK. The Parliamentary Outreach programme is separate to, but works alongside, Parliament’s Education Service.

As a Fast Streamer, you would be responsible for working in partnership with staff and Members at Westminster and in the devolved legislatures to deliver Outreach at local level and develop strategic partnerships with counterpart staff in the devolved legislatures. This will involve establishing and instigating opportunities to promote the work of Parliament at regional level to relevant audiences. There will also be a strong focus on working with Select Committees and Public Bill Committees to explore new ways of promoting engagement with evidence-gathering processes.
House of Lords

The House of Lords currently employs over 450 full-time equivalent staff, of whom over 40 were recruited through the Fast Stream. It has a unified structure, divided into a number of separate functional units, covering a range of services in support of the work of the House, from catering to research services.

In many respects the role of a Fast Streamer in the Lords replicates that in the Commons.

Most Fast Stream posts provide direct procedural and other support for the work of the House, in the Chamber or in Committees. At any one time about half of the Fast Stream entrants are assigned to work with a Select Committee. Clerks of Committees manage a small secretariat supporting each Committee unit. Their responsibility is to organise programmes of work to enable Committees to carry out the functions assigned them by the House. They also have to advise Committees about how they should comply with the practice and procedure of the House and any relevant House policies. They play a key role in drafting reports and other documents for Committees and on occasion travel with the Committee away from Westminster. Committee Clerks have to familiarise themselves with sometimes quite complex subjects in a short time, identify key issues and help Committees analyse them. As Lords Committees tend to have very broad terms of reference the Committee clerk can expect to have to move very quickly from one subject area to another.

In addition to Committee work, in due course Fast Streamers gain experience of other offices supporting the work of the Chamber more directly. In the Public and Private Bill Office they administer the legislative function of the House, and provide advice and support to Members seeking to participate in debate on it. In the Journal Office they are responsible for compiling information about the House and its work and procedures, and will be involved in preparing the formal record of parliamentary business. In the Table Office they will prepare the business papers for the Chamber, advising Members on the questions and motions they can ask and ensuring that they comply with the procedures of the House.

Fast Stream entrants have also always been deployed in wider administrative roles. Two Fast Stream entrants are seconded to the Cabinet Office as private secretaries to the Leader of the House and the Government Chief Whip, and they may also occupy other administrative posts as private secretaries to senior Members of the House such as the Lord Speaker or Chairman of Committees, or the Clerk of the Parliaments; as secretary to the Management Board; or on secondment to other areas of parliamentary administration, or outside the House. Fast Stream entrants have also served as Head of Human Resources, and Finance Director.

All Lords Fast Streamers can expect to undertake some night duty while the House is sitting, compiling the formal Minutes of Proceedings, undertaking division duty when the House votes, or sitting at the Table of the House or a Grand Committee.
What recent Fast Streamers have to say about Parliament

Antony Willott
House of Lords Clerk
BA Politics and History, University of Durham

While some people join the Fast Stream straight out of University, I joined the House of Lords after two years working for a government department. I was uncertain as to whether to accept a position on the central departments Fast Stream or take up a Clerkship in the Lords, but in the end the thought of working at the heart of the political process won me over – and it’s a decision I have never regretted. I spent a year and a half working on the Science and Technology Select Committee, before moving to a European Union Committee covering economic and financial affairs. In time at the Lords I have: drafted a report that made the pages of nearly every national newspaper; heard my work debated in Parliament; travelled to Washington, Paris and Brussels (not to mention Bedfordshire); and, worked closely with some of the most interesting and knowledgeable individuals in the UK. I’m now working on economic governance in the EU: one of the biggest and most talked about topics of the day. There can be few jobs where you may be responsible this early in your career for work which might have a real impact, and the thrill of turning on the radio and hearing something you have contributed to being discussed never fades.

As a Clerk on a Select Committee, I have been line-managing a Committee Assistant since my first day, as well as managing the work of a Policy Analyst and a Specialist Adviser (an outside expert brought in to advise on a particular inquiry). My daily tasks range from the administrative (liaising with government departments, identifying witnesses to give evidence, and organising Committee visits) to the more academic, such as preparing briefing papers, producing lists of questions for witnesses, and drafting lengthy reports on evidence gathered over a nine month long inquiry.

At the same time as my ‘day job’ on a Select Committee, I also spend time working directly on the business of the House of Lords. I spend at least one afternoon and evening a week on division duty, meaning I am ‘on call’ to record votes if the House decides to divide. After six months I also started spending one or two days a month preparing the House of Lords Business document which means helping Members schedule business and advising on questions that Peers wish to put to the Government.

After the Committee Office, I expect to be moved to another post which will either focus more on the administration of the House (for example, Secretary to the Management Board) or on procedure and the business of the House (for example, in the Public Bill Office working directly on legislation or perhaps a secondment to the Cabinet Office to work in the Government Whips Office scheduling the Government’s business in the Chamber).

It is hard work, but you are given a lot of responsibility from day one and the opportunity to work on a wide range of subjects at a key institution in the British political system.

Jyoti Chandola
House of Commons Clerk
BA Hons Theatre Dramaturgy, University of Leeds

I joined what was the Clerk’s Department in October 2006, still not really knowing what the job would involve. I had applied for the Civil Service Fast Stream and decided that a Clerkship in Parliament looked interesting enough to put as my first choice. From open days, brochures and talking to existing Clerks I’d discovered that Clerks supported the work of Committees and provided procedural advice but I had no idea how that would relate to my day to day work as the new Second Clerk of the Education and Skills Committee.

What it turned out to mean, in practice, was that I was given a short inquiry to manage, into bullying. I arranged for experts to attend Committee meetings to give evidence, provided briefing for the Committee and at the end of the process drafted a report for the Chairman. I certainly hadn’t expected, when I joined the Department, to be part of producing a report that would make the front page of one national newspaper! Although inquiries I have worked on since then haven’t managed to achieve the same level of media coverage, the sense of achievement that comes from helping MPs scrutinise the work of the Government remains one of my favourite things about this job. While I was with the Education and Skills Committee I accompanied the MPs on a visit to China. Travelling with a Committee can be exhausting but it is a fantastic chance to meet interesting and knowledgeable people and see things you wouldn’t otherwise have the chance to.

Apart from the possibility for travel and the excitement of seeing media report about something you had a part in, one of the other main attractions is the variety of the work. I have enjoyed the challenge of getting to grips with unfamiliar material in order to advise and assist a Committee.

After a year on a Committee I chose to do a short secondment to the Department of Resources. I worked for the Director of Operations and found the experience of working in a different Department in a very different role interesting and useful. The development of a House-wide Fast Stream means that future Fast Stream entrants are likely to spend at least part of their early careers working outside the Department of Chamber and Committee Services. The knowledge of how the wider House service works has proved to be very useful in my current role as second clerk of the Administration Committee.

Internal reorganisation means there are House-wide changes happening but the Department still retains a unique working culture. I discovered soon after starting that it is a pleasant and sociable place to work. During my first few weeks a number of colleagues at all levels introduced themselves and welcomed me to the Department. Since then I have relied on the advice and knowledge of more senior Clerks frequently and have always found that people are always willing to help when asked.
Equal Opportunities
Recruitment and promotion are strictly on ability and performance. We welcome applications from all qualified individuals. We are committed to developing working practices which will allow every member of staff to contribute his or her best, regardless of, for example, race, sex, marital status, religion, age, disability, sexual orientation, gender reassignment or any other irrelevant factor.

Further Information
Further information on Parliament can be found on www.parliament.uk.

For further information on job vacancies in Parliament go to http://www.parliament.uk/useful/job_opportunities.cfm.

For information on Clerkships in Parliament e-mail gradapp@parliament.uk