

Administration Committee

Oral evidence: Election Planning and Services, HC 588

Monday 28 November 2016

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Members present: Sir Paul Beresford (Chair); Sir David Amess; John Cryer; Michael Fabricant; Nigel Mills; Keith Vaz.

Questions 51 - 122

Witnesses

I: Max Freedman, UNITE Union Parliamentary Staff Branch, Georgina Kester, Chair, Members' and Peers' Staff Association, Emily Knight, Vice-Chair, MAPSA.

II: Janet Walker, Chief of Staff to Tom Tugendhat MP, Barbara Joy, Senior HR Manager, Corporate Services, and Alix Langley, Director of People Services, Corporate Services, House of Commons.

Written evidence from witnesses:

[UNITE Union Parliamentary Staff Branch](#)

[Members' and Peers' Staff Association \(MAPSA\)](#)



Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Max Freedman, Georgina Kester and Emily Knight.

Q51 **Chair:** Welcome. Do you want to give us a quick explanation of who you are? If you have something succinct you want to add first, fire away.

Max Freedman: I am Max Freedman. I am chair of the UNITE parliamentary staff branch that represents staff of MPs and a few Lords.

Georgina Kester: I am Georgina. I am the chair of the Members and Peers Staff Association. We are a cross-party organisation representing staff of both Houses in a voluntary capacity.

Emily Knight: I am Emily, vice-chairman of the same organisation, and I worked for a Member who was defeated, and now for a new Member this Session.

Q52 **Chair:** Thank you. Ladies first: in your evidence, you have acknowledged efforts made by the House to support staff. Do you reckon we should be doing more? Tell us what you think we should be doing more.

Georgina Kester: I came in after 2010, after the election, with a new Member, so I saw it from that point of view. Having been here for 2015 with a returning Member, it has been very interesting to see how the House adapted during that period, in terms of recognition of staff. There has been a greater recognition of the role of staff working for Members, the work that they do and the importance of it in the Members' offices.

We worked with the House on a lot of issues in the run up to the election, with the Digital Service, with HR, and with various other Departments. Things have improved enormously, but there is still a lack of awareness of certain groups of staff, particularly constituency staff and the work that they do, and a lack of support for them, particularly straight after an election. Emily has been here for two elections, working for a defeated Member and then a new Member, and I know that she would say that it was a very different experience, working for a new Member. We need to look at how staff can be better supported. There will be Members who bring staff in; there will be Members who hire staff when they arrive. It is how we make sure that those staff are well looked after and have the resources, equipment and support they need to be able to look after their Member. At the end of the day, that is what we are all here to do: to help you do your jobs to the best of your ability. It is making sure that we have the support and the structure.

Q53 **Chair:** So what do we do? Do we bring them all in and have a day?

Georgina Kester: Yes. There is a case for a proper House induction process. It is a very daunting task when you are a new member of staff. You walk into a new office, the bells are ringing, and you don't have a clue what the jargon is. You don't know where the loos are. You don't know how to book a Committee room. You don't have a clue what tabling



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a question is or what the Table Office is, and if you are working for a new Member, they don't have a clue either.

If there was an induction programme that staff could attend—perhaps when they come to pick up their passes—which just ran them through those sorts of issues and told them about fire and safety, booking meeting rooms, where they can go and where they can't and all those sorts of things, they would be in a position, when they start their job, to assist their Member.

Q54 Chair: For those who are in the constituency, do we get them in as well? Separately?

Georgina Kester: Possibly. Either bring them up here, or I think there is a case for running group sessions. For example, I have worked for a Member in Wales. We have four MPs within fairly close striking distance; it is cross-party, but they are all doing the same job, effectively. We could hold it at somebody's office, a town hall or a local scout hut, so that they can all get together. Then it would not drag them up here. It is a long way for some of the staff. It is great if you work in the south-east.

Q55 Chair: To Emily especially, as you were working with a Member who lost their seat, how did wind-up go?

Emily Knight: It started off very well. We had a meeting with IPSA and we had somebody from Barbara Joy's team to talk through the redundancy process. We had not given it a huge amount of thought, because my Member had not expected to not be returned, but the process was very clear and straightforward. A clear timetable was laid out, in terms of how to take staff through that process and do it properly and in accordance with the law.

Equally, we got quite a good amount of support here in the House when it came to what our responsibilities were as regards data protection and handling people's cases, what to do with those files, closing the offices, and so on.

IPSA was the main problem that we encountered, unfortunately, despite them being present in the meeting with HR to talk about timescales. They refused to pay my Member's resettlement payment, and it took about four weeks of me arguing with them before they eventually paid it. That was an incredibly stressful time for her, and for me as well. I no longer worked for her by that point; I had made myself redundant. It was very difficult to counter that. I did in the end, but I am sure there were others in that situation who perhaps would not have been able to argue their case quite as forcefully with IPSA.

With defeated Members, in particular, obviously it is a difficult time for them, and they are perhaps not in a position to argue publicly with IPSA over something like that. So, yes, I was very disappointed with that element of things. It was eventually resolved, but there is certainly room for improvement.



Q56 **Chair:** Was that argument with IPSA isolated?

Emily Knight: No. I have heard of similar incidents. Essentially, it revolved around a stationery order we had placed in September 2015; according to their guidance on capital expenditure—it was about USB sticks—they told us that the claim should not have been allowed, even though they had allowed it. I was able to produce the guidance they had issued in September 2015, which I had had the foresight to send to my own personal e-mail account. They did eventually relent, but it was only because I happened to have kept that guidance that they did indeed relent, eventually, after several weeks.

That brings us on to something else we want to raise, which is: during the election itself, certainly in the lead-up, there was guidance from the House, and from IPSA, about the difference between parliamentary work and political work, and what we were able to continue to do for our Members during the dissolution period, in terms of case work, support and all the usual things that we would do, and that we were indeed continuing to be paid for, but we were not given the tools with which to do that. Aside from not being able to come here, we were denied access to our e-mail accounts and all our Digital Service equipment—PICT, as it was then. We certainly feel that there is a case for allowing some access, certainly, to e-mails, so that we could continue to work for constituents in the way we did before the dissolution.

Q57 **Chair:** I know it was not directed at you, but do you want to add anything?

Max Freedman: Just a couple of points. I agree with pretty much everything said already. The most important assistance that the House and IPSA can give during the election process is clarity. We are not here to argue at this point about what rules there are in operation, but everyone needs to agree that those are the rules and they are being followed correctly.

I was trying to assist one of my members at the time whose employer was retiring at the election but had chosen to go on holiday at that point, and so had not signed off their redundancy. They were left in limbo for weeks. They kept phoning most evenings asking if I had heard anything. I hadn't, and there was plenty going on during the general election. Clarity, and a timeline during which every step should be undertaken, would be really helpful.

In terms of induction, I want to say that one of the benefits of bringing people together for an induction—whether that is in Westminster or out in any of the regions for constituency staff—is not only do they get to hear the wisdom of the House and those advising them, but they get to meet each other. We all know that the way you really learn how things operate in Parliament and in constituency offices is from people who have been through that process through trial and error, and who know the real wisdom of what has been going on. Making those contacts, those



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friendships, and knowing who to call to ask awkward questions is a key part, I would have thought.

- Q58 **Michael Fabricant:** If I may, this is a supplementary. You mentioned IPSA. How did you find the officers of the House? Sometimes I hear that they are great—will bend over backwards—for Members of Parliament but are less helpful with staff. Is that unfair?

Georgina Kester: Generally, they are very helpful. There has been a definite shift in attitude in the last couple of years and a greater awareness of who is doing quite a lot of those sorts of tasks. We are now very grateful to be able to take guests into the Pugin Room on behalf of the Members—those sorts of things, little things that make our jobs, and hopefully your jobs, too, easier.

Straight after the election, obviously the focus is always going to be on the Member; it is always going to be on the new Members and the returning Members, because it is a quick change-around. It is a lot of timetable work that you have to do to get people used to it. At that point, the focus does shift slightly and it can be far more Member-centric. We do tend to get somewhat pushed to one side in terms of office accommodation, equipment, all those sorts of things.

- Q59 **Michael Fabricant:** But you would not say that they treat you as second-class people?

Georgina Kester: No, I think that would be very unfair. It is just that sometimes the emphasis is not on us.

Michael Fabricant: That is good to hear.

- Q60 **Chair:** I have to say, having been in a ministerial office and heard my staff trying to deal with the staff of some of the MPs, some of them were exceptionally uptight, difficult, people.

Georgina Kester: The staff of MPs?

Chair: Yes.

Max Freedman: The MPs or the staff?

Chair: The staff, some of them; no names.

- Q61 **Sir David Amess:** Excellent choice of witnesses, Chairman. I recognise the three individuals. Emily worked just along the corridor from me. We have a wealth of experience here.

None of us can look into the crystal ball. In 2020, if that is when we have the election, there may be 50 fewer Members of Parliament; there may be all these extra staff swimming around with lots of experience, looking for jobs, or there may be a big turnout.

I sort of know the answers to the questions I am going to read out, but I would be interested to hear your views because, even if you have been here for a long time, things are changing constantly, so none of us really



are masters. As we all know, every MP is different—their needs are different—so these questions are probably a bit general, but anyway, what knowledge and resources do Westminster staff need to effectively support their Members in their first weeks? I am going to read them all out; otherwise we will be here for a week. What formal induction programme do you think would be beneficial? What should it include? Do you think extending the Members' buddy scheme to cover Members' staff would be helpful? I don't know how that would work, but anyway that is an idea. In evidence, MAPSA suggested introduction packs for Members' staff. What should they contain? All of you, please.

Max Freedman: That is a fair torrent of questions. I will see what I can do.

First, I think the buddy scheme would be useful. As I intimated a moment ago, personal contact is how you not only learn things but also retain that information. Simply attending an event, you might jot it down and then it will go to the back of your mind, whereas if you meet someone whom you befriend, they become a contact point that can assist you going forward. If it is formalised in a buddy scheme, then I see no reason why that would not be effective. If you don't get on with the buddy, through them you might meet other potential buddies, and it can work like that.

Such a scheme, although it would be more difficult, would be even more valuable in constituencies, because that is where staff get isolated. In here, it is easy enough—if you are allowed to—to go along the corridor and speak to other people, chat to people at lunchtime, or get involved in any array of events and get along with people; whereas, as we all know, constituency offices have very small spaces and a small number of staff—two or three people. If there are two or three people who have been there a long time, and one who has only just started, they may feel intimidated, or if everyone is starting at the same time, no one has the institutional knowledge. If there was a way of pairing people up in constituencies, that would help to bring people along and not feel the isolation that I do know a lot of staff do feel.

There is a role for MPs to encourage their staff to go and chat and meet other people, not keep them in a silo so they don't learn dangerous ideas from other offices, because that is how best practice can be spread, I would have thought.

There is quite a good book that we have here, the "Members' Staff Handbook", but speaking to people, I find that lots of people have never come across it. They don't know where to find it. It needs to be percolated more throughout the staff. If we did have induction packs of that sort, then that would obviously be—

Q62 **Sir David Amess:** So that is good enough?

Max Freedman: We think it is certainly a good start.



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Georgina Kester: It is a good start. We worked with the House to pull it together in a fairly short time before the election so that there was something.

Sir David Amess: Well done.

Georgina Kester: Yes, it is a starting point. There is a lot in there that is still aimed at the Members rather than the staff, but that is purely because it was put together rather quickly. However, we have recently been made aware that it is only given to people who come and collect a physical pass. Nobody in the constituency offices, unless they are pass holders—and I would imagine most Members' staff are not—have ever seen it. That is a shame because it does contain a lot of information that would be useful for them as well.

Q63 **Sir David Amess:** So we need to be proactive and get them down to the constituencies. That is what you want.

Georgina Kester: Yes. Once somebody has had security clearance, they should probably be issued with a copy, or their Member should be sent one and told to give it to their staff—some way of doing it. I know Emily has some ideas about a potential buddy scheme as well.

Emily Knight: Yes. I have been with a new Member for the 2010 and the 2015 election, and the buddy scheme the House introduced this time was really good. My Member found it really useful. Her buddy was able to tell her all about how the House works and the processes and so on.

But one thing perhaps is lacking. My Member had me to help her out because my other Member had been defeated, but we think there is scope for a buddy system whereby, perhaps on a voluntary basis, existing returned Members' staff are seconded to new Members to help them settle in. You have a new Member. They turn up. They don't necessarily know what is going on. They may not have expected to be elected. Quite rightly, they are given the advice—throughout the dissolution period, throughout the election period—not to promise people jobs willy-nilly, because the election skills don't necessarily translate to skills in Westminster. They find themselves here all of a sudden. Day one: there is a postbag. There are letters from constituents. E-mails are flooding in by the hundreds. They don't have an office. They don't have any staff and they panic, quite rightly, as anyone would in that situation.

Perhaps there could be a system whereby people like me, Georgina and Max, with our Members' permission, might spend a few days a week with those Members, helping them to hire staff in a calm and non-panicked manner, because, unfortunately, some bad hire decisions are made in a panic. We would help them bed in and get to grips with their e-mails, explain what is urgent, what a 38 Degrees e-mail is, and that sort of thing. We could help them go through the post and point out things that are really urgent that they need to deal with—just giving them a bit of support, with the permission of their Member, until that Member is able



to bring on people themselves. We think that would be quite a useful thing, and it would probably foster quite good relations between new Members and the intake that is already here. That is something that is lacking at the moment.

Q64 Nigel Mills: Can I turn to an issue that I found a little tricky six and a half years ago: establishing my constituency office? I don't think there was any guidance or advice, or anything other than some IPSA rules, which may or may not have made sense. Is that your experience as well—that for things that have to be done quite urgently and quickly, there is not much help out there at all?

Georgina Kester: Yes. There is very little help for you or for staff. Quite often, Members are more aware of the staff that they are going to hire in the constituency offices than they are in Westminster. Again, we thoroughly endorse people not employing in a knee-jerk reaction, but we know it is going to happen. If you have a good member of staff down there, then great. They will probably be competent and capable of finding a good office. But there are no guidelines to say things like, "Here is your budget but, by the way, IPSA are unlikely to increase that budget for five years, so when your landlord puts your rent up next year and you have already maxed out your budget, you are going to be in a bit of a pickle". That is the sort of thing that we are aware of and can help people with.

There is no advice on the type of phone systems that you might need, or security. Unfortunately, because of recent tragic events, I think security will be very different from now on. There will be a greater emphasis on it and much more ability for people to get set up properly. However, everybody finds different offices—some are in old shops, some are in old houses and some are in fully furnished and equipped offices—and there is no guidance on what is best, what to look for. I think it is essential.

Emily Knight: Or the legal requirements for Members as well in terms of disability access, first aid training—all of those kinds of things. It is a legal requirement that every office has a first aid kit. I did not know that until I found out by looking it up in 2010 when we had to do the same thing. Equally, data protection is something that Members' staff—just as much as Members—need to be aware of, even though the Member is the data holder, and not just in constituency offices but here in the House, too. It is a real concern that we have about the Committee room system for hot-desking, which is a solution to a problem—I don't think it is a perfect one—but it is a space that is open to the public. Any member of the public can just wander in. Each Member is given a small locker, and one key. Usually they wander off with the key and the staff member does not have access to the locker, or in any case there is not enough space in the locker after four weeks of correspondence coming in, so correspondence gets left in the Committee rooms and, as soon as that happens, the Member is breaking the law. It is a problem. Unfortunately, that is just one of many problems with the Committee room system.



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Max Freedman: To add to that, in terms of the obligations on the MP running their constituency office, where they are the responsible individual, you also have fire safety. Certainly in previous surveys that we have done—this would be two years ago—staff indicated that 17% of constituency offices did not have a fire escape. It will not be at the forefront of an MP's mind when they are setting up the constituency office, but it is absolutely something that someone should be saying to them, even if it is a tick box: "Bear in mind that fire safety is one of the important elements in setting up an office for which you are responsible".

Q65 **Nigel Mills:** I remember that for the first two and a half months, I only had internet access if the wind was blowing in the right direction and the Wetherspoon's wi-fi signal reached my office. I can't believe it can take that long to get broadband sorted out.

Georgina Kester: There should be an easy system of putting together a guidance note that every new MP is issued with: "Do you have decent broadband? Do you have security access? Do you have this? You need to make sure you have somewhere to have meetings with constituents"—all those sorts of things that, if you were not expecting to be elected, might not be at the forefront of your mind straightaway.

Q66 **Chair:** You mentioned IPSA. Do they give any advice? Or were they as awful as—

Georgina Kester: No.

Chair: No advice? Not on filling in forms? Not on the point that you made about the rent, and so on?

Georgina Kester: No. They will tell you what your budgets are, but there is no guidance on the fact that they are unlikely to be increased and that you will then have to go to contingency funding to get more money out of them or change offices. Yes, there is stuff contained in their guidelines, but over the last six years those guidelines have become fewer rather greater in quantity, because they have said that people need to take more responsibility for their own decisions. We have seen less guidance, rather than more.

Q67 **John Cryer:** To be clear about that, IPSA have said the MPs need to take responsibility for their own decisions? In my experience, IPSA tend to say, "Yes, you can do that" and then they say, "No, you can't do it", but at the same time they are saying, "They need to be responsible for their own decisions"?

Georgina Kester: It is more a fact of them saying, "Do you think it is within the guidance? Make the claim". It is a bit like what Emily found with her Member. Before the election, we were told there was a cut-off point for capital expenditure. We were issued with a list of things we could or could not buy that constituted capital expenditure, one of which was that USB sticks were allowed. So everybody bought USB sticks to put their data on—I am sure all your offices did something similar—or hard



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drives, so that we could still carry on functioning during the election period. Then they turned round and said, "Sorry; USB sticks were not allowed". It is changing the boundaries and it makes life very hard for staff. We are trying to equip offices and run them.

John Cryer: What you are saying reflects the fact that I get reports all the time from IPSA saying, "Yes, you can do it" and then a few weeks later, "No, you can't".

Georgina Kester: Yes.

Q68 **Michael Fabricant:** I was going to focus on the constituency stuff, but you have already dealt with a lot of it.

What I want to ask is about the practicality of how constituency staff can get guidance from IPSA and the House authorities. Do you think it is practical to get constituency staff from Northern Ireland, from Scotland, down to London for seminars, or ideally—I don't know whether that is going to be possible—to have regional seminars run by IPSA? I don't want to make it a leading question, but do you have seminars in Edinburgh, Birmingham or Belfast, whatever? What are your thoughts on this, in an ideal world?

Max Freedman: They certainly have proven to be capable of doing such things. In the lead up to the election they did road shows, dissolution advice—

Q69 **Michael Fabricant:** Who are "they"?

Max Freedman: IPSA. They have shown they are capable of doing this. I wouldn't say where the ideal location would be—Scotland or Northern Ireland or anywhere else—but it certainly makes a lot more sense for them to send two or three individuals up to do that, with the costs associated, rather than 50 MPs all sending people down and paying for them to stay overnight. That would seem ludicrous. If they can put on a roadshow—say, in Cardiff or in Birmingham—and people can come to that, that would seem a sensible solution.

Q70 **Michael Fabricant:** Do you think the House authorities should do that as well?

Emily Knight: In terms of training, they already offer quite an extensive programme of training courses for Members' staff. They are not particularly well advertised. They are hidden away on the intranet, which most staff do not tend to browse. You only go on there if you are looking for something in particular.

Q71 **Michael Fabricant:** Is the training done here in the Palace of Westminster?

Emily Knight: It is mixed. They are quite good at going out across the country. My Member has a Northumberland seat and our staff took part in training in Newcastle and in Edinburgh. However, in this day and age, there is no reason why seminars cannot be livestreamed over the internet



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or the intranet to reach staff in more far-flung places, particularly if it is going to be prohibitively expensive to get them to the training course. The House can get to them via the wonders of modern technology.

- Q72 **Michael Fabricant:** Except if you are in the Highlands and Islands; not only is it difficult to even get to Edinburgh, there is not much broadband there.

Georgina Kester: No, indeed.

Max Freedman: Certainly, the fire safety course, which I think we have to do once a year as fire marshals, is an online one that you get off the intranet.

- Q73 **Michael Fabricant:** On the technology, is there more that the House could be doing for staff in those early days to guide on what equipment is required and, more importantly, what software is required?

Max Freedman: I suspect one of the problems is that the early days are before they really have access to even start looking things up online. The early days, whether it is in the constituency or in Parliament, are very much a time for practical help on: how do you access the Library? How do you order stationery? How do you get things through IPSA and report things back to IPSA? That is before you even start with more dramatic or useful further online assistance, but once that is up and running, then I am sure there is a need for finding out all sorts of things.

Georgina Kester: It brings us back to the buddy system. It is hopefully where existing staff would have the experience and knowledge to be able to guide you to what you do or don't need.

- Q74 **Michael Fabricant:** Would it be MAPSA who would run the buddy system? Or would it be the House authorities?

Georgina Kester: It would have to be the House, because it would have to be fully cross-party. It would have to have full buy-in from all sorts of Members. It would be using their staff, at the end of the day. I know that my Member would not mind, but I am sure there are others who might feel differently.

MAPSA is very happy to run training events. Before the election, we felt that there was a lack of knowledge among Members' staff as to what dissolution meant for staff. The House did run days. The Whips' offices ran some training sessions. But it is very difficult for a staff member to go to a meeting with their Member and sit there and say, "He thinks he is going to be returned but, if not, what happens to me?" because that is not the sort of question you want to ask in front of your boss.

We ran a session that we thought we might get a few Members' staff turn up to. We had over 300 members of staff turn up to the first one, so we ran another two and got the same numbers again. That meant we had reached a very large proportion of Members' staff in a very quick way.



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We were lucky that we had fabulous help from HR, from PICT, as they were then, and from the former Sergeant at Arms. They all came along. They all gave presentations as to what dissolution meant for staff and staff only, and it was very much appreciated.

We are happy to help. We are happy to run training events where we can, but we do all work for Members. We do this in an entirely voluntary capacity, and there is a limit—just a little limit—to the amount of time we can spend doing it.

- Q75 **Michael Fabricant:** I am trying to focus on after the election, not the run-up to a disaster at the end of a Parliament, or potential disaster. I am particularly trying to focus on those constituency staff. When you talk about the 300 who attended time and again—and I don't know if they were the same 300 or a different 300—were they staff based here in Westminster, or were they people based all over the country—the constituency staff?

Georgina Kester: Initially it was staff based here, and then word got out and, by the third one, there were a lot of constituency staff who had come in specifically for that.

- Q76 **Michael Fabricant:** In summary, are you saying that, as far as constituency staff are concerned, you would like to see roadshows in regional centres that people can easily physically get to—not just cyber connection, but people there to talk to people, face to face—and also, of course, the buddy system instituted? Would you say they are the two main things you would ask for, for constituency staff?

Max Freedman: I won't say it is a leading question, but yes.

Emily Knight: A lot of those things are already available to constituency staff on the intranet, but they are not necessarily aware of them. Our constituency staff e-mail me quite frequently with links from an organisation called Parli Training, which offers paid courses. They e-mail Members' staff individually about them. There is nothing to stop the House e-mailing Members' staff to say, "These are the courses we are already putting on for you, and this is where you can find more about them on the intranet".

- Q77 **Michael Fabricant:** Has anyone used Parli Training?

Emily Knight: Not in a very long time.

Michael Fabricant: Do you have any experience of it?

Georgina Kester: Not at those prices.

Michael Fabricant: We must invite someone who knows a little bit about Parli Training.

Emily Knight: Not when the House offers the same courses for free, I'd say.



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John Cryer: Courses in self-defence, Michael; seriously.

Emily Knight: That is actually something—

Georgina Kester: We have had a lot of requests from people for those recently.

Emily Knight: Yes, and Members, too. My Member certainly would like to have self-defence courses. I did contact the House security team about it, but they said that they would not encourage Members to take self-defence courses. Dispersal techniques are what they would like.

Georgina Kester: I did notice that there are two courses being run by the Suzy Lamplugh Trust. I think one is this week and one is in December. They are not self-defence, but they are about creating awareness and how to deal with conflict issues and those sorts of things. But we have had quite a lot of people asking whether that would be possible, and also first aid training, which again a lot of people feel it would be helpful to have, particularly constituency staff.

Emily Knight: They feel very vulnerable, and if they are out with a Member, or in a surgery with the Member, it is a vulnerable place for both Member and staff, and we do think the House should be providing self-defence training for Members and for staff.

Q78 **Chair:** Would it help if the police were asked to help?

Emily Knight: If they do that sort of thing.

Georgina Kester: Yes, if they do that sort of thing. I know the Suzy Lamplugh Trust does a lot of that in conjunction with the police. They have worked with them for years. I remember having it at school. Anything like that that gives Members' staff a little bit more comfort.

Q79 **Chair:** People just looking over the premises and saying, "Change the lock".

Georgina Kester: I know that we now have had the Chubb Security reviews. IPSA has finally got round to putting that in place, which is an improvement.

Q80 **Keith Vaz:** Between you, you have 27 years of corporate knowledge of working for an MP. That is astonishing, looking at you all, because you look so young, at least compared with me, since I have just had a birthday. Those 27 years are something that is lost far too often when people decide to leave Parliament and go and find other jobs. Do you agree with me that there does not appear to be a career structure for the staff of Members? A really effective Member of Parliament has really terrific staff, because they have been around a long time, they know how the system works, and they know they are going to be paid more, and they know they have got a career, as opposed to, "I am going to do this for two years and then I am going to work for a public relations company, or stand to become a Member of Parliament myself". Do you not agree



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with me that we should be working towards establishing that career structure? I don't know, Mr Freedman, whether you call yourself a chief of staff.

Max Freedman: No.

Q81 **Keith Vaz:** No. We have a chief of staff coming in. It is a new title that MPs have given to the top man or woman in their office.

Michael Fabricant: It makes them feel important—the MPs, not the chiefs of staff.

Keith Vaz: True; you don't need that, Mr Fabricant, because you are always very important to us. But do you think that that kind of knowledge needs to be transmitted by yourselves to new members of staff, without the House interfering or anyone else doing it?

Georgina Kester: You are preaching very much to the converted on this side of table. It is an issue that certainly MAPSA and UNITE have been campaigning on for quite a while now. It is wonderful that there are so many people who want to come and work here. I do think that the fast turnover of younger staff is important—it brings bigger and new ideas and it keeps this place vibrant—but it does not provide the continuity that Members need. As you point out, it does not retain that skill set and knowledge that we, with our terrifying amount of years of experience, can keep here. I don't know whether there is a career structure, because, at the end of the day, we probably do everything we already can in our jobs, but what there is a case for is IPSA reviewing staff salaries and making sure that we are adequately remunerated and do not need to leave to earn enough to live on.

Q82 **Keith Vaz:** Absolutely, and that is a crucial point about corporate knowledge. My constituency chief of staff, if I can call her that—she doesn't like being called chief of staff, because she is only herself and one other—in Leicester has been with me for 30 years. The turnover in London is much faster. It is probably once every five or six years. People leave at the end of a Parliament and try to find something else to do. The salary stuff is fine; we agree—at least I agree—that there needs to be more pay as you get that experience, and as you stay longer, because you have that amazing corporate knowledge that very few people are able to acquire. But do you think the courses for new members of staff should be funded by us but run by yourselves? You are all the people who know exactly what is involved in running an MP's office, not the House authorities and, to a large extent, not Members, because Members do not want to be managers, do they? We are elected to serve the people. We are not here to run a business. We are here to just be Members of Parliament. Do you think that you all should be funded to do these courses yourselves?

Max Freedman: It is a new one and, as you say, there is corporate knowledge and skill within existing staff, who I am sure would be delighted to put on that kind of presentation and bring people together. I



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certainly write to all new MPs when they come in at by-elections and say, "Here I am, from the UNITE parliamentary staff branch. If you want to have a chat about how to help set up your office, I am very happy to do that, and here are some forms for your staff, if they would like to join the branch". That is something I just happen to do.

Q83 Keith Vaz: What is the response rate?

Max Freedman: I do not usually hear back, but I do understand that new MPs—

Q84 Keith Vaz: Is it because you say you are from UNITE?

Max Freedman: It could be. I would not want to get involved in that kind of discussion. One thing I would add, though—other than wishing you happy birthday—is to say that consideration of career progression would be made a lot easier if there was a better understanding of appraisals with all MPs. There are some MPs who do it very well, but as with all things, there are some MPs who don't do it well, or don't do it at all. As you say, new MPs have no interest in being managers, per se, but the truth is they do have a pot of money and staff to employ. Being new MPs when they come in, being told that this is a tool that can lead to a more effective office and helps with retention, helps with maximising the skill and potential of their staff, would be a helpful thing to change the culture in a lot of offices.

Q85 John Cryer: This follows on from Keith's question. For the time being, MPs are going to continue to be managers, effectively. For new Members, post-election, what sort of advice and support should be given to new MPs when it comes to employing and managing staff? As a supplementary, who should that advice come from?

Max Freedman: Shall I make a go of this? I have a few ideas, but we don't all agree on them.

Georgina Kester: We don't agree on this point.

Max Freedman: I think it is very important that either the MP or the head of office, chief of staff, whatever you might call them, has some relevant training in managing staff. Certainly I—and I am sure MAPSA as well—deal with enough cases where the relationship breaks down in an office, where I suspect that need not have happened if there had been better training involved in the first place.

Some of the things are obvious. We have mentioned data protection. Currently there is almost no guidance given on data protection for new Members, and certainly not for new staff, yet they are dealing with sensitive material straight from day one. That is a real gap in provision that would be important to address. I have mentioned health and safety in constituency offices and so on.



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Grievance and disciplinary procedures currently don't work. What is in the contract does not make a lot of sense, because they are very small offices, and if you have a grievance, it is probably either with the head of office or with the MP. If you raise a grievance, it is heard by the head of office or the MP. If you appeal against it, that is heard by the head of office or the MP. There is no independence in there. There is no natural justice. Certainly, when I speak to my members, frequently I explain to them they can take out a grievance, but they understand that the likelihood of getting an impartial hearing is almost zero. Offices working out a better way of operating would enable problems to be nipped in the bud much earlier. That comes along with clear management lines. It is a small office, but you need to know who is making the decisions. Similarly, with holiday entitlement: who is taking a holiday, when? Those are all things that lead to minor irritations in the office but can really build up over time. If MPs know that that is something that can develop, they can hopefully have a system in place.

I also think it is important to have a bullying and harassment policy in place, not just within the office but certainly with constituents. If you have abusive constituents who are phoning up and giving grief on the telephone, I always like the idea that a member of staff knows that they will be backed up by their MP if they can say they have a policy—one verbal warning maybe, and after that, "If you swear at me again, I will hang up". I am not saying that there should be a standard policy for all MPs, but I think staff deserve to have the confidence that there is a policy to back them up when they are dealing with awkward members of the public. I think that would be very welcome.

Finally, there could be a better understanding of mental health. We get staff who may have mental health problems or issues, or may develop these, and I do find that some of the issues that arise, when I have been trying to assist my members over the years, have come from dealing in a small office where there simply is not the space to recognise and accommodate some mental health challenges that an individual might have. You say to someone, "You cannot take time off here. We cannot manage without you being there", yet the strains that emerge in these small offices with pressurised jobs really can be combustible over a period of time. I circulated a recent survey that our branch did, which showed that over 60% of our respondents said they suffer from stress, and 35% from anxiety. There is still a bullying culture in there as well, but in terms of stress and anxiety, it is palpable. If Members knew about these things, knew what the signs were, and were able to better accommodate them, I think that would be very welcome.

Q86 Michael Fabricant: When I was a Whip, one of the measures that I and John Randall, who was then the Deputy Chief Whip, applied was how long a Member of Parliament could hang on to his staff, including in the House of Commons. So, full marks, Keith. Lots of Members of Parliament have staff who have worked for them for decades, while others can barely hold on to them for more than six months. Without mentioning any names of



MPs, have you had any interaction at all with whichever parties' Whips' Office regarding that? Have you used the Whips' Office as a resource, in extremis, where you find there is bullying?

Max Freedman: I haven't. Most of my members, though not all—I do have members from all parties—work for Labour MPs, and that has never been how it has been done. That is my understanding. I have tried over the years to have good relationships with the PLP office and with developing systems that can be taken forward, but I have certainly never spoken to a Whip and said, "This person is behaving unreasonably to a member". I think it is a different situation with MAPSA, though, isn't it?

Georgina Kester: It is a slightly different situation. We have vice-chairs. Emily is our Conservative vice-chair. We also have an SNP and a Labour vice-chair. They tend to have a bit more of an open dialogue with the Whips' Offices. I have met the Tory Chief Whip and the Deputy several times to discuss grievance procedures, and I know that there was a plan to make quite good progress with that under the former chief. I believe the new chief wants to do the same thing, but I gather it has been held up with the House. That was a grievance procedure that was going to be signed up to, cross-party. I know the SNP had already agreed to come in on that, and it was going to be very helpful. It was going to give us some structure, so that staff knew what to do and MPs knew how everything would be handled from that point.

We make it sound like there are a lot of MPs who are horrible people, who are horrible to their staff, and there are an enormous amount who are not. But there are those who are affectionately known as "the stapler throwers", who are difficult and, as you say, cannot hold down staff. But people will always want jobs here, and they will always take those jobs. Often they are young, impressionable, naïve people who come and work here straight out of university. If there is an issue, if they have a problem, as you say, there is no recourse. If your boss is the one throwing the stapler at your head, who do you go to? There is no HR for staff—none whatsoever—and it is very concerning that it still has not been addressed. In light of press coverage and things that have come out over the past years, still there is no progress being made with that. We would strongly encourage it. We did a survey of our members, of all staff of Members, and nobody cared whether it was IPSA or the House who took on HR, but somebody needs to grip it and say, "There is now an HR facility for staff".

Q87 Michael Fabricant: Yes, the issue was that it is Members of Parliament who employ the staff, and you cannot have a Member of Parliament employing an entire HR department, but it is certainly something that is needed. I know it is something that Anne Milton, the Conservative Party Deputy Chief Whip, wanted to carry on with, and it is something that I and John Randall started to initiate when there were problems in our own party with at least a couple of individuals who did not have the mentality to be decent to their employees. I am sure it happens in other parties,



too, I hasten to add.

Georgina Kester: We see it across all parties. If you are a young person straight out of university, you are very excited that you have this job; it is going to look great on your CV. If there is an issue, and you have nobody to go to, you are just going to slink away with your tail between your legs, because you don't want to get a reputation as a troublemaker. It is a small community and people do talk. They leave with a horrible experience and a nasty taste in their mouth, and the Member gets away with it, time and again, because nobody will stand up and say, "Do you know what, there is a problem there".

Q88 **John Cryer:** Going back to the original question, does one of you want to respond? Max has answered the original question, as to what sort of help and advice can be given to new Members on employing staff.

Emily Knight: I think it would certainly be useful to offer Members advice on what their responsibilities are under the law. Some will have employed people in their previous professions and some won't, but even those that have might have done so within the constructs of a large corporate organisation. It is a very different beast here. So certainly there should be advice, and the Member should take it. We would not go so far as Max's suggestion of compulsory training for Members, but more could be done to make them aware of how to be good employers, why it is in their interests to be good employers, and perhaps the pitfalls of not treating staff with respect. That would be useful.

Q89 **John Cryer:** That goes back to comments that you made, Georgina, about having an HR department. That would probably be sensible, but my own feeling would be that giving IPSA control of HR might not go down too well either with MPs or staff.

Georgina Kester: I don't think it would, and I don't think IPSA wants it.

John Cryer: In fact, I would not want to propose it to the PLP when we meet at 6 o'clock, because I would get hung, drawn and quartered.

Georgina Kester: I don't think IPSA want to take it on either. I have been sitting on a working group with them for the last couple of months, and part of the problem has been that they don't want to own it. The House currently do not have the resources to own it. We work very closely with Barbara Joy and her team, and they are brilliant. They do what they can to help us, and they were fantastic in giving us advice over the election period, but they don't have the resources to take on 3,000 staff members. That is an enormous burden. There has to be a way around it. Whether it is Members' offices buying into a person who is specifically employed to do that role, I don't know, but I feel that in this day and age, with the amount of staff that there are, the amount of publicity and media coverage that Members get, whether intentional or otherwise, it is not something that we want to be leaving open to chance.

Q90 **Keith Vaz:** I wonder whether you have looked at the comparison with



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the staff arrangements in the United States. They have developed this incredible career structure of people who work for Congressmen and for Senators. Have you looked at that comparison? We have obviously done it in terms of Select Committees—looked at how we compare to Congressional Committees. Is there a case perhaps to ask UNITE to send you over to the States—via Cuba, as you attend the funeral—to meet with your opposite number? It may not be unions running it, but there are obviously people looking after staff. You could make a comparison and come back and tell us what the future should look like.

Georgina Kester: That would be fascinating.

Max Freedman: It is a very important suggestion, which I think is an official recommendation of the Committee.

Q91 **Keith Vaz:** The Members of Congress have a much, much bigger budget for their staff. There is a career structure.

Max Freedman: Yes, there is. I have not done a study other than following these things from afar.

Keith Vaz: “The West Wing” and “House of Cards”.

Max Freedman: Absolutely. If the average constituency over here is 78,000, or will be after the boundary changes go through, the average congressional district is about 700,000, and not only is the staffing pool 10 times as large, but they have legislative specialists for all sorts of different topics. That goes into the different powers of Members over there as opposed to here. They do have much more of a clearly delineated career progression. I don’t like the way in which everyone, other than the Chief of Staff, has to address them as “Mr Senator” or “Mr Representative” or “Madam Senator”, which I think takes something away from the way in which people over here like to have a small and intimate but good working office where everyone has that level of trust between themselves. I am sure there are lessons to learn.

Georgina Kester: It would be fascinating. Not only that, but I am not aware of how they interact with their constituents, and whether they do so to the same degree as Members in this country. Whether they require them to do quite as much casework, I genuinely don’t know. I would be fascinated to find out more about how their roles are structured. It is not just there; it is the others. You have the Welsh Assembly. You have the Scottish Parliament. Everybody works slightly differently. In Wales I know there is much more of a pay structure. You come in on a certain salary, and then it is gradually increased as you get more experience. Everybody does things slightly differently.

Chair: Can I draw to a close before Keith sends you all off to the old Commonwealth for a world tour? Thank you very, very much. If there are other things you can think of that make you say, “Darn, I should have said it”, pen to paper, please. We are particularly interested in the IPSA thoughts and security, because both of them are at the top of the



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Committee's mind in particular. Thank you all very much.



Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Janet Walker, Barbara Joy and Alix Langley.

Q92 **Chair:** Welcome and thank you. Could you give us a brief synopsis of who you are and who you represent, and add any little, short, succinct points you might like to make before we start questions?

Barbara Joy: I am Barbara Joy from the Members' HR advice service.

Alix Langley: Alix Langley, Director of People in the House of Commons, and responsible for Barbara's Members' HR advice service.

Janet Walker: I am Janet Walker, one of those dreadful chiefs of staff, and I work for Tom Tugendhat.

Q93 **Chair:** You helped wind down a Member's staff and the office?

Janet Walker: I did.

Q94 **Chair:** How did it go? How could we have helped?

Janet Walker: It went very well. I worked for James Arbuthnot in his previous incarnation, and the standing-down process worked very well in terms of both the House processes that were put in place and IPSA, I am glad to say. We got a lot of guidance, a lot in advance. Barbara Joy helped a lot with the HR process: how people were going to be made redundant, when the process started, when it would complete. I know that Mr Arbuthnot raised concerns about the lack of advice given to standing-down Members, in terms of training and what their future careers may hold but, by and large, the standing-down system worked very well. We had no hiccups whatsoever, apart from the fact that seven or eight months after the election, I was getting queries from IPSA about a removal expense that Mr Arbuthnot had paid to get his effects moved from Westminster down to his house. That expense had been rejected for some reason, so we had to go back to the moving people seven months later and try to sort it out, which was inexplicable to me and to him. That was sorted out eventually. Other than that, there were no hiccups. I think it worked very well indeed.

Q95 **Chair:** Obviously, having wound everything down, you then turned around and had to build a new one up.

Janet Walker: Yes, I did. That was reasonably easy for me, because I had had experience here with a long-standing Member. I had had a lot of guidance from him on what it was like to work for an MP, what it was like to employ staff along the way, and I had looked after that for Mr Arbuthnot. I pretty much knew what I was doing. As soon as the election was over, I saw the buddy system in place and that worked very, very well. I had no hiccups whatsoever in terms of getting the Member up and running, but that was a lot to do with the fact that I knew what I was



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doing. I had had quite a bit of experience here on the way through. I am sure that the people that were here in these seats before me have spoken a lot about that.

If I can make mention of a couple of things—and I know that they were speaking about it—we were in temporary accommodation in one of the Committee rooms for six weeks, so it was a long time between the election being won and an office being allocated. We had trouble with basic things, like letterheads, envelopes, and printers that would work, all along the way during that six-week period. That made it incredibly difficult for the high volume of work, which comes in as soon as the election is won, to be done efficiently: to be calling up IT the whole time, trying to find somebody who would supply a letterhead so that the printing could get done—just hiccups along the way. I remember one day in the Committee room—it was on the Upper Committee Corridor—it rained very heavily, and it was raining in the Committee room. They had the bins out collecting the water as it came through the ceiling. That is going to be dealt with in due course, but it was not great then.

There was no lockable facility there, so confidential stuff was just out on the desks. There was nowhere to lock it away. That was problematic. Then the next thing that was difficult was getting hardware not just ordered but supplied. It took a long time for kit to come to the office.

Chair: Thank you. Do you want to add to any of that?

Alix Langley: No. I am glad that Barbara was helpful.

Q96 **Nigel Mills:** We had a long discussion about helping Members with their HR and helping Members to be good employers. Alix or Barbara, how well do you think that went after 2015, and how did it compare to the training I had in 2010?

Alix Langley: I certainly think that we have come a very long way from 2010. There was a lot of work in 2015, both around standing down and defeated Members and new Members. In particular, for new Members, we had a section of the new Members' reception area, so that we could talk to Members individually about their immediate needs, most of which were around recruitment, as you would expect. Barbara and her team provided a number of templates and fact sheets, which were available, and we e-mailed them out after the new Members' reception area. We had also obviously got a number of people in the HR teams trained up to deal with queries, so that we were able to follow up back at base, when new Members were contacting us with queries. We had input into the induction sessions that were run by the parties, focusing on top do's and don'ts in your first period of time. That was followed up with some drop-in sessions and also some training sessions around how to be a good employer.

Q97 **Nigel Mills:** What was the take-up?



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Alix Langley: On the take-up for how to be a good employer, we had a number of people at each session. We could have publicised them better, but what we saw from all of our interactions was a very wide take-up of the HR service from new Members on an ongoing basis.

Q98 **Nigel Mills:** The number attending those sessions you laid on, was that 10, 20?

Barbara Joy: we had at least half a roomful for each one, so we thought it was a good take-up and a lot of interest from the people who attended.

Q99 **Nigel Mills:** I forget how many new MPs there were. Was it 111 or was it more than that? I remember attending one of those sessions and there were three of us there in 2010.

Barbara Joy: We had 177.

Q100 **Nigel Mills:** Out of those 177, how many do you think you have hit, in the nicest sense of the word?

Barbara Joy: For follow-up calls, seeing them either at the new Members' reception or contacting them and having interaction with them, by the end of June, we had interaction with all but about a dozen of them. We had extremely high interaction with new Members.

Q101 **Nigel Mills:** An interaction being, "Hello. We exist. Thanks," or, "Hello" and there would be some—

Barbara Joy: We had a template e-mail that we sent to them about how to recruit staff, with links to the appropriate IPSA website places where they knew they could get job descriptions or the security questionnaires from the House. It was a very informative template. Some of them, if we did not see them at new Members reception, we saw them in one-to-one meetings upon request.

Alix Langley: A good measure of this is the extent to which the services widened from 2010. After 2010, the Members' HR advice service was quite well used by a relatively small number of Members of Parliament. In May of this year we had 214 live cases that Barbara and her team were dealing with across a broad spectrum of parties. We have reviewed and tailored the service better as well, but now we are seeing a much broader reach of our services to Members than we were in 2010, some of which is a product of our interaction at the election.

Q102 **Nigel Mills:** What were the issues that new Members were raising 18 months ago, then? Was it, "How do I employ people?" or were they going a bit further than that?

Barbara Joy: Primarily around recruitment. There were different types of recruitment questions; for example, whether they could have help with interviewing, how to write a person specification, what process they need to follow, what the contract looks like, whether they had to interview and advertise for posts. It was a variety of recruitment questions.



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Q103 **Nigel Mills:** Were there many questions on how to be a good employer after you have recruited? Were people saying, "What sort of reviews should I do, and how often?" and everything else?

Barbara Joy: Those questions have only started coming in the last few months. On our internet page, we do have appraisal guidance and different types of appraisal forms, but we have only seen those questions in the last few months.

Q104 **Keith Vaz:** Janet, you are worth your weight in gold, having worked for an MP for so many years, having got Mr Jayawardena settled and now working for Tom Tugendhat.

Janet Walker: Thank you.

Keith Vaz: Tell me about career structures for someone like you. You started as a researcher. When you started, did you think, "I want to be the chief of staff"? Was there such a post when you started? How can we develop a proper career structure for our staffing, so that we hang on to people, and pay them really well, so that the corporate knowledge that you possess—having dealt with three very different personalities—is able to be retained in Parliament, so that Members don't spend all their time trying to train new members of staff how to table EDMs, table written questions, where the Members' dining room is or where all these buildings are? How do we do that? How do we retain it?

Janet Walker: I heard you speak to my predecessors here, and everybody giggled nervously when the matter of pay came up. That is important; there is no shying away from it. If I can give you a bit of background: I came from a corporate environment where I was paid extremely well. I came here out of choice, so I was not expecting any kind of career structure. I came here because I was committed to working here. To be frank, I am simply not sure because, after you develop a wealth of experience—which you have kindly referred to—I don't know where I go from here.

On the career path that is open to young people coming in, particularly people from universities who are expecting to go into research, which they feel is very important—more important a lot of the time than constituency-facing roles—after that, where does a researcher go but into either a public policy area or out into public affairs? There are opportunities, I guess, to become special advisers now, and go along when their Members start rising up the ranks. To be frank, I don't know. It would be nice to be paid better, but I don't know.

Q105 **Keith Vaz:** Knowing what Members of Parliament do and knowing that a chief of staff is supposed to be a chief of staff, not a courtesy title—

Janet Walker: No, that is right.

Keith Vaz: They are supposed to run everything for the Member. I would not expect them to be paid less than £50,000, and I don't think that



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there are many, if any, chiefs of staff working in the House of Commons for an MP who earn that amount of money.

Janet Walker: I don't think you are allowed to. The pay grades just don't admit that.

Q106 **Keith Vaz:** Exactly, but if you think about the equivalent among those sitting on your right-hand side, who are members of the House, and you look at the grades of pay for members of the House staff, as opposed to Members of Parliament staff, they are much, much higher. They are graded and they are appraised. I am not criticising either of them. They both deserve the salaries, whatever they are, that they get. But the House staff are paid so much more than the staff of Members. That is right, isn't it?

Janet Walker: Is that right?

Q107 **Keith Vaz:** Your former boss was Chair of a Select Committee?

Janet Walker: Yes.

Q108 **Keith Vaz:** There is no one who works in the staff of a Chair of a Select Committee who is not paid more than a Member of Parliament's staff on an equivalent grade. Even the admin staff are paid more.

Janet Walker: To be frank, I was not aware of that. I don't look at other people's pay grades. That is a decision the House has to come to but, of course, there are all the bureaucratic and legal difficulties in what a Member's staff is classified as. We are classified as employees of the Member. We are paid by the public, and the Member is paid by the public. We are in some ways slightly more under public scrutiny than House staff, so there are all those difficulties that come into play there. To be frank, I don't know how you overcome them; I really don't.

Q109 **Keith Vaz:** To retain, you need a career structure and you need more pay to keep people in.

Janet Walker: You will need more pay eventually. What I am seeing—and not particularly in the office that I am currently in—is a lot of staff turnover with a lot of other offices. People come in, they work for a couple of years and they suddenly think, "My goodness me, I can earn another 10 grand easily out in public affairs. Why should I be working for a Member of Parliament?" But this is the most important job in the world, to my mind, to this country. You need good people working for Members, and good-quality people who are committed to working for them, who are loyal to them and who are willing to stay. I don't think I have answered you very well, I am sorry.

Keith Vaz: No, you have actually. You have raised some very important points. Thank you.

Q110 **Michael Fabricant:** All three of you were here when we heard from the last panel, is that correct?



Janet Walker: Yes.

- Q111 **Michael Fabricant:** We were talking about grievance procedures and what happens in the very rare case—but, sadly, cases that do exist—of Members of Parliament who don't just pay badly, but actually behave badly, either because they are nasty people or because they just don't know how to employ staff. It is rather like I am living in a Cathedral Close. Deans are expected to be managing directors of an operation, but they are trained in theology. They are not trained in finance. Similarly, many MPs don't come from a business background. They don't have a clue how to behave to staff.

Can we go back to the points that we were discussing earlier with the panel, who were saying they would welcome a grievance procedure? You will have also heard that IPSA are probably not the right people to do this. It would cause all sorts of difficulties with Members of Parliament and possibly with the staff as well. I would like to ask all three of you: if there were a mechanism—and I fully accept that the House of Commons is not the employer of the staff, it is the Member of Parliament—whereby the House authorities provided some sort of grievance arbitration, first of all, Janet, would you welcome that? The two officers of the House, would you welcome it? I ask Janet first of all, as someone who works for a Member of Parliament?

Janet Walker: Yes, not that I have ever needed to revert to one. There ought to be one. In my experience in private enterprise, once an issue has come to that stage, it is usually understood—even if only tacitly—that the relationship has broken down to a certain extent and, by and large, the two parties eventually go their separate ways. Nevertheless, yes, there should be one. I wonder if the Whips should not be the arbiters of this.

- Q112 **Michael Fabricant:** What we heard earlier was that some parties do this; other parties don't. There is not a fair and equal approach among all the political parties. It is just the way it has evolved.

Janet Walker: Mind you, I think the Whips have enough to do.

- Q113 **Michael Fabricant:** Certainly, it was our observation, when I was in the Whips' Office, that when you had a grievance, quite often this happened time and time again with the same Member of Parliament. What about the officers of the House, Barbara and Alix? Do you think it is something you could take on? I don't mean you personally, but the House authorities acting as some sort of tribunal or arbiter?

Alix Langley: You may be aware that the House has put in a contract with an employee assistance programme for Members' staff, which is a confidential source of advice that they are able to telephone, which we publicised particularly after the election. That is one way to provide support to Members' staff who find themselves in a difficult position and are trying to make decisions about how to manage that within their office. There is a grievance procedure that is in the standard contract. We



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would ideally want issues and conflicts to be resolved at as early a stage as possible to avoid it getting to the kind of position that you are talking about. Certainly, Barbara and her team advise on that frequently.

Q114 Michael Fabricant: I was not aware, and I am not going to pretend that I was aware. I was not, and I don't think many people are aware of this programme that is available. How would it work? You are saying that an employee of a Member of Parliament can go to—who did you say they were?

Alix Langley: It is an employee assistance programme. It is a helpline and you can call with all sorts of concerns. One of the things that you might want to call for is to say, "I'm having a difficult time at work. What would you advise?" There is some support available there. One of the things that they might recommend is that you use a grievance procedure, and there is one in the contract.

Barbara Joy: There is one attached to every contract. It is part of the contract.

Alix Langley: Obviously, we recognise that they are small offices.

Q115 Michael Fabricant: I would love to invite—but I cannot—the previous witnesses back to know how they feel about this. Maybe we can talk informally afterwards. It is not something that is currently being made much use of, or is it?

Alix Langley: I would not want to pretend that it solves every problem that there is, but it certainly is a move to provide more support to Members' staff.

Barbara Joy: I was going to also say that not every Member hears a grievance that is brought against him, or even his staff. Members also use external consultants. I know that, because they liaise with me about that. If it is a particularly complex or sensitive grievance, they can use their budget or apply for contingency fund to get someone external to assist them.

Q116 Michael Fabricant: Interesting. It is something we might pursue a bit later on in this inquiry. UNITE has suggested there should be mandatory training for Members of Parliament, and I don't see how that would work in practice at all, as good as it might be. What are your views on this? Janet, you were looking pretty negative on that.

Janet Walker: I cannot see how you would make it mandatory. MPs' lives are busy enough as they are. To load them with more training I think is unrealistic. It may be nice, but it is unrealistic.

Q117 Michael Fabricant: Yes. I suspect that the very few Members of Parliament who might need that training are the ones who are most likely to refuse to do it, mandatory or not. How do you two feel about it, Barbara and Alix?



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Alix Langley: As we were saying, we have offered these sessions about how to be a good employer, and we have had some take-up, if not from everybody. One of the other areas where we provide support and training through the learning and development team at the House is to people within the office, and often it is office managers who deal with some of the issues around employment in the early stages. That is another way that we can help and support Members of Parliament to run efficient offices.

Q118 **Michael Fabricant:** One of the other things we heard about in the last session was buddying—we already have buddying of MPs, but buddying of staff. Is this something that the House authorities could facilitate?

Alix Langley: I don't know. It is an idea to think about, isn't it? Certainly, the buddy system in the election for Members was very successful, but I don't know enough about that to give you a sensible answer.

Q119 **Nigel Mills:** Is the solution to this to have the House employ all Members' staff, rather than MPs doing it?

Alix Langley: It would be a different model.

Q120 **Nigel Mills:** Would it be a better model?

Alix Langley: there are pros and cons of all of the approaches. If there was an easy model that worked, we might have come across it by now.

Janet Walker: It is how the Australian political system works. All the Australian MPs' staff are employed, I think, by the House of Representatives or the Senate, so that is a model that one could look at.

Chair: That sounds like a travel bid.

Janet Walker: No, not at all. I like it here.

Q121 **Chair:** Your accent is coming out. We have briefly touched before and now on IPSA. IPSA does not come out brilliantly well, except for in your initial comments. Is there anything you want to add in relation to IPSA HR over the way in which they tutored you, how they have managed the systems—how they say "Yes" and then "No", and "No" and then "Yes", and so on? This is from my experience.

Janet Walker: they are better than they used to be, but they had to be.

Chair: You are good on compliments.

Janet Walker: They are hard pressed to understand what MPs do. They are hard pressed to understand what MPs' staff do. A quick look at their available job descriptions on Members and staff shows that without a doubt.

Q122 **Chair:** So we don't want them educating us; we want to be educating them.



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Janet Walker: yes.

Chair: I like it.

Janet Walker: I don't think it is going to happen.

Chair: Oh, you never know. It is a great note to finish on. Thank you all very much.