

Administration Committee

Oral evidence: [Election Planning and Services](#), HC 588

Monday 16 January 2017

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Members present: Sir Paul Beresford (Chair); Sir David Amess; John Cryer; Martyn Day; Michael Fabricant; Ms Gisela Stuart; Mark Tami; Keith Vaz.

Questions 181 - 261

Witnesses

[I.](#) Professor Emma Crewe, Professorial Research Fellow and Professor of Social Anthropology, SOAS, University of London, and Eve Samson, Chair, Interdepartmental Working Group for Members' Professional Development, House of Commons.

[II.](#) Marcial Boo, Chief Executive, Victoria Elliott, Programme and Projects Manager, and Vicky Fox, Director of MP Support Services, Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority.

Written evidence from witnesses:

- [Professor Emma Crewe](#)
- [Eve Samson](#)
- [Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority](#)

Examination of witnesses

Professor Emma Crewe, Professorial Research Fellow and Professor of Social Anthropology, SOAS, University of London, and Eve Samson, Chair, Interdepartmental Working Group for Members' Professional Development, House of Commons.

Q181 **Chair:** Thank you both. Do you want to make a comment statement before we start? A minuscule one.

Eve Samson: If I were going to introduce an experimental programme of Members' Professional Development, I would not do it in a Parliament with a wafer-thin Government majority, four leadership elections and major constitutional change. None the less, some things have been embedded and I think that we have made some progress and, as we said in previous briefings to the Administration Committee, this is something that we are rolling out and experimenting with and doing different things across the Parliament. It is longer-term than induction.

Q182 **Chair:** Thank you. The Conservative Party will do its very best to have a massive majority next time and no difficulties.

Professor Crewe: I only want to say one thing, which is that I think induction but also professional development and other kinds of processes that encourage reflection or learning or whatever are an opportunity to not only learn about the institution and value what is already there, but also to recognise the talents and experience and knowledge of the new people who come in. Sometimes, if you are given the impression that training and induction is just all about going native and being socialised, it really hampers you and gives you much, much less incentive to get involved in those processes. If they are designed in such a way that people feel they can contribute ideas, maybe even explore different ways of doing things, then I think you get people to participate and they become much more exciting as processes.

Q183 **Chair:** I have been here long enough to accept what you are saying but also to recognise that Members and the Whips Offices, at least in the Conservative Party, do that, and there is an opportunity to filter things in and out. We have to make Whips see it.

Secondly, I was delighted with your book, and one of the things we have not touched on is lay members. It may intrigue you to know that on the Standards Committee I asked that every single one of the lay members, who were appallingly ignorant of what we did, bought a copy of your book and went away and got stuck into it to try to work it out.

Professor Crewe: Fantastic. Thank you.

Q184 **Chair:** Thank you. It is very useful. It comes around again to the development needs of both Members and laypeople. What have you discovered when you were doing your book?

Professor Crewe: Could I add MPs' staff as well?

Chair: Yes, please.

Professor Crewe: There are two main ways in which I think the situation for MPs is a little bit different from other professions. One is the extraordinary complexity and diversity of the jobs. You do not do one job; I think you do many, many jobs. You have to develop—and a lot of MPs do develop—the most extraordinary skill at bouncing from one to another.

The other thing that is perhaps particularly the case for MPs is the difficulty with admitting that there is anything you do not know. You are supposed to come into Parliament and immediately know everything, because you have been campaigning to be a leader of the constituency and of course you are forced in a way to give the impression that you know exactly how it works. It seems to me that you have an extremely complex job to do on the one hand, and on the other hand you get punished, particularly by the media, if you admit that there is anything you do not already know. It is really, really important to give MPs far, far more support.

I would add that you do deserve a lot more appreciation for what you do—not that everything you do is perfect. One of the impressions I got was that there is very little time to prioritise, so it seems to me that MPs rush from one thing to another because you are constantly having to respond to demands and it is very, very difficult to say no to people. I think there is a huge potential for doing very innovative and creative forms of reflection or training or professional development. I would make the argument for saying that some of it should be confidential and that it should not necessarily be in the public domain. You are in the public domain the vast majority of the time. I think it would be really, really helpful if there was more space, including, for example, on Select Committees. This is not just an issue for individual MPs, but there is also huge potential for MPs doing things in the different configurations that you find yourselves in. Whether it is APPGs or it is Select Committees, then I think it is right that you have some private space where you can reflect and learn and get out of the public eye, which is extremely hostile, and scrutiny sometimes becomes, I imagine, pretty unbearable.

Q185 **Chair:** That is called “going home”. That is when you get some peace. You said we need more help. How would you suggest that we provide more help?

The second thing you did not touch on, which I noticed, coming from the other end of the earth, is that in this country, if you are a politician or in government and you make a mistake, it is difficult to admit it, and the newspapers and so forth will really have a go at you. Where I came from, there was a more relaxed attitude to it and they recognised that there was a touch of humanity and humanness, and if you made a mistake, they would accept it if you said, “I made a mistake”. Did you find that, or am I barking up the wrong tree?

Professor Crewe: No. I think we have a real problem with the expectations of politicians, and not only politicians—it is true of leaders in

many sectors. There is an expectation that you do not make mistakes, but also that you have far more control than you really do. MPs do not all have the same amount of power, for example, and yet there is this expectation that you can change the constituency or you can bring about policies and laws that are going to solve huge, complex problems. There is definitely an intolerance, and, I think, an unrealistic expectation, of MPs. That, in a way, is only solved by having more conversations and dialogue with the media and with constituents and so on.

As to your first question about getting more support, I know that you already have some fantastic processes going on within Parliament, so I know that the House of Commons itself provides all kinds of opportunities. The only issue there and the only puzzle for me is that I do not think MPs necessarily take them up as much as they might. It would be really interesting to find out from your colleagues why that is. Is it really just shortage of time, or is it difficult to be seen to be doing these things because the public and the media are so unforgiving about spending money, for example, or not looking as if you know everything already or whatever it is?

Also, there are obviously lots of external organisations that are doing some things but perhaps could be encouraged to do more. Maybe some of the more experimental, risky, innovative, creative forms of professional development could be located in other agencies. I am thinking of places like the Hansard Society, the Institute for Government or the Westminster Abbey Institute, which runs extremely interesting events and, in a way, has the space and freedom to be, as I say, more experimental and more innovative.

Q186 Ms Gisela Stuart: I want to follow up something in terms of building up expertise, but before I do, I believe it was Randolph Hearst who said, "News is something somebody doesn't want you to know about, and the rest is advertising". The moment we expect the press to say, "Aren't you wonderful and honest that you express your doubts", then we do not have a proper media any more. Can we just park that for a moment?

After about 20 years in this place there are two things that I wish I had known more about or had been more accessible. One was the National Audit Office. I think that is an external agency that is quite different from all the other ones. I did not realise that I could go to the National Audit Office as an MP and say, "Could you please look into this?" and then it would be fed into the Public Accounts Committee. There are serious investigatory agencies whose services I was not aware I could use.

The other thing is that I am now on the Intelligence and Security Committee. The secretariat of the Intelligence and Security Committee is incomparable to any other Committee I have ever worked with in terms of its depth and breadth of expertise and support of members, and it is not a Committee of the House—it is supported by the Cabinet Office. Rather than going about trying to wonder as to why individual MPs do not have time to trundle up to the Institute for Government and listen to a terribly interesting lecture, I can tell you what the answer is: we just do

not have the time. In the long term, is it not a question of institutional strengthening? If we were to look at what happens to the support on Select Committees, we would see that the Defence Committee, for example, has a set of permanent advisers who talk to Members before, though other Committees do not. I am just wondering whether for long-term sustainable improvement we would not be better off looking more at the structural support than the individual MP support.

Professor Crewe: You definitely have to do both, in my view. Again, there is already a lot that the institution is doing to improve the way it works, most notably the way Select Committees work. I noticed, for example, that you are employing somebody who is going to increase diversity, including the diversity of witnesses that you—

Q187 **Ms Gisela Stuart:** Yes, but that does not strengthen the way MPs get advice. The mere fact that I used to be able to just pop down to the Foreign Affairs Committee at the end of my corridor, and the Defence Committee. You have now wholesale farmed them out, off the premises, so even for a member of the Committee to just talk to them and get the support has been made more difficult. On top of that, you do not have the adviser structure of a depth, which means a Member going into the Committee would say, "These are areas you want to think about. These are areas for reflection". That will give you sustainable institutional deepening, rather than ad hominem.

Professor Crewe: I think you need both, personally, and I agree with you about the proximity—the more proximity you have to extremely high-calibre people working within the service—but I would also add your own staff. I personally would make the argument for increasing the capacity to some extent with your staff, who are not that well paid but are becoming increasingly important. If I look at the staff in constituencies, for example, the ones who had been there for a while—and I know there is often a problem with turnover—had encyclopaedic knowledge of your constituency, particularly the local government departments, which they really needed to know. They also had knowledge of individuals and knew exactly whom to go to for which kind of problem. It would seem to me that the staff that you have in Westminster should know about the National Audit Office, should know about Government Departments, and should really be the resource for you that is knowledge-based. They need to be the ones who have the information and the knowledge. It does not seem to me that you, as MPs, can be expected to know everything that you need to know in an extremely complex state. I think MPs' staff already play an important role and could play an even more important role.

Q188 **Ms Gisela Stuart:** I hate to break some very uncomfortable news to you. For 20 years I have had never more than a part-time secretary in London as my so-called staff because I have been in an exceptionally marginal constituency and my entire staff has been in the constituency in Birmingham. Do not make the assumption that the staff should be my hand-holder. If you are looking at the institutional strengthening of MPs, then you make the assumption that the MPs are the beginning and the

balance of staff are in the constituency—I do not know how strong the SNP staff members are in London. I assume a lot of them are up in Scotland.

Mark Tami: All of mine are in Scotland.

Ms Gisela Stuart: I will leave it there, but I just want to leave that thought to you. Long-term sustainability means you strengthen the institutions, not the individual.

Professor Crewe: Could I add one more thing about the kinds of events that would be useful for individuals none the less? I do think you have to do both. In any organisation, you see fantastic results when you give senior managers and leaders the opportunity to reflect very hard and to learn from each other and to learn from people who have been in a similar position to themselves. The obvious learning process that does go on is between new MPs and established MPs. That goes on anyway informally, but I think that if external organisations—like, for example, the Westminster Abbey Institute—were to offer their premises and a space or whatever for MPs to have discussions, then there is absolutely no point in going and listening to long lectures, but I am thinking much more that MPs could learn a lot more from each other. It is difficult to do when you are rushing from Select Committee to debate to APPG or whatever. I still would make the argument for both because I think that individual MPs are continually coming in and need somehow to get up to speed extraordinarily fast in a very complex job.

Q189 **Keith Vaz:** Developing what you have just said about staff to MPs, especially new MPs, how do you get them revved up with the skills that are necessary on things like tabling questions, indeed where things are happening in the House, and do you think that there is a role for an external organisation to be able to help new members of staff to grapple with the very special language that exists in Parliament? As I say to all members of my staff, “You probably will never use this expertise again in any other job that you have because it is such a unique job to work as a member of staff to a Member of Parliament”. Like being an MP, it is a one-off, but it is developing those processes, that language, and the jargon. Do you think there is a role for the Institute for Government or some other organisation to provide that kind of training for them so that they are able to acquire the skills? Whenever someone is leaving my office, I make it a condition that they will train their successor before they go so I do not have to do the training.

Professor Crewe: The business of the House—for me, that is not just procedural matters but the relationship between procedure and politics—is that of the Chamber and Committee Services officials, not just Clerks but other officials as well. That is what they really, really excel at. If I was an MP and I was seeking advice from a longstanding MP, I would ask exactly that question: how do I train up my—

Q190 **Keith Vaz:** This is still the tribal nature. You go to the tribal elder, and the tribal elder will tell you how to do your job. I am saying, should there be a quick, short course of four days where you can send a new member

of staff off to be trained over those four days to give them a proper grounding in how to work for an MP?

Professor Crewe: Yes.

Q191 **Keith Vaz:** We do not have that now, do we? Ringing up the Chamber officials is not the same thing and ringing up the Table Office is not the same thing. I am talking about something much more formalised, where we could get our staff trained up over a short period.

Professor Crewe: Can I quickly say one thing? Eve can answer that much better than I can, but I would say the staff need to know some elements of that, and I would say that the officials are much better placed to provide that kind of training. Also, they need to know whom to go to in the service for different questions. I would say yes, a course or whatever, but that for me is exactly the area where the internal structures are extremely strong. I will come back to it later, but I think it is other kinds of issues that are more usefully facilitated by outsiders.

Eve Samson: In the years I have been in the House, there has been a sea change in the attitudes to Members' staff, from people who got between us and the Member to people who were working with us to facilitate the Member doing what the MP wanted. There are constraints on space. There are constraints on resources. None the less, we have done things like introducing training for Members' staff on tabling questions; we have an online module on how to table amendments, although I notice it has not been hugely taken up. We do try to do a lot more for Members' staff, but Mr Vaz says quite rightly that we are doing it in discrete tranches. There is a tranche about tabling questions. There is a tranche about amendments. If a Member comes to the Public Bill Office with a member of his or her staff, and introduces them and says, "This person is acting for me, please support them", they will get tailored support.

I am not sure about the practicality of this sort of short course that you are mentioning. I cannot see, to be honest, how an external body could provide it because they would not know.

Q192 **Keith Vaz:** It could be done internally.

Eve Samson: It is certainly something I will take away. Members' staff training is not something that I am responsible for, but I work closely to them and I will certainly take it away. We are thinking quite hard about how much more support we can give to Members' staff. We do training in constituencies. We do constituency road shows where groups of people from different Departments of the House go up and talk to Committee staff in different places. We can think about that.

Q193 **Mark Tami:** That covers the bit that I have, does it not? I can come in on that. You have touched on what training is provided or not provided or people ask for, but, as Keith has said, there is a lot of pressure on us and whether we seek that out or whether we try to do what we do ourselves. You mentioned what is available in our own offices up in the various

seats. I know from my own experience that you quite often get something and say, "That looks interesting", only to find out that it is about a three-hour journey away or something like that, and that is not going to be particularly helpful. I am in North Wales, and it is easier to get to London than it is to get to something in Cardiff. How much can you do, or do you think it should be widened so that there is more training provided nearer to where people are?

Saying that, my staff have attended things in Liverpool or Manchester, which are a darn sight easier to get to, but you still have to want to do it.

Eve Samson: I am in a little bit of a dilemma here because I am talking about Members' Professional Development, so what you are having from me is now what you would call house policy but informed comment. I know that it is a balance always between resources and demand. People are trying to get more training out into the locality, just into areas. One thing I suggest hesitantly—because it does add to the burden and I am aware of the difficulty of burdens—is if groups of Members or groups of constituency staff together identify a training need, then it is much easier.

Q194 **Mark Tami:** Again, I know from experience that some Government Departments do have people that will come to you, rather than you going to them, to update people on the latest CSA arrangements—I do not know—or whatever, whereas the House requires us to go to them.

Q195 **Chair:** Are you thinking of perhaps arranging group training, particularly in the beginning of the period, down here, where we could bring the staff down for one or two or three days, and IPSA would pay?

Mark Tami: I would not hold your breath.

Eve Samson: We are trying to do more for staff. What we find is difficult is that if you arrange something on a prearranged day and you say, "We are doing this on a prearranged day", you end up in a position where people cannot come or will not come. It is this balance between making sure the demand is there and, as I say, I am in a difficulty because I am not responsible for Members' staff training, but I will pass that back. I know that they certainly want to be a lot more flexible about it.

In terms of Members' training, which might have some light shed on it, what we have done and what has worked very well is when groups of Members have come to us and said, "Can you set up this?" Because it has been a small group, they know who they are, they have identified the convenient day and we have set it up for them. That has been quite successful.

Q196 **Chair:** You mentioned we need training on online abuse and public engagement. I would not limit it to online abuse; we get the physical abuse anyway. What sort of training should we do?

Professor Crewe: I do not think that is really about training. I am seeing it in a broader sense and thinking more that you deserve to have a lot more support in many ways. The issue of security is an obvious one

in terms of support. It is an opportunity for IPSA to be not just as generous as possible about security, particularly in the constituencies, but perhaps IPSA and Parliament need to make the case to the media, which is now surely much easier following Jo Cox. That this is something really, really serious and it has been for a long, long time. It is an absolute scandal that you cannot look as if you are spending money in a constituency on making sure that your constituency offices are really secure. It is a form of support, but that is very different from the issue of getting attacks on social media or conventional media.

For some MPs, I got the impression that it would be really helpful to at least support each other. In a way, this is something that only MPs and other people who are really in the public eye can figure out solutions for. There are brave MPs who I see supporting each other and calling out the particularly nasty trolls and that kind of thing. I do not really think that is about training in the narrow sense, but something needs to be done, particularly about the wild west of the social media. It is not going to be some conventional form of regulation. It has to be a change in practice.

Q197 Michael Fabricant: I find that if you retweet a particularly unpleasant troll—as I do, when occasionally someone says, hard as it may seem to be believed, anything nasty about me—some of the other 24,000 followers immediately come on to them and say, “Stop being beastly”. There are ways of getting around it.

Professor Crewe: Yes, exactly. If you were a new MP and you had not been in the public eye before, it would be very useful to have a conversation with you about it. Perhaps they will know that, but perhaps some will not immediately know who are the most active Twitterers in Parliament.

Michael Fabricant: I think they do.

Professor Crewe: Yes. It may be easier for new MPs to get different kinds of advice from different MPs if events are set up and opportunities are provided, rather than just leaving it up to individuals to continually go and seek out other individuals.

Michael Fabricant: I do not know to what extent your research showed this, but the Whips on both main parties, Labour and Conservative, do provide moral support and do provide introductions to enable that self-help or mutual help to continue. Then people are not thrown into complete isolation. I proselytise about the fact that the Whips are not there just to impose discipline; far from it. There is very little discipline you can impose nowadays. It is about intelligence gathering and being a form of HR organisation in many ways.

Chair: Michael has just explained to me we are still only on question 1.

Q198 Sir David Amess: I had three brief questions for our two witnesses. Brief answers will certainly suffice. On the basis that apathy seems to rule the day, has there been any feedback since the general election about the Members’ Professional Development Programme? True, yes?

Eve Samson: Feedback about the programme or about the individual events? The feedback about the programme that you have had, which is, most frustratingly, that it is very hard to make Members understand that they can come to me and say, "I would like you to arrange this" and if I possibly can, I will. It is not for want of trying. We have brochures. We have flyers. We have had things up on screens in Members' areas. We have done events.

One bit of feedback, trying to raise awareness that people can ask, is difficult. The other bit of feedback is what we have done in terms of Committee training, in terms of a little bit of media training and in terms of the procedural toolkit has been very well reviewed. The other bit of feedback I should mention, which is not quite about Members' Professional Development but is about seeking Members' views, was the Chamber and Committees team, of course, as part of the interview project, asked Members about access to procedural support. We had already overhauled some of that, but, realising that it was low-visibility, we have the procedural hub now down in the library, which should be more accessible, and materials on Members' Professional Development. Just the simple news that you can ask me is in there.

Q199 **Sir David Amess:** Well done. The second of my three questions is about the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh Assembly. You have quite a bit of interaction with them. Is there anything they are doing in terms of training, scrutiny or extra facilities? Are there any tips we can learn from those two bodies?

Eve Samson: The Scottish Parliament I have not seen recently. The Welsh I think we could learn a great deal from, but that is about engagement at the top. What I have noticed in Committee training is Committees tend to like training depending on how much their Chair likes training. One Committee, for example, uses an awful lot of training resources and finds it very helpful. Other Committees do not at all. I think there was a group and a consensus around what they needed at the top of the Welsh Assembly, which helps hugely. I feel that we all learn from each other. There was a lovely point where we were ahead of them, but they have caught up again.

Sir David Amess: Excellent. Perhaps, Chairman, the Committee could take a little trip to the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh Assembly at some time. *[Interruption.]* Oh dear. That was below the belt there from a colleague. The final question is about new Ministers. Ministers come and go; the Civil Service is always there. Do you think there should be some training given to them, like why is it that Ministers take two months to send colleagues a reply, and then when you read the reply it is a complete waste of time, frankly, and you have waited two months for it? Do you have any ideas of training for new Ministers?

Eve Samson: I think they may be an even harder-to-reach group than Back-Bench Members of Parliament. Seriously, the Institute for Government I know has been involved in some training. I am sure we are

happy to brief new Ministers, but I am not sure that we can mandate anybody to come and be trained.

Sir David Amess: It was not my idea to ask the question. It was here on a bit of paper, so somebody wanted the question asked. Seeing there was an awkward silence, Chairman, perhaps it is an initiative we—

Q200 **Chair:** I endorse the question because, having arrived here, started to learn what it was like to be an MP, and then suddenly dumped with being a Minister before I knew what it was like to be an MP, and having the then-Madam Speaker giving me a real what-for for not following some rule or other, it would have been helpful to know the rule.

Eve Samson: I think some very senior colleagues of mine do offer help and briefing.

Q201 **Michael Fabricant:** Emma, you admitted almost that there had been quite a small take-up or no take-up of the Members' Professional Development Programme, and you were trying to identify why but you were not sure why that might be. You felt that maybe it might be a losing of face. Personally, I do not think it had anything to do with that at all. I suspect it is more to do with that MPs are busy and are rushing around. A lot of MPs do not come from any management background at all so would not have a clue how to prioritise, and that is why they are rushing around. The other problem is that they do not even know that such a thing exists, which is not surprising because internal communications in the House of Commons would not operate that way in a normal organisation.

First, how can we educate MPs to prioritise better? Secondly, how can we even bring to the attention of MPs that the development programme—or Professional Development Programme, as you like to call it—exists? Most people have never heard of it.

Professor Crewe: First, I would distinguish between two different types of professional development. One is acquiring the knowledge that people need to do the job properly, and that people do take up to some extent when they need it. When you first come in, as a completely new MP, you have this big bag of constituency mail and you have loads of things to think about. You are not going to get into obscure procedural questions at that point. Much later, you do, and I think there is a certain amount of take-up on things like—

Q202 **Michael Fabricant:** What do you mean by “much later”? Are you talking about months or years? What sort of timespan?

Eve Samson: Sorry. The reason I am pausing is because I talked a new entrant Member through the Order Paper just before Christmas, so people pick it up when they need it. Committee training is a strand of this. Committees have quite often waited for a month or two until they knew each other and have come back for refreshers; or, for example, when Work and Pensions and I think the Business Committee were calling in people over BHS pensions, they got somebody in from my team to talk

them through how to ask questions. That was for a very specific, very high-profile session.

Q203 **Michael Fabricant:** By "Committee training", are you talking about Public Bill Committees, or are you thinking particularly of Select Committees?

Eve Samson: Select Committees and questioning training for this one. That was very much triggered by a particular event. They were having a high-profile witness. They wanted to manage that session as best as possible.

Q204 **Michael Fabricant:** Would that not be the role of the Clerk? As David said—he has gone now—we have some questions here. When I was on the Culture Committee, Gerald Kaufman, who was a brilliant Chairman, always used to say, "These are the questions we ignore. Ask your own questions", which I always thought was a very sensible idea. We did not need training for that. Either you have wit or you have no wit at all, in which case you maybe should not be on a Committee.

Eve Samson: I think you would find police officers, barristers, negotiators and all sorts of people get training in questioning and it makes them more effective: when a closed question is useful, when an open question is useful, when you give people enough rope to hang themselves, and indeed sometimes for Committees when to work as a pack. That is what this questioning training applies. It is much more than a list of questions. It has been found to be quite helpful.

Q205 **Michael Fabricant:** Back to my question, then, if indeed it can be of help—you are convincing me that it can—how are you going to educate people that this facility for training exists, if the take-up is so low?

Eve Samson: Committees are easy. I make sure that all my colleagues know and it is offered to Chairs regularly, and I hope that, as awareness grows, others will know. On other sorts of training, we have always said when we have come to the Administration Committee we would be demand-led and that we want to provide things that Members want and need. It is all very well us imagining what you would want; we want to respond to what you do want. I would very much welcome support from you. We have given out booklets, leaflets, flyers, had items in the newsletters, had stands in Portcullis House, which we will do again. Whenever I meet a Member now, I say, "By the way, this is also available to you".

There is some hope. Awareness is growing. For example, on language training, there is a sudden uptick from eight to 16 Members now taking language training. People talk to each other, they become aware it is there, and then they get back to us. Plugging on has to be the answer.

Q206 **Michael Fabricant:** It is desperately sad. We are talking about 650 Members of Parliament, and you regard it as a great success that we have gone to 16 people now who have taken up language training.

Eve Samson: I do not regard it as a success, but I do not regard it as my job to make Members take language training either.

Q207 **Michael Fabricant:** Whose job is it to communicate that these great programmes exist? It is all very well talking about how valuable they are, which I am sure they are, but if nobody knows about it, it is a complete waste of time, is it not?

Professor Crewe: I think it is bound to be quite a long process. When I first started talking to MPs five years ago, they talked about the process of becoming a Member of Parliament as “de-skilling”, and they talked about how there was not very much professional development or training. It has completely changed in five years, and I think it is inevitably going to take a certain amount of time before people realise how much is available.

Q208 **Michael Fabricant:** Every five years, there is a churn of Members of Parliament, so somebody may realise after three or four years what is available and they might be gone after five years.

Eve Samson: Could I just finish making a point about different types of learning? I personally think the institution has made huge strides in providing the kinds of training that it is appropriate for the service to provide. Transferring knowledge and increasing skill in questioning I think are important areas, because sometimes some MPs and Chairs on Select Committees are very good at distinguishing between different audiences, but some treat all witnesses as if the process is about scrutiny, and of course it is not. Some of your witnesses are friendly—I hope I am friendly—and some of them are Ministers or very senior civil servants who are accountable to you, and therefore need a completely different style of questioning. I think MPs learn how to make these kinds of distinctions partly by doing it, because of course that is the main way in which one learns how to do a job—experientially, actually doing it—but some do not, and a nudge is really helpful.

There is a third form of development, which I think is much, much more complex and can sometimes be politically very sensitive and is difficult for the officials to facilitate. Maybe that is about leadership or about really becoming expert, and that is where I think the external bodies could be quite useful. There—and this is easier to do in a private space—different MPs can have tough conversations about prioritising, about how to deal with the media, but also about ancient questions like what on earth it means to represent 70,000 very, very diverse people. It may be a very old question but it has not been solved, and I think it is worth discussing, and I do not think it really works to call that training. I do not think anybody has completely figured out the complexity of representing these huge numbers of people within a constituency. You could get MPs who have been doing it for a while and new MPs into conversations, which are not just about learning how to do the job but maybe about doing it differently and developing democracy, which clearly does not yet work perfectly and of course never will.

Q209 **Michael Fabricant:** You still have not answered my question about who is responsible for getting the information across that all these different programmes, ranging from the Institute for Government to your internal programmes.

Eve Samson: I am, and I have clearly failed. I am baffled as to what more at this stage I could have done. I am hoping that the procedural hub will help. If you go back to your office, you should find—which was sent to you, carefully taking account of feedback that doing things at the beginning of a parliament was good, about six weeks in—a booklet listing everything we have done. You will have pages on the intranet. We have rather dialled back because, as discussed with the Administration Committee last year, we wanted to be demand-led. We are responsive to what Members want.

Q210 **Michael Fabricant:** I do not think six weeks in is a very peak period for new Members of Parliament, the very people you are aiming at. Six weeks in, they are just about getting into their mailbag. If you are new Member of Parliament, you often get letters from constituents who feel they have an issue that was not handled well by the previous Member of Parliament, probably because there is not an answer, probably because the answer they got from the previous Member of Parliament was not to their satisfaction. They say, "Right, I will have a go with the new Member of Parliament". This is not a question, Chair, but I am going to suggest maybe you now contact them again, because you might find—but then you might not—that their attention will be more open to external stimuli. Six weeks in, they will be snowed under. Is that not obvious?

Eve Samson: Nothing in this is obvious. Partly because one of the things that we were interested in was whether Members would want to do something—it was to gauge demand for off-site events in October in the event there was no demand, but there needs to be a lead-in. We will certainly contact people again. One of the things that we have been doing is having stands in Portcullis House, for example, regularly, so people can come by.

Q211 **Chair:** To be fair, your biggest problem is the old one of leading a horse to water. MPs just drink alcohol. They do not drink knowledge. They will not take notice of what you have.

Eve Samson: I think we have a lot of competition, and I do not mind the competition. Like all the All-Party Parliamentary Group. We thought people would want a lot of subject-related briefing, but there are lots of APPGs. People did not come to us so much for—

Q212 **Chair:** Could I give you a last simple question? A lot of us come from local government. Are you better off if you have come from local government, or do you have to unlearn everything because it is different?

Eve Samson: You are better placed to answer than me, particularly since local government structures have now changed.

Chair: Thank you very much.

Examination of witnesses

Marcial Boo, Chief Executive, Victoria Elliott, Programme and Projects Manager, and Vicky Fox, Director of MP Support Services, Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority.

Q213 **Chair:** Would you like to make an opening statement or go straight into questions?

Marcial Boo: If I just may introduce my colleagues, I am Marcial Boo, chief executive of IPSA, and Vicky Fox here is the director of MP Support Services. She joined after the general election, but she is responsible now for providing the support to MPs and co-ordinating that and improving that over time. Victoria Elliott was here during the general election. She is the programme manager at IPSA and co-ordinated all of the work that we did during the general election and can answer points of detail on the way that we manage general election process if necessary.

Q214 **Mark Tami:** Can we look at pre-election preparation? What did you do to involve Members and staff in how you approached the election and obviously leading on afterwards?

Marcial Boo: We started the preparation for the general election about 18 months in advance. We had a programme that we managed. We had MPs at the heart of that so we decided very early on to have some activity for new MPs, some activity for departing MPs and activity for returning MPs. Six months in advance of the election we recruited temporary staff to make sure that we had support for the new MPs and departing MPs.

I will ask Victoria to answer the specific question about the involvement of MPs and their staff in advance.

Victoria Elliott: I think we spoke to a number of individual MPs to run some of our early plans past them as Marcial said.

Q215 **Mark Tami:** How many? Sorry to interrupt.

Victoria Elliott: Sixty. Vicky can answer that.

Marcial Boo: Obviously, in the immediate run up to the general election we spoke to all 90 MPs who had declared that they would be standing down in advance of the election. Then from the 7 May 2015, onwards we were engaged with MPs, and their staff, on a pretty much permanent basis.

Q216 **Mark Tami:** Okay. You bigged up the website and that was a success and all that sort of thing running up to it but why did you not roll out the other stuff as well rather than just saying the website was a great success? Why did you not trial some of the other things? I am thinking in

particular the travel subsistence and relocation was not in place at the start of Dissolution when you obviously knew when Dissolution was coming. It did not come as a shock.

Marcial Boo: Sorry, you are talking about the guidance that we gave out to MPs.

Mark Tami: Yes.

Marcial Boo: In advance, we tried to work out what would be most helpful for MPs and indeed we were communicating with MPs well over a year in advance of the general election about Dissolution guidance, some of the things that would be coming into place, the things that they were to bear in mind. We had meetings with MPs along the lines of what would happen if they were to be defeated so that they had some understanding of what they might need to do. We certainly did a lot of communication—

Q217 **Mark Tami:** I know from speaking to colleagues, some of whom were defeated, that there was much confusion over what people could claim or could not claim in terms of travelling and whether they could they come here, and how many times. It was just as if IPSA were making it up as they were going along quite frankly.

Marcial Boo: We certainly were not doing that but in our own report that we put on the website, we did acknowledge that some of our Dissolution guidance could be clearer. Vicky, did you want to say something?

Vicky Fox: Dissolution guidance was published a year out so it was not just the website where the information came from. There was also a letter sent to all MPs a year before the election and then it was supplemented by all the additional measures that Marcial has mentioned.

Q218 **Mark Tami:** Yes, but there is a difference between publishing and how it works in reality and there was clearly an element of a different sort of guidance being given and, yes, okay or, no, which was not and it was not clear. The point I am trying to get across is that it was not as if there was an election just suddenly sprung on people. You knew when the election was coming. Why was it not in place?

Vicky Fox: I think it was in place but I think the question is about something else, which was, was it the right information at the right time. I think in our lessons-learnt document that was something we did acknowledge, that the Dissolution guidance could have been clearer.

The other thing is you cannot always anticipate some of the practical issues that come up so you write a piece of guidance that does not cover every scenario and that is something also that we learnt from the last general election.

Q219 **Mark Tami:** I remember one example of someone: you refused to cover their travel and you said that they needed much more proof than a sitting MP would have. I just wonder why you took such a strange approach, quite frankly.

Marcial Boo: The two biggest lessons that we learnt during the general election was that first our systems and processes were a bit clunky and needed to be updated. Secondly, some of our rules were a little bit too restrictive. So immediately after the general election, and indeed in the whole of 2016, we have implemented a wholesale upgrade of our IT systems so the processes and systems can be improved. We ran a consultation on the rules of the scheme themselves so that where we have seen that there are some restrictive rules in place, the IPSA board can take some decisions to improve those. Those sets of improvements, both of our systems and our rules, will be coming out in 2017 but it was necessary for us during the general election to apply the rules that we had at that moment.

Q220 **Mark Tami:** IPSA, I just think for its size and for the number of people it seems to employ, dealing with 650 people and you cannot get that right or cannot get that in place, it does seem somewhat odd.

Marcial Boo: I think that overall we did support both the 182 MPs who left the House and the 182 MPs who joined, effectively. We got them all on the payroll. We supported them in the recruitment of their staff, all the new ones, and the redundancy of the former staff.

There were a whole lot of things that we did do right. It was our first general election. We did learn lessons. We published our findings. We have been very transparent about that. It was very clear that we needed to improve our systems and processes and some of our rules and that is exactly what we are intending to do.

Q221 **Martyn Day:** I am one of the new Members that came in after the election and I would certainly agree with some of the comments made that the initial period, when we had a dedicated person who was very helpful at the beginning, but that stopped after a few months and ironically it stopped for me before I had a constituency office in place and before I had new staff. So just at the point where I had my first three months' worth of bills to claim back I ceased to have a dedicated piece of support.

Marcial Boo: I do accept that point. When we were planning for the general election—it was our first—we decided to bring in some temporary staff. We brought them in January, February 2015 to train up in advance of the election and we thought that by October we would no longer need them and obviously mindful of taxpayers' money we set up contracts on a short-term basis. In the event it turns out, and this is something that we have learnt, MPs, when they are first elected, as you have heard from many witnesses here, were swamped with information, learning the ropes and then they went away for the summer, had a deserved rest and then they came back in September after the conference season just at the time when we were losing our staff. We certainly learnt that there is a need for a second bit of input to new MPs in the autumn term, after the summer recess, when they are beginning to get to grips with renting an office, hiring staff and all of the things that you just alluded to. That is absolutely right.

Q222 **Martyn Day:** I am glad to hear that. Just as a follow-up to that, I would hope that that additional sort of second tier of support will cover training for the Member's staff on how to use the systems because I know I certainly get my staff to put through all claims on that on my behalf.

Marcial Boo: Again, I absolutely agree. I know that this Committee has heard a lot of evidence about the need to support MPs' staff and I wholeheartedly endorse that and I am very happy to talk to questions on those issues if the Committee would like me to.

Q223 **Chair:** If, as we mentioned before, there are programmes run for staff down here we would be able to bring them down here and they may have to stay the night. That all be picked up?

Marcial Boo: That is correct. We do also, on IPSA's front, and I know that the House of Commons does this as well, travel around the country to provide support to MPs and their staff. Since the general election, I believe that we have had 33 separate visits or roadshows to different parts of the country, all nations of the United Kingdom, to provide support and that is certainly something that we intend to carry on doing.

Q224 **Mark Tami:** Will IPSA pay for the hotel and whatever directly, or do MPs have to pay for that and then claim it back?

Marcial Boo: If it is a parliamentary cost then in the normal way you would submit a claim and it would be paid, yes.

Q225 **Mark Tami:** So MPs have to pay that first?

Marcial Boo: If it is training for staff to support them in their roles, yes, that is right.

Q226 **Mark Tami:** Okay. So we would have to pay the hotels and everything first.

Marcial Boo: You have a payment card so you are not out of pocket.

Q227 **Mark Tami:** I do not have a payment card because I do not—

Marcial Boo: We provide payment cards.

Q228 **Mark Tami:** I know but they are not—we will not bother to go into that but—

Marcial Boo: I completely acknowledge that there is cashflow issue for MPs, which is why we have an arrangement with Barclaycard to provide MPs with a payment card so that they are not out of pocket because obviously we do not want MPs necessarily to have to make all of these payments on their own and then wait for the five or six working days that on average it takes for us to reimburse them.

Q229 **Mark Tami:** Why could you not have a system in place where training is something different that was paid out of some sort of central budget or something?

Marcial Boo: There are central budgets in the House of Commons, which are for training, but we take the view, as is in the statute, MPs are

independent officeholders. It is for them to determine how they want to use their budget, what training their staff need. It could be that one Member of Parliament feels that he or she needs to have staff who are trained in financial management—

Q230 **Mark Tami:** With respect, if one of your staff went on a training course you would not pay for it, would you, and then claim it back?

Marcial Boo: No. That is right because—

Q231 **Mark Tami:** But you expect us to do that.

Marcial Boo: The nature of IPSA as a statutory body is different from the nature of an MP as an independent officeholder.

Mark Tami: Okay, fine.

Q232 **Michael Fabricant:** In fairness, I know people who work for companies who have credit cards—I am not referring on this occasion to John Lewis. Nissan in fact give credit cards to their staff, but if they do not use the credit card and spend out of their own money, they claim back. I will say one thing for it: it used to take a month before I got repaid and now you are very prompt but that is the only nice thing I will say otherwise I will be debugged by my colleagues.

Marcial Boo: I am very grateful for the positive comment from the Committee.

Q233 **Chair:** You said that you had induction sessions for 92% of new Members.

Marcial Boo: Yes.

Q234 **Chair:** How did you measure the effectiveness? Did they come in and go to sleep or did you feel that got something into their heads?

Victoria Elliott: We had regular weekly reports on how many people had been trained and whether it was MPs or MPs' staff and that included qualitative feedback. Then we did a wider review via a survey and interviews of new MPs, departing MPs and returning MPs. Those two things together gave us the indicators that we were looking for.

Q235 **Chair:** What about your quick guides? You said they were useful. How do you know they were useful?

Victoria Elliott: Again, I have to go on the basis of the two things that I have mentioned, which is feedback via IPSA staff who come back and compile a report on a weekly basis that is fed into initially a daily planning and monitoring group—that then dropped down to monthly. Beyond that, the survey in the autumn and the in-depth interviews that we did with a number of MPs and former MPs.

Q236 **Chair:** If you get a real problem and it has all gone pear-shaped and the Member has gone up the wall and so on, do you pull it in at a senior level to try to find out what has gone wrong?

Victoria Elliott: Generally or within the election?

Chair: Generally.

Marcial Boo: Yes, is the answer to that. Yes. We have a formal escalation process that, on the operation side, comes through Vicky who manages the whole of the operations team, and senior managers—Vicky, and I too, as necessary, become involved in individual cases. We also have a weekly meeting. This is all internal but we have a weekly meeting where we just have a catch-up between different parts of the organisation to make sure that we are dealing with high profile or difficult cases in a consistent way.

Q237 **Mark Tami:** What do you do to help a new MP setting up an office, and their staff, bearing in mind that neither will probably have much of an idea about what to do?

Vicky Fox: A new MP will have an account manager who will speak to them. Immediately after the general election, every new MP had a meeting with a member of IPSA in the first week. Whenever it happens, whether it is a by-election or after an election, they will be given all the crucial information that they need straightaway, things like logins and information about the payment card. Then they will get their ongoing support from their account manager. That will include on the phone, through the advice line. It will include meetings and it includes their staff as well.

Q238 **Mark Tami:** Does that include finding an office or help with finding an office, or what is suitable as an office, or security advice around a type of office or location? Does it involve that or not?

Vicky Fox: Others will know better than me because I wasn't here immediately after the general election but I think we give people pointers in the right direction but we do not find an office and we certainly do not recommend particular spaces as offices or not.

Q239 **Mark Tami:** Bearing in mind it will probably be the staff member up there who is there who has to try to do that, you do not give that sort of support to them.

Vicky Fox: I think that is beyond our remit because we are not specialists in 650 different constituencies as to where the right area is for an office to be.

Marcial Boo: As you will know yourself, different MPs choose to take a different approach to this. I have visited many MPs in their constituencies myself over the two and a half years I have been in post. Some like to have a shopfront with their name over the door. Some prefer a managed office in a light-industrial estate for example and then they run constituency events in church halls or what have you. It is partly up to the individual MP. What we do is we set a budget that enables MPs to rent appropriate accommodation in their constituency. We do benchmark statistics of office rental around the country, and we do have a process for making sure that in individual cases where there is something

exceptional happening and there are particular costs, we can meet those too. In general, it is less than formal.

Q240 **Mark Tami:** As the Accommodation Whip here I would beg to differ on that and I think there are major problems and this is causing the House all sort of problems, particularly for London-based MPs who represent London seats. Some of them are finding trying to get office accommodation very difficult, which is driving them into the House, which is causing us all problems because IPSA has not taken a realistic approach to rents.

Marcial Boo: I would say that of the office-cost budget, which is there for MPs to use to rent accommodation, there are only 10 MPs that overspent that budget in the last financial year.

Q241 **Mark Tami:** With respect, that is completely different—yes, because they have overspent but a lot of MPs do not overspend because they do not get into that position in the first place because they do not have offices in their seats because the rents are too expensive.

Marcial Boo: On average 31% of their office-cost budget was spent on rent so there is clearly room there. I do accept that there are some MPs who chose to use the space in the Palace of Westminster to accommodate their staff because it is “free”. It is not subject to our budget cap. I do understand that there are issues but we do thorough research on the levels of office rents around the country when setting our budgets.

Q242 **Mark Tami:** We used to have it that you could transfer money—the office costs to the staff, and you could move them either way, which you do not allow. Are you looking at that in trying to solve this problem?

Marcial Boo: Again, it is in line with the Treasury’s financial guidelines to all public bodies, which is not to allow bodies to via money from one budget to another. Again, like all public bodies we do ask that MPs stick within their office-cost budgets and within their staffing budget separately.

Q243 **Mark Tami:** So your view is the only reason that MPs come in here is because they want to use the stuff that is free.

Marcial Boo: No, there are all kinds of reasons. Clearly, some London MPs find it more convenient to have their staff located here. As you heard—

Q244 **Mark Tami:** But you believe that the funding is perfectly adequate for them to have offices in their constituencies.

Marcial Boo: We review levels of funding every year. We put advice to IPSA’s board. They reach a view. They are reaching a view now in respect of the consultation that we ran last year on all aspects of the scheme, and clearly if there are issues then we will address them in the annual budget uplift that we give to MPs.

Q245 **Michael Fabricant:** How can you set a budget for the whole of the United Kingdom when you know, because you say you have done the

research, that when you look at analyses, costs of rent in Leeds are very different from Birmingham and of course are very different from central London? So how can you set an overall budget for the United Kingdom when you know full well that costs vary within the United Kingdom?

Then you get the distortion that Mr Tami has already said—that what you think demonstrates that people are operating within the budget is simply that they have been forced to take alternative, less appropriate, action, whether it be putting them in the House of Commons or maybe not having anywhere at all, which means that their constituents are not so well served.

Marcial Boo: Again, we do look at evidence around the country and I accept, of course, that every single constituency will have a different market structure. Some will have lots of office accommodation, some will not and so on. In some cases I have been to the offices myself and I have seen what they are like. I was visiting an MP on Friday morning last week.

When we set the budget, we do not set it at the lowest possible level. We set it at a level that we believe is commensurate with MPs across the country being able to find something appropriate for them to do their jobs. To the extent that we have evidence that suggests that the levels of budgets are not sufficient then absolutely we will take that into consideration when we are setting the budget for the next financial year. I am very happy to take representations of evidence of rental levels in different parts of the country to help us to set the budget right but at the moment the evidence that we have seen, both from professionals in the property business and from individual MPs, does indicate that broadly speaking the level of office rents is appropriate notwithstanding the fact that the board is about to make decisions about next year's 2017-18 office budgets.

Q246 **Michael Fabricant:** I still do not understand what you are saying. Are you saying that you take if not a median, then a level and say okay but then we will know that X%, maybe 10 or 20 Members of Parliament, will never be able to afford it? Or do you say, well the most expensive rent is here so we will make sure that everybody can afford it, including those in the most expensive area? What I do not understand, given those questions, is why you just do not say in certain areas the rent allowance will be this. I am not saying you should do it constituency by constituency but that you say, just like one has London weighting, that you have a Birmingham rate or a Leeds or a York rate, or whatever, because there are such huge variations for the reasons that you pointed out in terms of availability of office space and indeed economic activity within that particular area.

Marcial Boo: We do have a differential rate for London and for the rest of the country.

Q247 **Michael Fabricant:** Yes, but you know that—

Mark Tami: Sorry, if you take my seat, the next-door seat is Chester,

and the rents in Chester are massively higher than my seat but you treat them exactly the same.

Marcial Boo: We set the budget at a level where the Chester seat would be able to afford accommodation that would be—

Q248 **Mark Tami:** But they struggle to do that.

Marcial Boo: Again, that is where we rely on receiving evidence from the two sources. We cannot, here at IPSA, just pluck a number out of the air. We do need to rely on facts that we receive from people in the property business and from MPs themselves. We do know, for example, in Edinburgh, to take one example, in coterminous constituencies, exactly the point you are making, there are vastly different property markets. In one seat in Edinburgh in particular it is extremely difficult to find appropriate accommodation for an office and we do have a mechanism for addressing issues like that, which is a contingency process, so that if an MP comes to us and says, "Look, in this constituency it is—"

Q249 **Mark Tami:** You used the term "overspend".

Marcial Boo: Yes, and I was using that as evidence—

Q250 **Mark Tami:** The term "overspend" implies that somebody has done something wrong, effectively, and you have had to bail them out. That is what it implies.

Marcial Boo: If we set a budget at a particular level and we know statistically that 31% of that budget, on average, goes towards rent and that there is the remaining 70% or so, 69%, which is for other matters the MP knows at the beginning of the year what their budget is and that it is their responsibility to manage the budget through to the end of the financial year, and only 10 out of 650 MPs have overspent, then we do take the view that it is the MPs' responsibility to make sure that they have managed within that budget through the financial year.

Q251 **Chair:** You would get the response from the receipts that you get and you will be doing that for the next financial year because we are very sensitive to the word "overspend". We have the *Daily Mail*, our friends, who will interpret that their way. So, you do adapt?

Marcial Boo: Say again?

Chair: You do adapt?

Marcial Boo: MPs adapt in terms of—

Q252 **Chair:** No. What I am getting at is that you presumably learn and budget from the experience we have just heard from Mark here that Chester is different from his own neighbourhood so if at the beginning of the year that is not built in—and I am just using Chester as an example—you will adapt it so that the following year you will have recognised the changes and the word "overspend" will not come in because you will have shifted the budget.

Marcial Boo: You are talking about IPSA making adjustments, are you?

Chair: Yes.

Marcial Boo: Yes, we do set the budgets every year. IPSA's board sets the budgets every year. They are about to do that this month and we will—

Q253 **Chair:** Will that reflect the demands that you may not have been able to predict?

Marcial Boo: It will reflect the evidence that we have of changes in the cost of office rental across the country.

Chair: Okay. That will do for the moment.

Q254 **Martyn Day:** I was intrigued by the benchmarking of office rents and I want to inquire about how you went about benchmarking and what type of properties it was you were looking at. I know from looking at my own constituency I finally did get a good office location that met the requirements but initially I had difficulty finding something that would have had disabled access, ground floor, make it accessible to constituents. I could have relatively easy rents if I was going to go up a stair and up a back close, or whatever, but I was not prepared to do that. I am intrigued as to what types of properties you have benchmarked because I think that is essential to the availability of an office. There may be plenty office accommodation well within budget but it just might not be suitable for modern purposes and constituent access.

Marcial Boo: MPs choose to have offices in different ways and most MPs do need to make sure that the public can access their offices although some choose to meet the public in other premises. We talk to property professionals and we seek their advice. We tell them more or less what MPs look for in an office and we get their advice from different parts of the country. I am happy to send you some more details about how we go about doing that after this meeting.

Q255 **Keith Vaz:** Mr Boo, is there any work being done on procurement, a newly elected MP, who may be given a recommendation on a deal that IPSA has been able to secure with, for example, a mobile phone company? Not necessarily telling the Member, "You have to have this deal" but a list of various suppliers who are prepared to supply at a lower rate because they are doing a deal with IPSA or because they have access to 650 Members? Have you looked into that as a way of cutting down the cost of the office-costs allowance?

Marcial Boo: It is a very good point and it is something that we are debating ourselves. On the one hand, I do absolutely acknowledge the point that you are making, which is that sometimes there are economies of scale whether it is on broadband provision or telephones or whatever it happens to be, office stationery, where by having a general contract for all MPs to access it can be cheaper. However, at the same time it is not really our role to dictate to MPs how they ought to go about spending their money. What we do, with the House, is in some areas, as we do with some providers of office stationery, have some travel bookings as well. We have some companies that we make direct payments to. MPs

can avail themselves of those opportunities if they wish. However, if MPs do wish to buy their office stationery within their constituency, from their constituents, then they can choose to do that too and we will still make that payment.

We do want to encourage MPs to think about value for money and to help them and to support them in doing so, with the House of Commons, but without making that an obligation.

- Q256 **Keith Vaz:** The second very quick point is an issue I have raised with you before, which is there seems to be no recognition in the staffing budget of a career structure for very senior members of staff. Sometimes, for example, if a Member retires and the member of staff remains they will only remain if they are remunerated at a certain level. Of course, the standard starting salary is £23,000 I think for London. Is there any opportunity for you to look at the nature of the staffing budget so that it reflects the experience staff may have? Of course, in Congress you can have very senior people who act as Chief of Staff for Congressmen or Senators but we do not seem to recognise that here. Can we look at that as a possibility because people do tend to go off because they cannot get above £40,000?

Marcial Boo: Again, I accept that. When IPSA was created we did conduct some benchmarking work to try to find parallel roles for MPs' staff and set the salary bands according to that evidence. We have not done that since then but we did do that again at the end of 2016. We got an independent report that provided us with benchmarking data on MPs' staff salaries, whether they were caseworkers or researchers or office managers. That advice, which we received independently, is going to IPSA's board at the end of this month and they will use that and other information to determine a salary budget for MPs' staffing budget for April 2017.

Keith Vaz: Thank you, Mr Boo. Thank you, Chairman.

- Q257 **Chair:** Some Members, I understand, had their resettlement grants delayed due to ongoing disputes over individual claims resulting from conflicting advice from IPSA. How are we going to get over this ahead of the next Dissolution?

Marcial Boo: There are two things to say to that, first in respect of the experience that we had in 2015, which I am happy to talk about. The second part of your question was about getting over that before the next general election. Again, we asked questions about this very issue in the consultation that we published in May last year. We have already put advice to our board about how to change the rules around resettlement payments for the next general election so that we can acknowledge financial need for departing MPs. We will be announcing the new rules in March because we did find that there were some MPs who took time to resolve their financial affairs in 2015 and because we felt that it was important to the taxpayer that all MPs' financial affairs were settled before we gave them their resettlement payment we said, as the House had said in 2010 indeed, MPs would only receive their resettlement

payment once their financial affairs were sorted out. I know that that caused some delays in some cases but the vast majority, 90% I believe, of resettlement payments were made by the September of 2015.

Q258 **Chair:** Those MPs who are defeated, some of them had long delays before they got their resettlement grant; some of them had no income so there are two points. First, can you get over that and would you consider doing a part payment in advance?

Marcial Boo: To the second part of that question, yes. We are talking to our board about the possibility of doing that. That would require a change of the rules but that is what the board is there to do. We are talking to them about that now. 90% of MPs got their resettlement payments by September of 2015.

Q259 **Michael Fabricant:** Keith Vaz has already asked some of the questions that I was going to ask you. I just make the observation that I like the fact that you recognise that Members of Parliament work in different ways and that is right and proper. I also like the fact that you are going to investigate bulk buying but will not enforce it on anyone. I would offer you a warning, because you mentioned broadband, and the House of Commons has just thrown its hands up in dismay saying they are no longer going to offer a standard broadband package because, depending on what part of the country you live in depends on whether Virgin or BT or somebody else provides better solutions so just be aware of that.

Chair: They are very aware of that; we have a report coming back and discussions are underway.

Michael Fabricant: That is good to hear and presumably you will be adjusting your budget, by the way, because those of us, I think all of us, who have broadband paid for by the House of Commons are no longer going to have it paid for by the House of Commons so presumably you are going to make an allowance, additional, because that will have to now be paid for through IPSA.

Chair: They already do for most of us.

Marcial Boo: Yes, 200 MPs already pay for broadband themselves so 200 MPs already manage to pay for that out of their own budgets but I accept the point you are making. Again, we have provided advice to our board that the House of Commons is inclined to stop the broadband contract and that may generate financial pressures on a few hundred MPs to pay for broadband themselves. Rest assured that we are aware of the issue as the Chair says.

Q260 **Martyn Day:** This is an issue that I have experienced myself so I have some direct knowledge about it and have raised it with the IT department; it is the inability to pool the two different budgets. When you buy through the IT department's own dedicated budget, you get all the additional security features on a piece of kit, which is the bit that I would like. Or, we can go down to Tesco, wherever, and just buy anything off the shelf and put it to our office-costs allowance. I have held off because I need to get an additional piece of kit but I would rather not get

something that does not have all the security functions. I would be happy to have a bit of my office allowance top up the IT department's budget because at the end of the period it is going to be obsolete equipment anyway but it would give me all the security features that I think would be much more valuable to me connecting into the parliamentary estate, and for my staff, than just a machine that we can get on the internet and send our e-mails from. Can we get something done to allow that degree of flexibility? Otherwise there are several hundred pounds-worth of unused budget sitting in an IT account that we cannot buy anything meaningful from, and we will be spending money to get a piece of equipment—I hesitate to say “substandard equipment”—that is not as secure.

Marcial Boo: My understanding is that the digital services here have a budget that you are able to use. You can also buy IT equipment from the IPSA budget. You can buy the same secure equipment from the same catalogue using the IPSA budget as you can the House budget.

Martyn Day: I was not aware of that. I have not heard that—

Chair: It was worth you coming just for that.

Martyn Day: Yes, so I appreciate hearing that although it would be nice if you could just pool the two budgets and fully utilise them.

Marcial Boo: We have mentioned broadband already. We have already made some changes on insurance policies because there are half a dozen areas like this one where there are two budgets, one in the House of Commons and one IPSA budget. We are liaising with the House of Commons authorities and trying to make life as easy as possible for MPs so that it is clear to you how to get the equipment that you need, whether it is IT equipment or an office, to help you to do your job effectively and you do not need to worry about all this because you just are enabled to do your job.

Some of this, as the Chair is aware in respect of broadband, is not straightforward and we need to work through some issues but there is goodwill on all sides and we are trying to work to solutions case by case.

Chair: Good ending, Marcial. Thank you very much.

Marcial Boo: You are very welcome. Thank you very much.