

**Written evidence submitted by the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority (IPSA)
(SPC0042)**

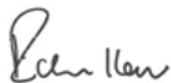
**IPSA's Response to the Second Report of the Speaker's Conference on the employment conditions
of Members' staff**

Please find enclosed our response to the Speaker's Conference on the employment conditions of Members' staff. On behalf of the Board, I would like to thank you and your colleagues for an interesting and constructive report which will help to fulfil our mutual objective of improving the working conditions for MP staff who play such an important role in the delivery of our democracy. I am pleased that we were able to support the Conference's work both through giving evidence and providing the clerking team with data and insight.

At the heart of our response is a commitment to continue and strengthen our collaboration with the House. We therefore were particularly pleased to see the Conference's recommendations regarding the strengthening of the Members' Services Team and the expansion of its services. We now work very closely with that team as we all navigate the tricky employment landscape that Members Staff are in, and I know from feedback from staff representatives that this collaboration has produced real benefit in more coherent support for MP offices and better understanding of the challenges they face.

We hope that our response will reassure you and your colleagues that we take the issues raised in the report very seriously and are ready to play our part in bringing about positive change, and work on several of the recommendations is already underway. Please be assured that everyone at IPSA is committed to improve further the working conditions for MP staff.

Yours sincerely,



Richard Lloyd

Chair

Recommendation – Paragraph 63

In line with our core principle about access to support services, we recommend that the House Administration expand the remit of the Parliamentary Health and Wellbeing Service, and the role of the Workplace Adjustments Case Manager, to offer services to Members' staff on an equivalent basis to Members and House staff. This could be achieved by offering such services for a fee, paid for by Members using their allowance with IPSA.

As stated in the report, the current position is that IPSA provides funding for reasonable adjustments outside the parliamentary estate, with the House of Commons responsible for funding reasonable adjustments within the parliamentary estate. However, sometimes the distinction is not clear cut, and we take a pragmatic approach and work with the House of Commons to ensure reasonable adjustments are funded.

We wholeheartedly agree with the Conference that Members' Staff should have access to the support they need in the most efficient and effective manner possible and have been working closely with the Wellness Working Group over recent years towards that ambition. IPSA would be happy to work with the PHWS and other House colleagues to see how we might further support the extension of services to Members' Staff. We are mindful of the need to reduce IPSA-related workload on offices and so would be keen to explore a range of funding options, beyond the suggested subscription model.

Recommendations – Paragraphs 72 and 75

We recommend that, to minimise the risk of misinterpretation, IPSA publish information on staff salaries and office accommodation costs separately from Members' own salaries and expenses, making clear that the funding is part of the support provided for Members to conduct Parliamentary work and that this provides an important public benefit. (Paragraph 72)

We recommend that the IPSA budget for Members' staff travel, and training be reported on as a whole rather than on a per-Member basis (for example, in the way security costs are aggregated when published). (Paragraph 75)

Earlier this year we launched a project to look at how our data is published as we are aware of the impact that misleading interpretation of business and staffing costs can have on Members, their staff and confidence in democracy. The research we have undertaken as part of this project has confirmed that transparency without understanding can result in ill-informed commentary about our data, a chilling effect whereby legitimate expenditure is not claimed and the weaponisation of

business and staffing costs to undermine individuals. Having considered the outcomes so far, IPSA will be providing greater contextualisation of our data, more visualisation to improve comprehension and plan to consult on changes to how we categorise and aggregate data. Members' staff have already submitted their views to this work, and the Conference's recommendations will be addressed as part of this project.

Recommendation – Paragraph 98

We recommend that the House Administration and IPSA amend their data sharing agreement to provide for IPSA to share data (in real time where possible) on new starters, leavers and sickness absence with the MST.

We already share starters and leavers data with the MST under our Data Sharing Agreement, and we are happy to work with them to support their proposed enhanced role subject to relevant data protection considerations on both sides.

Recommendation – Paragraph 134

We recommend that IPSA consult on suitable criteria to provide additional funding to a Member to backfill the work undertaken by their staff, where the member of staff is undertaking a role which benefits Members' staff as a whole.

In recent years IPSA provided backfill support for a secondee who worked with the MST on wellness issues, and we understand the value that comes from this peer support and insight. We are happy to support this recommendation and will draw up proposals, engaging with Members' Staff representatives.

Recommendation – Paragraph 152

We encourage IPSA to undertake a study of the work of Members' offices, in order to establish a clearer picture of the demands placed on Members' staff.

We have made significant progress in recent years in building up our knowledge of the day-to-day demands placed on Members' Staff, including regular collaboration with staff representatives, attendance at MST's office manager meetings, our own MP Staff User Group and through informal channels. The additional funding provided to offices impacted by COVID or the Afghanistan situation in 2021 should give the Conference reassurance that we understand and respond to workload pressures. As the Conference Report points out, we have also increased the staffing budget in response to wider concerns about caseloads.

IPSA has also responded positively to the reports produced by the Wellness Working Group on pressures facing Members' Staff and very much value the dialogue we have with them. We are not complacent, however, and will work with staff representatives to establish what further we can do in the coming period.

Recommendation – Paragraph 154

We ask IPSA to provide clear and accessible guidance on both the criteria for securing contingency funding and on the application process, and to include anonymised examples of cases where additional funding has been provided. We recommend that IPSA make the process for applying for contingency funding more straightforward and lower the threshold for qualification.

As outlined in our 2023/24 [Business Plan](#), we recognise that a more flexible approach to budgets is required and we are currently scoping alternative approaches to avoid unintended consequences, exacerbation of poor practice, staffing budget risks and the impact on Treasury and NAO financial reporting and forecasting. We will also address the additional challenges such as varying budget according to need and our desire to secure greater value for money as well as the appropriate degree of flexibility. As part of this thinking, we will also be considering the role of contingency funding and in the meantime, we will revise the current guidance to address the concerns raised in the Conference Report.

Recommendation – Paragraph 156

We agree that Members' staff should not be working unpaid overtime and recommend that IPSA work with Member's offices (supported by the MST) to provide clear guidance about the acceptable parameters for overtime and adequate payment.

We share the Conference's concern over this issue. Whilst conscious that the decision for granting overtime rests with the employing MP, we are happy to work with the Members' HR service to establish what further guidance might be of assistance.

Recommendations – Terms and Conditions (Paragraphs 159, 162, 163)

We recognise the legitimate concerns raised by Members' staff in relation to their terms and conditions. IPSA is currently undertaking a review of staffing matters. We recommend that IPSA takes note of the evidence submitted to the Conference and works closely with Members' staff to ensure its Scheme reflects the realities of their working lives and provides adequate and appropriate payment. (Paragraph 159)

We recommend that IPSA amend its Scheme to recognise previous service with another Member when calculating entitlements to redundancy or leave. It is acknowledged that an individual's eligibility for statutory entitlements, such as redundancy pay and family related leave and pay, are intrinsically linked to continuous service and are therefore not available to staff whose continuity of service is brought to an end by virtue of a change of Member. (Paragraph 162)

We recommend that IPSA consider providing contractual entitlements for both pay and leave, equivalent to the statutory schemes of redundancy, maternity, adoption, paternity and shared parental leave. Eligibility for such contractual entitlements should be calculated with reference to all concurrent periods of employment an individual has held with any Members. This would require amendment to the IPSA Scheme and their approval of templates for contracts. (Paragraph 163)

Last year we completed our triennial salary benchmarking exercise to ensure that MP' staff salary ranges are in line with comparable roles in other sectors. This resulted in some increased salary bands and a commitment to ensuring that all roles meet the Voluntary Living Wage. We have now embarked on the next phase of our work to review MP staffing matters which includes assessing career and pay progression, equality, regional pay including the existing London salary weighting, flexible working, living pensions, job descriptions and bandings as well as further salary benchmarking. The issues raised in these recommendations are already under active discussion, initially with MP staff representatives, and we hope to be able to consult next year on firm proposals.

Recommendation – Paragraph 164

We further recommend that IPSA investigate options for creating a scheme, comparable to the Civil Service Benevolent Fund, to support Members' staff who are unable to work due to ill-health.

Whilst we fully recognise the issue raised by this recommendation, there are legal and practical considerations to take into account in the creation of such a charitable fund, not least the statutory framework within which IPSA is required to work. We will consider options to achieve a similar outcome, however, drawing on the experience of schemes that currently operate in the public sector.

Recommendation – Paragraph 168

We welcome the development of the IPSA portal, but in order for it to be successful, IPSA must engage with both Members and their staff to design a system which is intuitive, user friendly and meets the real, rather than perceived, needs of Members and their staff. We have identified a number of simple changes which would immediately improve the user experience as follows:

- i) IPSA should allow Members to nominate two proxies (rather than one) to enable Westminster and constituency staff to deal with relevant matters.**
- ii) The portal should include a user-friendly tool to allow Members to visualise the on-costs associated with staff salaries, rather than having to calculate this manually.**
- iii) The portal should include real time and up to date data as to how much of the budget has been allocated/spent for the financial year.**
- iv) IPSA should endeavour to confirm budgets for the upcoming financial year as far in advance as possible.**

As part of our wider Improving IPSA Programme, we are currently developing an IPSA portal as the online access channel through which we deliver our service. The portal will be a gateway to a range of IPSA Online content sources that will be assembled in a simple to navigate and customised interface for presentation to the end user. It will be designed to allow easy access to budget views, spend against allowances including payment card spend, job descriptions and contract tools and open cases. There are also opportunities to widen the scope of the portal to create new cases via chat, email, or a Teams call and to create options for MPs and their staff to purchase goods and services from direct suppliers through the portal. We welcome the Conference's support for this important piece of work.

In response to feedback, we have endeavoured to be able to confirm budgets as early as possible. We are grateful to the Speaker's Committee on IPSA for their support in doing so. We are mindful that there is a balance between early confirmation of budgets and ensuring that our funding decisions are based on the most up-to-date economic data to ensure they are adequate for the next financial year.

Recommendation – Paragraph 169

We recommend that IPSA set up a joint user group with Members and their staff on improving customer service. The group should input into the design a portal which is fit for purpose - and meets the needs of Members in fulfilling their duties as an employer, as well as in their duties in Parliament and the constituency.

As mentioned above, we have well-established lines of communication and engagement with Members' Staff, and we discuss regularly issues of customer service with SCIPSA and the Administration Committee. We know that the Members' Services User Group, facilitated by the

MST, has proven to be a successful way of seeking feedback from House colleagues and are discussing with them how IPSA might develop a similar approach. We are committed to engaging closely with Members as we design and test new approaches to service delivery, including the IPSA Online portal.

Recommendation – Paragraph 170

We therefore recommend that IPSA: i) allocate a named account manager to each Member and ii) establishes a permanent presence on the Parliamentary estate to enable Members and their staff to access support and resolve queries.

IPSA already operates a named account manager for each Member. Our new organisational design brings together colleagues from across the organisation to focus on customer service and this has proven to be successful as MP and MP staff satisfaction with our services has increased in the past few years. We are not complacent, however, and our Business Plan publicly commits IPSA to improving customer service as one of core priorities.

In the past we did have IPSA staff on site in the House, but at that time we found that there were very few contacts with Members and their staff, and as a small organisation, it was not the most efficient way to support our customers. We do provide face-to-face training sessions for staff in regional locations and have deployed staff to Members' offices to assist with problems. We are considering new ways of communicating through our technology strategy including further exploiting the new Customer Relationship Management system we implemented in March 2022 to deliver intelligent help and support such as live chat, self-serve help and FAQs, community support and video calling. At the next General Election, our plan provides for fully trained staff to be present for the New Members Reception Area, and to assist departing Members, and we are considering how we might staff a drop-in service in the short-term.

Recommendation – Paragraph 175

The House Service should establish a joint Working Group with IPSA to consider how the provision of office accommodation could most effectively be centralised, to ensure value for money, a good standard of accommodation and a minimum level of security provision for all Members' offices, thus improving the working environments of Members' staff.

As part of our Improving IPSA Programme, we have begun a proof-of-concept pilot of total outsourced property management on a targeted number of leases that are about to expire. This will allow time for lessons learned and an understanding of scaling up opportunities ahead of the next

General Election. Any further options identified, in addition to outsourced property management, may also be tested in a similar way. Identifying suitable leases and piloting, as well as building evidence and seeking insight, will be done in close consultation with Members.

Recommendation – Paragraph 177

We encourage IPSA to think differently about its roles as a regulator and a provider of support services, so that staff working in a customer service role have a culture focused on supporting Members in delivering their constituency and Parliamentary functions, rather than acting as a barrier to efficient delivery of services. This could be achieved via an internal re-organisation of how IPSA manages its business and no changes to legislation would be required.

Over the past 12 months, we have conducted a root and branch review of IPSA's regulatory approach and service provision and IPSA's Board has approved a plan to further improve what we do and how we fulfil our statutory duties. This Programme, referenced here in our response to the Conference's recommendations, is about regulation through service. We are committed to finding the right balance between supporting parliamentary democracy, assuring the public, delivering value for money to the taxpayer and operating efficiently, as required by our statutory duties. We are intent on making the right decisions to enable MPs to fulfil their parliamentary duties while maintaining public trust and being as efficient, effective, and transparent as we can be.

November 2023