

Written evidence submitted by Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority

IPSA warmly welcomes the establishment of the Modernisation Committee and its strategic priorities.

In recent years, IPSA has publicly recognised the role it should play in promoting public trust and confidence in parliament, and has made a commitment to doing so in its current corporate strategy. This submission to the call for evidence by the Committee reflects the experience of IPSA and in particular the balance IPSA strikes between implementing our statutory duties towards supporting Members of the House of Commons, transparency, and assurance that value for public money is being obtained through our activities.

Driving up standards

The oversight and enforcement of standards in parliament is carried out by a relatively large number of bodies, although few have statutory independence. The experience of IPSA is that a clear remit, set out in statute, can help ensure that difficult decisions that might otherwise have to be taken by parliamentarians can be demonstrably and transparently done at arm's length from those who are directly affected by such decisions.

Provided this is communicated effectively, this can help assure the public that perceived or real conflicts of interest will be set aside on sensitive matters such as the remuneration of MPs and their staff.

An important starting point in the Committee's deliberations under this heading therefore might be to consider how any proposals for future improvements in standards can be delivered in a way that demonstrably ensures the independence of those charged with the development, oversight and enforcement of standards rules, subject to the overriding principle that parliament is sovereign.

Second, the Committee on Standards in the last parliament heard evidence of the confusion that exists among the public and parliamentarians as to the roles and responsibilities of the different bodies in the standards landscape.

There are numerous informal and formal channels of communication and data sharing agreements between these different bodies, and with the representatives of MPs and their staff. The efficient and timely sharing of information on a more formal footing could be considered as one way in which patterns of poor behaviour or the need for additional support for parliamentarians or their staff might be identified and acted on at the earliest possible opportunity.

There could also be more direct linkages drawn between different aspects of the standards regimes, where there is risk arising from the proliferation of rules or codes. For example, the current arrangements for oversight of all-party parliamentary groups has led to claims for IPSA funding for purposes that are arguably outwith the registered purpose of particular

groups. The reputational and funding risk associated with these groups was the subject of an inquiry by the Committee on Standards in the last parliament, but the rules governing these could usefully be re-examined.

Third, to reduce confusion about roles and to promote more efficient complaints handling or reporting, the relevant bodies could develop and participate in a public-facing portal including a guide to potential complainants as to what they can expect. Along with a shared commitment to good practice in complaints handling, for example timely and transparent updates as to progress in investigations, this would promote greater confidence in the system without the need for structural change.

Such a portal could reasonably be designed to host the range of relevant transparency measures, including IPSA's funding and interest-declaration reports, with appropriate contextualisation.

Fourth, Parliament is regarded externally by citizens as a single institution. A renewed approach to driving up standards should recognise that parallel and differing approaches to each House risks diluting the effectiveness and public confidence in the existing system.

One example of an existing voluntary approach to closer coordination between the two Houses is the application by the House of Lords of an equivalent uprating to the Lords' attendance allowance to that determined by IPSA for Members of the House of Commons ([House of Lords Allowance - House of Lords Business - UK Parliament](#)). The Committee could play an important role in promoting the development of further such common approaches with the House of Lords Commission. A further step would be to task the relevant bodies with finding efficiencies and common approaches within a sensible timescale.

Improving culture and working practices

IPSA has taken its responsibility to support improved culture and working practices very seriously, and in particular has recognised the need for collaborative working with House teams and representatives of MPs' staff.

To promote good working practices, we have mandated the use of IPSA model contracts and job descriptions as a condition of IPSA funding, introduced an automatic uprating to staff remuneration and salary bands, and begun more proactively to assist MPs with the procurement of offices that meet our standards for healthy and safe working. We are currently consulting on proposals to recognise MPs' staff past service, and to enable secondments between MPs' offices.

IPSA has also taken steps to enable MPs to support the wellbeing of their staff by providing dedicated funding without this being attributed to individual offices. We recognise that there is more we can do, in particular with regard to the way we meet our statutory duty to publish MPs' office expenditure. We are also currently consulting on proposals in this area, for example greater contextualisation and a different approach to the reporting of less material items of expenditure.

There have in the past been discussions about other dimensions of funding conditionality, for example the mandation of management training for MPs who wish to receive IPSA staffing budgets. IPSA's preferred route to the improvement of management practices is to work more closely with the House of Commons Members' and Members Staff Services Team to ensure that appropriate training is proactively offered and take-up is promoted. There are also proposals for a similar approach for MP office managers, and IPSA is ready to support any such initiatives.

There are other aspects of current working practices that have unintended consequences for IPSA's support. For example, we have long provided a dependant's allowance for those with young children but our Scheme differentiates on a geographical basis between those entitled to London accommodation and those expected to commute. We also implemented additional funding during the last Parliament to allow for MPs who need prolonged absence from the House, mainly focussed on parental absence (mostly akin to 'maternity leave') but also long-term sickness. Our aim is to treat Members fairly and consistently but with sensitivity as to their domestic circumstances. And we have amended the rules on the provision of taxi services to account for security concerns which often revolve around late night sitting.

Both of these issues can have unintended but disproportionate impacts on certain groups of Members, for example women and those with young families. To promote a family-friendly Parliament, which we are always willing to look at in terms of IPSA's rules, we encourage the Modernisation Committee to reflect on House working patterns and hours to address some of these impacts at source.

We would be happy to meet with the Committee to expand upon the views expressed in this submission should this be helpful.

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