

Written evidence submitted by The Members' and Peers' Staff Association (MAPSA)

Introduction

The Members' and Peers' Staff Association (MAPSA) is a cross-party, non-political organisation run by and for Members' staff, in all roles, whether they work full time, part time, as an intern, in the constituency, remotely, or in Westminster. We represent all staff of any political party, across both Houses, to ensure that all staffers working for Members have access to the best possible working environment, facilities, and support they need.

MAPSA welcomes the formation of the Modernisation Committee and the opportunity to contribute to its call for views on behalf of staff from the House of Commons. MAPSA has also encouraged staffers to make individual contributions to ensure as many voices are heard and can be considered by the Committee.

As a cross-party staff association, we believe we are uniquely placed to provide insight and feedback that represents a range of ideas, collective sentiments, and joint challenges that cuts across politics and boils down to the fundamental nature of our roles as staffers supporting MPs.

Our aim in this submission is to focus on the areas that staffers have identified as having the most impact and importance on their employment in line with the Committee's key strategic aims of driving up standards, improving culture and working practices, and reforming procedures to make the Commons more effective.

Driving up standards

ICGS

When it comes to the Committee's first aim of driving up standards, MAPSA believes there is an opportunity to strengthen and streamline the Independent Complaints and Grievance Scheme (ICGS), which was born from inappropriate and unacceptable workplace culture – ranging from bullying, harassment and sexual misconduct – and do everything to drive up standards expected within Parliament.

MAPSA is supportive of the ICGS' role in tackling inappropriate behaviour and conduct in our parliamentary workplaces. However, we are concerned that grievances faced by staff often do not meet the threshold to be raised to or considered seriously by the ICGS or are hard to quantify, such as 'casual' bullying. On the face of it, these grievances might only be shrugged off as isolated instances or unfortunate shortcoming by an employer when it comes to upholding best practice. Nonetheless, these cases, when viewed in the collective, can show a pattern of sustained misconduct or improper behaviour that would not be accepted in any other workplace. Regrettably, this behaviour is disproportionately tolerated given the unique nature of MPs being both the employer, and HR – or effectively, the judge and jury.

Staffers therefore face a gulf where they may not have faced egregious enough behaviour to go to ICGS with confidence, but do not have a proper, independent HR to turn to and raise their grievances or seek advice. This perpetuates a culture of poor yet accepted behaviour, because if a staffer leaves their role due to this, the next staffer is likely to suffer similar behaviour.

In this vein, MAPSA believes there is value in the House or IPSA, in assessing the ‘hot spots’ where staff turnover is high for a Member, and to understand why. It is also a reason MAPSA would like to see exit interviews by the House or IPSA, in their capacity as regulator, as standard practice for all Member’s offices and their outgoing staff. The Modernisation Committee has an opportunity to make this part of its mission of driving up standards.

MAPSA also believes political parties should have a greater role in ensuring bullying is not accepted or perpetuated from the onset. This starts with implementing and ensuring thorough recruitment of prospective and returning candidates at the selection stage prior to a general election. It is also mandating transparency in each party’s relationship with Parliament in relation to ongoing internal investigations of MPs for allegations of sexual misconduct, which further protects staff as well as constituents.

It is incumbent on each party and its MPs or parliamentary candidates to understand their responsibility as employers and instilling best practice to avoid scenarios of impropriety that is not only harmful to the health and wellbeing of staff, but also detrimental to the reputation of our democracy, our politics and parliament.

Mandatory training for Members of Parliament as employers

Due to competing priorities that are inherently baked into being an elected official, Members’ role and responsibilities as employers are often not treated as priorities. While some MPs have been employers before being elected, many do not have the experience or skills in this area, including management, recruitment, or career development, and staff suffer from this inexperience or disinterest.

Given the current employment arrangement where Members are the employers of their staff, it is critical that MPs are given proper HR and management training following a general election and throughout a Parliament. This, again, would protect MPs as employers and ensure staffers are protected and in a position to thrive in their work environment.

Staffers would like to see the implementation of meaningful onboarding for Members where the Behaviour Code, HR training, and GDPR training are not just best practice but are requirements for MPs as employers and controllers of constituents’ data. This should not just be at the onset of a new Parliament for a newly elected Member, but on a yearly basis – for all MPs – to ensure high standards are in place and there is a clear and robust education and understanding around protocol. It would also be beneficial to provide, and even require, ad hoc training throughout a Parliament. Mandatory training is an expectation in other workplaces that serve the public, and there is no reason the said cannot be said for Parliament.

The Modernisation Committee is in a position to instigate and implement this call for change in efforts to drive up standards that will have a positive impact on the employment of staffers as employees of MPs.

Improving culture and working practices

HR Service for Members' staff

MAPSA believes it is fundamental for the Modernisation Committee to advocate for an HR system for the staff of MPs.

The current system means that staff are in a precarious situation where the imbalance between employee and employer is so stark because the employer has access to HR and advice that an employee does not.

It is unreasonable that staff are not given the same support services as MPs when we are collectively funded by the taxpayer. An HR function for MP staff would ensure staffers, regardless of who they work for, can turn to HR to lodge a complaint against their MP or have a general grievance system in place, receive support and advice, and seek formal representation in a meeting. An HR would not, as it stands, replace the principal relationship between the MP as employer and the staff member as employee.

While we understand the outcome of the Speaker's conference included the creation of a trained HR Practitioner role for staff, we regret that this role does not go far enough for staff because it does not have the authority or teeth to fully represent us due to the House's perceived conflict of interest; the HR practitioner is only in a position to signpost staffers and is not the equivalent of the HR support that Members receive.

An independent HR would level up the rights of staffers, which the House, IPSA, and Members should welcome in their efforts of achieving fairness, equality, and creating a modern workplace. It would also lessen the burden on MPs, who must play the function of HR in conjunction with their duties related to their roles as elected officials.

If this cannot be achieved within the House or IPSA, it is critical that an independent HR body is created or hired in, as is the case with charities and small businesses that might not otherwise have a dedicated department.

In the event of periods of high staff turnover, IPSA or the House can recruit additional HR support accordingly. There is no reason MPs' staff should not be given day-to-day support in the event of larger staff turnover that might occur every 5 years as a result of a general election. This is not sufficient reasoning when there is a precedent of comparable governments or companies, which might go through administration or mass redundancies but are able to staff HR accordingly and give outgoing employees the statutory meetings and due diligence they are entitled to in accordance with the law.

Pay

Career and pay progression are also a priority for our members, and making sure that remuneration best reflects the dedication that goes into supporting constituents up and down the country. It is also important that the House supports training for staff and making sure that talent is not lost when a staffer feels they have timed-out in supporting their parliamentarian.

While we understand the Modernisation Committee cannot control pay and budgets, MAPSA strongly believes there is a place for the Committee to advocate to IPSA on the importance of pay in delivering outcomes.

This includes emphasising to IPSA the importance of allowing all staffers, if applicable, to reach the top of their pay bands within one office. The current budget does not allow this flexibility or recognition of length of service, thereby making it both difficult and competitive to retain experienced staff.

Employment conditions

MAPSA supports IPSA's recent proposals to acknowledge continuity of employment should staff move between Members' offices and hopes the Modernisation Committee sees its place in advocating for a reasonable break in service to be recognised. Staffers also strongly believe that all existing accrued rights and entitlements are maintained, including sick pay and annual leave, and hope the Committee can make representations on behalf of staffers on this front.

Accessibility

It is important to MAPSA that the Estate is accessible to everyone. While staffers understand there are longtime objectives that need to be addressed through the work of the Restoration and Renewal Committee, we expect basic accessibility to be in places for MPs, staffers, and the public alike. There is a level of accessibility for disabled and differently abled people that cannot be met due to the limitations of the building, such as which offices can be assigned or easy access to disabled bathrooms, and we look forward to the proposals and timelines that would enshrine accessibility as a cornerstone in 'the mother of all parliaments.'

With regards to parliamentary passes, staffers would like recognition for their roles and access to a pass to the Estate if they work for a Member. The current restrictions create a distinction and inequality within offices and prevents Members from receiving the full breadth of support their office requires with the ability of all staff, regardless of location, to come to the Estate and assist their Member and constituents in parliamentary business.

Staffers also believe there is a place for passes to be used in meetings within the constituency itself to, such as site meetings, tribunals, visiting homes for anyone who is housebound, etc. that would give credence to a staffer's role in supporting an MP and display professionalism. Formal ID is commonplace among other government workers and the private sector and would offer protection to both staffers and members of the public.

Equality and diversity

With the 2024 general election marking the most diverse Parliament in history, MAPSA is acutely aware that this representation is not reflected in the hiring practices or staffing of those same MPs and believe this could be rectified by mandating fair and open recruitment rather than just by promoting best practice.

MAPSA has called on IPSA to audit and publish staff equalities data to ensure that equalities pay gaps are monitored and addressed. As the payroll provider, IPSA is in a unique position to collect, monitor, and publish this information, and we believe there is a collective and reputational advantage from ensuring diversity is achieved and represented across all levels of Parliament. MAPSA calls on the Modernisation Committee to ensure that diversity is part of their proposals for improving culture and working practices.

Staffers have also voiced their dismay that following the 2024 general election, staffers were not eligible to apply for roles within the House as a requirement was being employed through the house authorities already. Many felt this stipulation precluded qualified staffers from applying and was discriminatory.

Reforming Parliamentary Procedure

Voting

While Whipping times are shared with staffers, we believe it would be beneficial if voting times on each day are either standardised or communicated with staff as the norm to ensure transparency and consistency.

Similarly, staffers believe that remote participation and electronic voting by MPs, while not having a direct impact on staffers, plays a vital role in the democratic process while also ensuring equality and accessibility, which should be a mission of the House.

PMQs

Staffers have expressed the benefits in extending PMQs to 1 hour to allow for more MPs to ask questions to the Prime Minister. This would better serve democracy and the public by holding the Government to account on a weekly basis for more than 30 minutes.

Pre- and post-election period

Staffers across all parties have voiced their concern at the lack of support given to staffers before and during an election period, particularly when an MP is standing down or is unlikely to be returned. Staff feel as if there is not enough training or offerings to help navigate the time brought on by the inherent nature of our roles and would like the House and IPSA to play a greater role in giving career advice, supporting the transition, etc. that is generally only offered to MPs.

Another issue raised has been concerns on the length of time given to outgoing Members following a General Election when it comes to closing down offices. It is a dehumanising process where MPs

and their staff feel immediately discarded if they are not returned and given only a handful of days to pack up their offices. More thought and support need to be given to both former MPs and their staff.

Conclusion

Staff working across Parliament and the country are the backbone of our democracy, and we believe there is an opportunity, through the Modernisation Committee, to make Parliament a model workplace, at the forefront of workers' rights, with strong protections in place for Members' staff. At the moment, it is far from meeting this standard and too often staff feel they are not recognised as equal or valuable partners in Parliament.

In conducting this call for views, we hope that the Modernisation Committee makes the views and employment of staffers a priority to improve our roles and rights within this place.

In delivering outcomes, it would be beneficial for staffers if the Committee defines the consensus for delivering change and share transparency on what metrics will be used to determine that consensus.

December 2024