



July 2020

Report from the
General Election
2019 Survey of
MPs and their
staff

Background

After each General Election, IPSA conducts comprehensive, qualitative research interviews to gather in-depth feedback from current and former MPs and staff on the support and information it provided. The interviews reported here assessed MPs' attitudes towards IPSA's 2019 General Election support, including its digital claims system, IPSA Online, as well as IPSA's processes, day-to-day support, and general regulatory activities. The report complements the quantitative analysis in IPSA's Annual Survey of its users¹, and probes issues specific to the December 2019 election.

The objectives of IPSA's 2019 General Election support were to:

- Use a risk-based approach to support new, returning, & departing MPs to maintain high compliance with Scheme/election-specific rules, during and after the election
- Work collaboratively with the House to provide a high quality, timely, and tailored service to support new, returning, and departing MPs to perform their role
- Ensure we are appropriately resourced and provide staff with the right training, information, and tools to deliver a quality service to MPs and their staff.

The interviews with new, returning, and departing MPs and staff lasted 60 minutes on average, with written submissions occasionally included. An interview guide was used to focus discussion. Interview notes were analysed to identify themes raised by more than five per cent of participants. Where specific issues are cited, these are therefore intended to be illustrative of wider concerns.

A sample of six new MPs, six returning MPs, six former MPs, and six members of staff was sought through a general invitation in IPSA's regular email bulletin to all MPs and their staff. The participation achieved was above the targets set and included:

- 29 current or former MPs, including 10 new, 8 returning, and 11 departing MPs (10 defeated and 1 standing down). 17 represented Labour, 10 Conservatives, 1 SNP, and 1 was an Independent. 55% were male; 45% female. This included 3 nations of the UK.
- 25 staff members (14 new MPs' offices, 7 returning, and 4 departing). 15 were Conservative, 9 Labour, and 1 Liberal Democrat. Over 70% of staff participants were women. The MP Staff User Group and IPSA's Staff Focus Group were invited to contribute.
- Many participants had protected characteristics, notably two with registered disabilities.

From these numbers, the results cannot be seen as representative of all MPs' offices and are likely to be over-represented by those wishing to report difficulties with IPSA. They nonetheless provide valuable insight into users' satisfaction with IPSA's General Election and day-to-day support, which is informing immediate improvements as well as preparations for future elections.

¹ <https://www.theipsa.org.uk/publications/annual-user-survey/>

Executive Summary

IPSA had mixed success in meeting its objectives for the 2019 General Election, achieving two out of the three objectives set. IPSA ensured substantially high compliance by MPs with the rules of the *Scheme of MPs' Business Costs* (the Scheme). There was also largely effective collaboration with the House of Commons. But those interviewed did not think that IPSA provided well-resourced, reliable, and informed support.

New MPs and staff were impressed with their first interactions with IPSA, but were disappointed that this momentum was not sustained through the three or four months until they had fully set up their office and staffing arrangements. There were frustrations with the difficulty of connecting with IPSA staff, receiving consistent advice, and timely responses to queries. The property registration process caused strain, but the new starter process was more straightforward. New MPs wanted a named account manager, more one-to-one meetings, better acknowledgment and tracking of queries, and practical how-to guides to help them to access the funding to do their jobs.

Departing MPs and staff were grateful for the professional and sensitive manner in which IPSA engaged with them immediately after the election. The timeliness and accuracy of IPSA's support to MPs' staff who were being made redundant was particularly praised. Yet departing MPs also noted their difficulties in obtaining timely and consistent support. They felt that IPSA did not take a flexible approach to winding up their financial affairs, and that this delayed their loss-of-office payment (equivalent to a redundancy payment). They also noted inconsistencies in approach between IPSA and the House of Commons, with the latter withdrawing digital equipment and email accounts before the end of IPSA's winding-up period. Some also believed it wrong that IPSA applied its rule not to pay rent for properties beyond the end of February 2020. They also wanted IPSA to complete more quickly validation checks of any outstanding public monies owed.

Returning MPs and staff showed high satisfaction with the support received from IPSA through the General Election. They considered that the guidance produced by IPSA was timely, clear, and helpful, and that it aided compliance with the rules. They also noted that it was improved on previous years.

All participants showed a solid understanding of IPSA's statutory functions, but there was concern that IPSA prioritised its regulatory function over its duty to support MPs. The digital claims system, IPSA Online, received negative feedback. Benefits of the new IT system, however, were recognised and there was appetite amongst MPs' staff to work with IPSA on improvements. The payment card provided by IPSA to support expenditure was widely appreciated and its processing was considered manageable. There was appetite for IPSA to pay MPs' suppliers directly. IPSA's Scheme of rules was recognised as clear and reasonable, whilst budgets were seen to be largely adequate. IPSA's publication of expenditure was also accepted as important for transparency, but equally that this transparency had to be meaningful. There was real appreciation for IPSA's dynamic response to the coronavirus pandemic. IPSA's communications bulletin to MPs and staff was widely read and seen as informative, with the homepage and website requiring refinement to make full use of the generally helpful materials that they host. On the whole, IPSA was seen to work well with other agencies, including various departments within the House of Commons.

Election-Specific Findings

A) IPSA's Support to New MPs

- From 13 December to 17 December 2019, the **New Members' Reception Area (NMRA)** was organised to induct new MPs to their roles. Collaboration between IPSA and the House of Commons was maintained via a **Superhub**, with House staff and IPSA present from 18 December to 10 January 2020. At the NMRA and Superhub, IPSA handed new MPs a copy of the Scheme, clarified queries on MPs' budgets, gave new MPs their payment cards, and gathered their payroll details so they could be paid.

Interaction	Contact Rate
Meetings with New MPs at the NMRA (or at the Superhub)	98.71% (100%)
One-to-One Meetings with New MPs by 27 January, 7 February, & 12 March:	48% / 65% / 72%
Payment Cards Collected by New MPs by 17 January / 7 February / 12 March	69% / 94% / 95%

- Feedback** from new MPs' and staff on the NMRA and Superhub was very good:

 - It was well-organised with "wonderful" collaboration between IPSA and the House.
 - Content was clear, avoided "overload" and staff were "consummately professional".
 - IPSA "pulled out the stops" in order to pay all new MPs in the December payroll.
- One-to-one meetings** were held between IPSA staff and new MPs from January to provide IPSA Online and Scheme training, followed by a communication from an IPSA Account Manager with further detail. These meetings were praised for going "above and beyond".
- Whilst the respondents were conscious that IPSA had a high turnover of MPs to assist, including those who had left Parliament, one participant, citing **slow responses to emails and phone calls**, regretted that IPSA's support had "tailed off". Others were frustrated by "incredibly delayed" responses or finding it "impossible" to speak to IPSA staff. There was disappointment amongst those otherwise impressed with IPSA's immediate support that customer service had switched from highly personalised initial contact to "faceless" communication later. There was also disquiet that phonelines were switched off one Friday a month for training. One new MP concluded that "IPSA did not have enough people to deal with the job".
- Named account managers** were promised to new MPs, but due to the demand on staff, this was not put in practice. Support felt "dislocated" and "too automated", and was often compounded by a different IPSA representative seeming unfamiliar with their own case. Some respondents responded that they did not have a personal relationship with IPSA at all. A named account manager would have been a "big deal" to new MPs and (former) colleagues by reassuring MPs of better continuity of service, especially for complex or sensitive cases, and building improved trust and rapport between IPSA staff and MPs.

6. For some participants, and in contrast to 2017's [report](#), their “biggest concern” centred on the **consistency of IPSA advice**. This led some MPs to insist on IPSA advice in writing to provide an “audit trail” in case of difficulties or due to their concern of a “lack of record keeping”. This was particularly stressful as IPSA business was more “public-facing” because their claims are published. The “lingering fear” was that mistakes could have “serious consequences” for MPs. This placed an added premium on securing reliable advice.
7. Participants expressed particular concerns about:
 - training and knowledge of frontline staff who could not always answer queries
 - call backs promised, when queries were not immediately resolved, not taking place
 - the impact of low staff retention and high turnover on organisational knowledge
 - “very aggressive” deadlines applied by IPSA to MPs, but little corresponding urgency from IPSA when MPs’ offices faced pressing issues
 - lack of “accountability” from the inability to escalate to a senior manager more able to exercise discretion and, therefore, a propensity to escalate externally instead
8. A frustration of new MPs’ offices was that emails sent to IPSA seemingly “went off into the ether”. This **absence of acknowledgments and ability to track queries** caused ambiguity for MPs’ offices, which was particularly trying for matters critical to office set-up such as property registration and proxy permissions. It also led to repeat demand on IPSA, due to participants’ inclination to send further emails if offices were uncertain if queries had been received. The House of Commons model, of reference numbers to track queries, was suggested as an improvement to provide greater certainty to users and lessen the risk that they email repeat questions, escalate concerns, or send formal complaints.

“[There is] a vicious cycle [of] ... slow and opaque...processes [leading to] more contact, more emails, and more forms which increases the work for IPSA and makes the process slower still”.

Office Manager of a New MP

9. The **property registration process** was common to those reporting an unfavourable experience. Concerns focused on delays in processing property registration forms, delayed deposit loans and rent payments, and errors not corrected by dates promised. Issues with the process could have a “domino effect” on an office’s ability to have equipment delivered or benefit from direct supplier relationships. **Missed deposit loans and rent payments** added financial worry to some new MPs who, stressing that they were “not wealthy”, resented being “expected to lump up” thousands. Others regretted that reimbursements then did not appear to be expedited until escalated. This was compounded by “never [having] the same person at the end of the phone” nor “direct email address”.

10. Further important points included:

- Many landlords would not sign a lease until IPSA had paid the deposit. But IPSA would not make the deposit payment until receipt of the **signed lease**. One new MP described this circuitous exchange as “madness”. The process led to a **registration backlog** and a number of remedial finance payments. That this process was causing pressure was recognised by a **temporary change to IPSA policy**. From 3 February 2020, IPSA accepted unsigned leases, with a written commitment from the MP that they would supply a signed lease within 30 days. This was also followed by a restructuring of IPSA’s MP Support team.
- Support for IPSA being more proactive in facilitating the transfer of **constituency offices** from a departing MP to a new one by, for example, accepting a transfer of liabilities associated with the deposit loan. Notwithstanding the legal difficulties of doing so, some respondents felt it “painful” for IPSA to insist that a landlord repay a deposit loan to a former MP to then repay to IPSA, for IPSA to subsequently pay a deposit to the same landlord on behalf of the new MP.

11. IPSA’s property registration process is now being improved, both to streamline the process itself and to produce a clearer ‘how-to-guide’, as one new staff member commented that they could not find “guidance on what we needed” nor talk to IPSA staff “to go through it and resolve in five minutes”.

12. In contrast, feedback on the **new starter payroll process** was more positive. Many respondents felt that the process went smoothly. Participants found the model contracts and job descriptions on IPSA’s website useful. This feedback is welcome, particularly due to the exceptional rise in new starters and leavers in MPs’ offices in this period:

Month	Number of Starters & Leavers
November 2019	150
December 2019	469
January 2020	646
February 2020	789
March 2020	404

13. A few nonetheless experienced issues and found the process to be “complicated”. This too is being addressed by process improvements and by the production of step-by-step payroll guides in a user manual. Some participants raised concerns that their **proxy permissions** had not been authorised quickly or that payroll forms submitted were “lost” or not actioned as expected before the payroll cut-off. This diluted trust in IPSA and raised concerns as to MPs’ staff financial security and that of their personal data. It was felt that there was “little transparency” about whether payroll forms had been actioned and that the process would benefit from improved **acknowledgment** and/or **tracking of queries** to provide “some certainty” to those involved.

14. The **start-up supplement to MPs’ budgets** was universally well-received. The decision, exceptional for the 2019 election, to allow unspent monies from this supplement to be rolled over to the 2020-21 financial year was also welcomed as “generous”, although some

said that they had received “mixed messages” as to whether and how the unspent supplement would be rolled over.

15. **One-to-one meetings** with IPSA staff were welcomed. More of these, resources permitting, would have provided further transitional support to new MPs elected to Parliament for the first time. Such meetings would focus on specific queries from new MPs and their staff and present an opportunity to work through property registration issues.
16. Impressed by IPSA’s support at the Superhub, some participants were keen for IPSA to extend its **presence on the parliamentary estate** in order to resolve knottier issues than was possible via email or to resolve minor issues without needing to get in touch. It was also suggested that greater visibility on the estate “would be very positively received” and tackle a cultural perception that a stand-offish attitude exists between MPs and their regulator. However, other respondents felt that IPSA’s current presence should be “better promoted” to MPs’ offices but, in any case, remained insufficient due to busy parliamentary diaries on Wednesdays.
17. Participants also indicated that they would value a more **practical how-to-guide for processes**, regularly updated online, rather than “scramble and work it out for yourself”. “Less theory and more practical” was desired for a “quick start” and to
 - tackle a perception for some that guidance is “all over the place” on IPSA’s website and “not easy to navigate”. There was much appetite amongst the MPs’ staff to work with IPSA to jointly prepare this guidance. This work is now in hand, and badged as *‘by MPs’ staff, for MPs’ staff’*, as more responsive to staff needs and an example of IPSA listening to feedback and responding to their priorities.
18. For many MPs’ **staff**, the post-election period involves a **period of adjustment**. Many participants commented on informal peer support networks for MPs’ staff, with one new proxy admitting that they were “very much relying on colleagues”. Participants saw merit in the idea of IPSA facilitating a **proxy buddying scheme** whereby experienced proxies volunteer to formally support new colleagues. Overall, this would smooth the adjustment period and better share best practice.
19. According to some MPs, there is therefore a role for IPSA in introducing itself to **prospective new MPs via the parties’ headquarters and Whips before the election**, by providing a briefing on budgets and pointing to practical IPSA guidance designed to support new MPs. Upon becoming elected, new MPs face significant decisions as an independent office-holder legally responsible for the employment of staff, for managing large and distinct budgets, and potentially for a tenancy of office premises. One former MP commented that “you are expected to be all over property law, all over employment law”. There is no guarantee that new MPs have such experience. The impact of residual casework from the previous incumbent, plus an influx of correspondence for the new MP, adds to the “learning curve” and contributes to a pressured early working environment. IPSA and the House of Commons could take more practical steps to assist new MPs, particularly where they have to make quick financial decisions when they are being “thrown in at the deep end”. This earlier work

would improve the goodwill between new MPs and IPSA at a stressful and demanding time for all involved.

B) The Winding-Up Process and Departing MPs

20. The **winding-up process** takes place when former MPs are closing down their parliamentary affairs whilst adjusting to their loss of office and looking to find new employment. The period involves giving notices of redundancy to long-serving staff, some of whom have become friends. One ex-MP described the experience as being in a “funeral home”. IPSA and House of Commons staff met all departing MPs to provide detailed support on making staff redundant. These meetings were positively received and IPSA was given credit for handling a difficult situation professionally. One former MP was grateful that staff were “empathetic” and the “right content” was provided.
21. The data below, showing a high uptake of meetings with IPSA, show a positive reception for IPSA’s communications, planning, and collaboration with former MPs:

Interaction	Contact Rate
Meetings with Standing Down MPs from Dissolution to 12 December 2019 (to 12 January 2020)	91.14% (96.20%)
Meetings with Departing MPs at the Non-Returned Members’ Area by 21 December 2019	97.29%

22. Departing MPs were also provided with **redundancy calculations** for their staff. Given the sensitivity of the issue, most departing MPs were pleased and relieved that the support provided was speedy and accurate. The view amongst staff participants was also that IPSA was “very helpful” and “supportive” in the circumstances. This was widely regarded by participants as a clear achievement for IPSA. One minor suggestion was that IPSA could have more clearly communicated that ex-MPs’ staff could attend this meeting with the consent of the former MP, as many did.
23. To recognise the impact of the festive period, IPSA extended the winding-up period from 12 February (being two months after the election as set out in the Scheme) to 29 February 2020. This flexibility was well-received by former MPs and staff. But this flexibility led some respondents to mention the “major problem” of **misalignment between the House of Commons support and IPSA**. For ex-MPs, their parliamentary equipment was removed by the House on 14 January, their parliamentary email account was turned off on 16 January, and their IPSA payment card stopped on 31 January. For most departing MPs and staff, this was confusing. They wanted House of Commons deadlines to align with those of IPSA, as recognised by the extended period to 29 February 2020 to make eligible claims. After they lost their House of Commons equipment, most former MPs and staff had to use personal IT equipment and a “clunkier” way of logging into the system. Former MPs, seeing “[no] logical reason” for this, felt the dates were guided only by what was convenient for the House of Commons.

24. Former MPs welcomed the ability of IPSA to give **advance reimbursements** to address cash flows concerns but wished that IPSA had more clearly and proactively communicated this offer. There was nonetheless recognition that IPSA had made quick and efficient **winding-up payments**, equivalent to two months' salary (£8,400), to former MPs to compensate them for the time spent in winding up their financial affairs. This was the first time that IPSA had made such a payment to any MP who left office and was recognised as a positive step.
25. The experience of former MPs felt more "straightforward" for MPs who chose to stand down. These respondents benefitted from the "head-start" of "planning" the winding-up process. IPSA was also able to plan better with standing down MPs, meeting 91% of them before the election and 96% by 12 January. **Standing down MPs therefore reported higher satisfaction** with IPSA's support.
26. On the other hand, defeated MPs' offices were frustrated at a **lack of transparency** within the winding-up process or clarity of where matters stood. Many felt IPSA to be a "hold-up" and wanted a model that **acknowledged and tracked queries** to escape the current "black hole", particularly for deposit loans. For one former MP, they were resigned to being "stuck in this process not knowing whether it's moving or not". There were also **difficulties connecting with IPSA** to obtain advice and receive call-backs with concerns about the lack of **personalised support** akin to "dealing with something...unresponsive [and] nebulous". This was despite being "told in the meeting that you have a single point of contact". Some **insensitive communications** were said to epitomise impersonal interactions with IPSA. One commented on emails sent "without any regard to who was being contacted".
27. There was also unhappiness that much **validation activity** occurred after the winding-up period had concluded when the employment of **former MPs' staff**, often more well-versed in IPSA-related business, had ceased. This was when IPSA was checking MPs' final claims. Many participants admitted that they were still very much reliant on former staff who, out of personal or party loyalty, continued to support their former employer through the process. Some ex-MPs, for example, had a small invoice, linked to a deleted parliamentary email account and submitted by a no longer employed staff member, queried by IPSA to ensure it was within the rules, and they found it hard to respond. This, however, might stall the loss-of-office payment.
28. If care was taken to ensure that any **immediate post-election communications and validation activities** were sensitive, departing MPs would have been grateful to IPSA for taking the initiative, such as through more immediate advice to seek cancellations or refunds for council tax or other payments, to help them move on quickly. According to a fixed-term parliamentary timetable, IPSA could work to resolve as many validation issues as possible in advance of dissolution. As one former MP concluded, "the earlier this work can begin the better... it should be concluded at a much earlier stage".
29. One area of proactivity concerns **deductions**. In April 2020, IPSA introduced a process for deducting potential loans from loss-of-office payments (LOOP). This appears to have been

welcomed. That said, some participants noted that they had asked IPSA to deduct payments from the LOOP without response. The more proactive use of deductions against the LOOP, particularly when low-value and requested by the former MP, could therefore be an effective method and expedite the winding-up process.

30. In April 2020, IPSA formalised a case-by-case procedure for making **advances** of the **loss-of-office payments** to former MPs. This policy, conscious of mitigating risks to public money, allowed IPSA to advance half of the LOOP and retain the remainder until final checks by IPSA had been completed. This supported former MPs worried about cash flow and enabled IPSA, if necessary, to deduct any remaining debt from outstanding monies. There was broad support for this facility, so long as it was coupled with a wider commitment to expedite the process. Nine former MPs had, at the time of writing, benefited. This, and the decision above, are examples of real-time, albeit reactive, lesson learning. For the next election, these and other flexibilities should be formalised in advance.
31. Similar to new MPs, there was support for a **further round** of personalised **one-to-one meetings**, perhaps again with Members' HR, to support departing MPs in resolving issues. This was felt particularly useful for those with knottier matters to unwind and/or those no longer able to call on the formal or informal support of staff. It was also considered helpful if these meetings, if face-to-face, could be as regional as possible. The reason for this was twofold. First, as one former MP put it, there seemed to be "no appreciation that not everyone lives around the corner" from the House. Second, some reported that they or colleagues did not look forward to meetings held in the same institution from which they had been just been ejected.
32. On the **disposal of kit**, the guidance here was seen to be satisfactory, but could be improved. Some participants felt that the guidance, as well as the indicative costs of kit, should have arrived more quickly and in more detail to allow former MPs to make informed decisions as to the best route to take. Proactively sending **receipts for the use of IT kit** during the election by returning MPs could also be worthwhile to facilitate spending returns.
33. Turning to policy, one "major problem" raised by some former MPs was the issue of **rental break clauses**. Even for those unaffected, many actively referenced the anxiety of colleagues and largely sympathised with their position. According to paragraph 4.25 of the Scheme:

MPs should negotiate a clause in their contracts to allow them to give two months' notice in the event of a change in circumstances, such as losing their seat at a general election... Any further costs beyond that period will not be funded by IPSA, unless... they were unavoidable.

34. Whilst many participants understood the rationale underlying the provision of protecting public money, some doubted that it considered the **nature of the property rental market**. Some respondents argued that many landlords in London were not amenable to two-month break clauses, as they could instead find another tenant not insistent upon one. Similarly, in some constituencies, anecdotal submissions suggested that the supply of appropriate office space is more limited. This, in turn, may mean that landlords are again unwilling to negotiate a break clause, but this time because they know that the MP has few other suitable alternatives to consider. In this sense, it was felt that the Scheme provision, in failing to consider these market differentials, could place an **unrealistic burden upon MPs**.

“bonkers that when you’re first elected, with all the pressures on you professionally and personally, that you are being asked to sign off on leases for five years with all sorts of nuances you are meant to know about, such as negotiating break clauses”

Former MP

35. Second, it was argued that **discretion** should have been exercised with regards to leases entered into before IPSA hardened the two-month break clause provision. Effective from [2017-18](#), MPs were no longer “**advised**” but instead informed that they “should negotiate” a break clause. Some participants felt it unreasonable to ask MPs, focusing on parliamentary and constituency matters, to renegotiate leases and, failing that, to expect them to assume subsequent liabilities. For one, renegotiating a lease was a “distraction from [the] real job”. Another ex-MP could not understand why IPSA was “applying 2017 rules to a 2015 lease”.
36. In addition, one former MP said the current system risks penalising MPs seeking **longer-term leases for better value for public money**. The argument was that landlords, if willing to agree a break clause, may only countenance a short lease with such a clause attached. This impacted the MP’s stability, but also the taxpayer if further expenditure was needed on legal fees, as well as higher monthly rental costs in shorter-term leases. The value of lost time was also difficult to monetise. Leases mirroring a parliamentary term under the **Fixed-Term Parliaments Act 2011** were also said to be entered into “in good faith” and should be treated sympathetically as any snap election is, by definition, unforeseen at the time of the lease’s commencement. One participant added that the decision to bring the lease to an end was external to the former MP. Participants felt that the policy should be “more sympathetic”.
37. Third, it was suggested that IPSA’s approach to these matters during winding-up was harsh and some former MPs felt “humiliated”. The decisions of the **Compliance Officer for the IPSA**, reversing decisions that implemented the Scheme literally and as written, suggested that there might be scope to adopt a more proportionate approach.
38. A **potential middle-ground** was explored of retaining the provision, but accepting case-by-case derogations when an MP could evidence reasonable, but ultimately unsuccessful, efforts to negotiate such a break clause and that they may not be able to secure a suitable

alternative. This may encourage MPs to take measures to protect public money, but provide flexibility to recognise special circumstances. This shift, however, would raise questions about how an MP could prove ‘reasonable effort’ and that no ‘suitable alternative’ existed. This, or indeed any other such change, would also be subject to consultation and come with significant financial and regulatory implications. Meantime, given the clear pressure that this policy placed on departing MPs, as well as the corrective work on IPSA following the Compliance Officer’s overturning of IPSA’s decisions, the feedback is noted.

39. Departing MPs and staff were asked specifically about whether **their experience of the winding-up process** had changed their impression of IPSA and how, if so, it contrasted with their experience as a sitting MP. The relationship for the majority had deteriorated.

C) IPSA’s Guidance in advance of the General Election

40. We also investigated the **experience of returning MPs**. Overall, participants believed that support through **dissolution guidance and guidance on the use of kit, constituency offices, and on campaign activities** was timely, clear, and “greatly improved” on 2015 and 2017. Feedback suggested that IPSA should work more closely with the House to ensure that the guidance was accessible, not only in large font, but in printed versions for those requiring reasonable adjustments.
41. Feedback on **dissolution and thematic guidance**, including quick guides, was positive. There was agreement that the information was clearly presented, with sufficient notice, and in a digestible format. One MP commented that “whatever I needed, I found”. As ever, clarity was key: “the rules... were clear about what you could or could not do”.
42. Overall, guidance on the **regulation of websites**, across the dissolution and campaign activities materials, was considered “very helpful”. Comments described it as “really useful”, “a lot better”, and “very clear”. Notwithstanding this general satisfaction, one MP said that they “will never forgive [IPSA] for the way they behaved” regarding material on their website.

General Election 2019: Programme Objectives and Conclusions

43. Based on the findings above, success in meeting IPSA’s 2019 General Election Programme objectives was as follows:

Objective	Conclusion
Use to a risk-based approach to support new, returning, and departing MPs to maintain high compliance with Scheme and election-specific rules, during and after the election	☑
Work collaboratively with the House to provide a high quality, timely, and tailored service to support	☑/↔

new, returning, and departing MPs to perform their role	
Ensure we are appropriately resourced and provide staff with the right training, information and tools to deliver a quality service to MPs and their staff.	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>

44. The findings show that IPSA did indeed maintain high compliance and satisfaction with the Scheme. Of the claims submitted by new MPs from the election to 31 May 2020, 99.95% were compliant with the rules. There was a 99.96% compliance rate amongst returning MPs in the same period. For former MPs, the rate was similarly high at 99.47%. It was also felt that IPSA’s pre-election guidance (dissolution, campaign activities, use of office etc.) was clear, presented in a user-friendly manner, and well-targeted to aid compliance. Whilst this initial assessment remains subject to future assurance work, the **first objective**, according to the data and the views of participants, **was met by IPSA**.
45. On the **second objective**, the picture is positive on balance. For new and departing MPs, IPSA’s initial collaboration with the House was excellent, particularly at the NMRA and Superhub as well as in providing redundancy and HR support to those standing down or unseated. But a major source of criticism concerned the misalignment of withdrawal dates of equipment, account access, and payment cards between the House, PDS and IPSA, well before the end of the extended winding-up period. Whilst much of this was for the House and PDS to resolve, many former MPs saw the winding-up process as a joint endeavour involving all agencies. Returning and departing MPs, however, found the co-created dissolution guidance to be helpful. As such, the **fulfilment of this objective was more than partial, but with room for improvement**.
46. New, returning, and former MPs expressed concerns as to the accessibility, responsiveness, and reliability of support. For new and former MPs, it was a shame that the initial personalised and dedicated support offered by IPSA staff was not maintained. Concerns about service also became most acute when difficulties with process occurred. It is therefore this **third objective where IPSA was found wanting** in the eyes of participants and where serious effort should be directed to redress problems.

Reflections on Wider Performance

Relationships with and Support Provided by IPSA

47. For returning MPs’ offices, in particular, it was day-to-day delivery which was more troubling, in contrast to the election support provided. Of most concern was **responsiveness and consistency of advice**, as well as the desire for a **direct account manager relationship**. Respondents who had built up more personal relationships with IPSA staff were more

willing, even if they had occasional issues, to give IPSA the benefit of the doubt. Whilst this does not detract from the need to avoid problems in the first place, it shows the value of human interaction and the goodwill that it generates.

48. We explored whether participants felt IPSA gave equal weight to both statutory objectives: of independently regulating MPs' pay, pensions, and business costs, and of supporting MPs to carry out their parliamentary functions. Overall, there was wide understanding of **IPSA's statutory functions**. The second aspect, however, produced a broader spectrum of responses with one new MP labelling IPSA's approach as "computer says no" and another participant concluding that IPSA performs "quite effectively...possibly to the point of stupidity". The sentiment of the latter quote was shared more widely. One new MP found that the relationship is a "bit toxic on both sides". There was also agreement that IPSA faced a "difficult job" and the historical baggage of the expenses scandal may have set the foundation for, or the impression of, a seemingly "antagonistic" and "us and them" relationship. On balance, the **regulatory function was marginally seen to be prioritised**.
49. One aspect considered was the **tone of emails**. Some MPs' offices felt the tone of some exchanges "dismissive", giving the impression that they were "burdensome". Some participants felt that some forms and emails, particularly on repayments, were blunt, accusatory, and "guilty until proven innocent", which landed particularly badly when the repayment was a result of an IPSA error. One MP added that "you feel like you're doing something wrong every time you have an interaction" with IPSA. For a new MP, the impression was that "if you stray, that's your problem". They felt this represented a failure to appreciate that collaborative support would be a "facilitator" of even higher compliance and thus better serve both of IPSA's functions. In the minds of some, this gave weight to the view that IPSA prioritised its regulatory function to the detriment of supporting MPs. For others, however, performance issues were more the **result of "clunky systems and processes"**. The key, therefore, was improving processes and operational performance to get things right first time, every time, to rebuild relations.

"If some of those services... could be improved then the trust... would follow in line with that"

New MP

IPSA Online

50. As reflected in the Annual Survey of MPs and Staff, a **majority were unhappy** with IPSA Online, describing it here as "opaque", "clunky", and "not intuitive". The interviews, though, tell a more nuanced story. Whilst some benefits were recognised, much **constructive feedback was offered** to highlight particular pressure points.

51. Participants agreed that the new system had taken some **adjustment**. As one participant admitted, they had “never known an IT system that has been brought in that does not have its problems”. One former MP “like[d] the new system of being able to do everything digitally”, which was “fine once you get used to it”. Across the majority of participants, including those unsatisfied with IPSA Online, **certain improvements** were recognised:
- Faster reimbursement
 - Direct reimbursements to MPs’ staff members rather than via MPs
 - Paperless submission (particularly welcome during the coronavirus lockdown)
52. A majority of those interviewed described **difficulties with IPSA Online**. These concerns, which will inform future service improvements, could be grouped as follows:
- Why do users not receive notifications and clear, disaggregated remittances?
 - Why is it not possible to save payment card reconciliations in draft?
 - Why does the system not allow the deletion of claims made in error?
 - What do payment statuses mean? How many details (e.g. notes) are published?
 - The property registration forms on IPSA Online are “overly complicated”
 - The modelling of budgets should be improved to allow precise, monthly forecasts.
 - The layout “annoys [me] every time... not user friendly” ... “too many chevrons”
 - Defaulting claims to ‘on behalf of’ the proxy is “problematic” when most are for the MP, making it easy to submit claims, which cannot be deleted, in the wrong name
 - The need for reasonable adjustments to make the system more accessible
53. Many MPs’ offices reported that the **proportion of their working week spent on IPSA-related business had risen**. They argued that this diverted time away from parliamentary and constituency work, the volume of which had similarly increased. One new staffer alleged that the system can “literally add hours to your week”. One MP agreed that submitting claims “now takes longer”. A new MP argued that time “expended” by MP, staff, and IPSA staff was a “ludicrous opportunity cost”. For system changes, participants were clear that IPSA “must talk to the users”. As with jointly written guides, there was therefore appetite amongst **staff to test potential changes**.
54. On **training and guidance**, there were mixed views on IPSA materials and tutorials. One new MP felt that it was “written by computer programmers for programmers”. A new staff member found the guidance useful, but difficult to find on the website. In calling for “line by line support”, one former staff member suggested that more detailed guidance be included in the recommended how-to-guide. The training sessions were, however, praised for their content and delivery. Webinars, inline guidance, and screen-sharing were similarly welcomed as innovative contributions to the diverse set of learning and development tools needed. More face-to-face support, perhaps in the House and the regions, was also desired.

Payment Cards

55. Participants were invited to comment on the payment card facility and the process for reconciling transactions. The introduction and expansion of the payment card was **positive** in the eyes of respondents as an “essential tool” that they would be “lost without”. The

process for reconciling transactions made, aside from the absence of a save draft function, was also felt to be manageable. No complaints were made about the new payment card policy, whilst the decision to extend the reconciliation deadline for the December election, an issue for those we spoke to after the General Election 2017, was welcomed.

Direct Suppliers and Central Procurement

56. Participants were asked if they valued the direct supplier relationships established by IPSA and whether there was a desire, or a business need, to expand them. Respondents were also asked if they thought that more central procurement would lessen the administrative burden upon them and whether, in principle, it was appropriate for IPSA to offer centralised options. Overall, there was **recognition of the value and simplicity of the direct supplier relationships** in place, coupled with a desire to expand upon them. Central procurement also proved popular, but the specific expenditure materially impacted appetite. More direct payments could support both of IPSA's statutory functions owing to:
- lower administrative work placed upon MPs' offices
 - high assurance by obviating the need to make payments to MPs to pass to suppliers
 - decreased need for MPs to carry debt and seek reimbursement
 - enabling MPs' offices to focus on higher added value activities, whilst simultaneously strengthening IPSA's regulatory controls and public assurance.
57. In general, participants favoured **central procurement, on an opt-out basis**, as a "huge opportunity" for greater economies of scale and better value for public money, whilst enabling MPs to retain choice as to how they spent their budgets. Support for central procurement was stronger for "low-hanging fruit", such as mobile contracts, which could otherwise prove unduly "difficult" for MPs' offices. It was also seen as "very helpful" for new MPs' offices, which was "like starting a business". It would also give MPs' offices certainty that invoices, if handled by IPSA, would not be queried. More radical options, such as the central provision of constituency offices, were felt to be advantageous in theory, but more liable to meet MPs' resistance and prove practically more challenging to implement. Many participants saw the merit of a constituency office, with the right security, fire safety, and disability standards, being rolled over to new MPs as beneficial continuity for constituents, "easier" for those first elected, and better value for public money.

IPSA Scheme and Budgets

58. Defining eligible business costs and setting out the requirements for legitimate claims, the Scheme is a key document for MPs' offices and at the core of IPSA's regulatory function. Its importance is underlined by the obligation to lay it before Parliament. In general, participants thought that the rules were **clearly outlined, largely logical, and well-presented**. The high compliance rate of new MPs' claims strengthens this conclusion. Some respondents, however, commented that they did not make claims, which they knew were eligible, for fear of media ramifications. Some eligible claims, therefore, could not be made "politically".

59. Participants were invited to offer feedback on the **2020/21 budgets** set by IPSA to resource MPs to support them in carrying out their parliamentary functions. Participants felt that they were resourced adequately. There was widespread **appreciation for the significant uplift to the staffing budget** and provision for wellbeing and training for 2020/21, albeit peppered with slight resentment that it was “now on a par with what it should have been”. Citing an increase in casework, more than five per cent of participants suggested (without prompting) that the assumed **staffing complement** of four full-time equivalent staff members was insufficient. As such, they feared that the increase to the staffing budget, including provision for welfare and training, would be used to recruit additional capacity, rather than on salary progression or wellbeing. There was also appetite for an **IPSA accreditation scheme** in which Office Managers could participate. This could involve certification that the staff members have successfully conducted IPSA Online training and are well-versed in IPSA business. This was felt to facilitate CV development for staff, provide further training, make recruitment simpler for (particularly new) MPs, and offer a badge of reliability to those sharing best practice and applying to work for MPs.

Publication

60. IPSA’s publication of claims made by MPs seeks to assure the public that public money is spent legitimately. There was general **acceptance that MPs’ claims should be published**, with “sunlight the best disinfectant”. Indeed, perhaps owing to IPSA’s genesis in the expenses scandal, participants accepted that **claims had to be published**. Redactions and the opportunity to review published claims were nevertheless appreciated. That said, participants were of the view that the publication of MPs’ staffing costs “only furthers negative public perception”. Despite broad support for the principle of transparency, participants were mindful of the need for it to be meaningful. The **publication of staffing costs**, alongside expenses such as hotels, proved most controversial:

- Some staff members found their pooled salaries being published alongside other costs to be intrusive or, at times, offensive to be treated as an expense. One new staff member commented: “IPSA should be clearer that these are staffing costs, not expenses in the way that the public may automatically think”.
- Participants felt their inclusion inflated the total figures published online, often quoted globally by others, and allowed them to be manipulated by opponents. To make matters worse, some participants suggested that the publication of staffing costs led to a “race to the bottom” amongst MPs’ offices and a reluctance to offer salary increases for fear of becoming the most expensive MP in the region.
- It was also felt that the salaries of constituency and parliamentary staff were not what the average person would imagine when asked about MPs’ expenses. For one new MP, “it should be split out... the point of transparency is that people want to know what MPs are spending on themselves”.
- As such, by potentially giving a false impression to the public of what they consider to be expenses, this did not make **transparency meaningful**.

61. One suggestion was to publish an **aggregated figure for the costs of all MPs’ staff**. This could be broken down into an average per MP. As such, the public would have transparency of the

costs of MPs' staffing and knowledge of the maximum claimable quantum from the staffing budget set by IPSA, but MPs may instead face a lower risk of the figures being misinterpreted or abused. This could "remove the incentive for MPs to underpay their staff".

Coronavirus Response & Public Engagement

62. On 19 March 2020, IPSA announced a **series of measures**, including additional funding and flexed rules, to support MPs and staff in the adjustment to home-working necessitated by **coronavirus**. Those surveyed said that the measures were a **welcome and timely display of flexibility** in response to coronavirus, particularly approaching the end of the financial year. The measures were seen to have been directed at the right areas and provide sufficient support to MPs' offices. The FAQs and guidance updated on IPSA's website were similarly found to have provided much-needed clarity. Some discontent, however, was registered at the inability to connect with IPSA for a period via **phonelines** and only via email, and the impression that the "shutters came down" after IPSA moved to home-working. Following government advice on 16 March, IPSA had moved to working remotely to protect staff and reduce viral transmission. MPs' offices were asked to contact IPSA by email, with call-backs taking place for urgent queries. A phone-booking system was introduced a month later, which was welcomed by those interviewed.
63. Participants considered that a **bolder communication strategy** would have counteracted misleading coverage of the announcement and better educated the public that MPs' business costs are subject to independent regulation. Whilst there was agreement that the issue of MPs' expenses had been detoxified, participants said that it remained too easy for the public to misunderstand MPs' business costs and be unaware of IPSA's existence. Participants felt that IPSA should defend MPs more robustly in the press when specific claims are legitimate, pre-emptively clarify and rebut issues vulnerable to misinterpretation, and better inform the public of its role.

"There was not anything particularly powerful from IPSA to say MPs had nothing to do with this, [leading to] a lot of abuse. [It's a] massive source of public distrust and dissuades good people from becoming an MP".

New MP

Communications

64. Whilst participants felt that there was a need for a more proactive public engagement strategy, they were **content with IPSA's main communications channel: the emailed bulletin**. There was wide readership of the bulletin amongst those surveyed and respondents found it well-presented and informative. The frequency was appreciated too, as participants urged IPSA to guard against needlessly overwhelming inboxes already "under siege". Improvements, however, were needed to make the **homepage and the website more user-**

friendly so that users could more easily access the generally helpful materials that they currently hosted.

Collaboration and Remits

65. Participants were invited to comment on **IPSA’s collaboration with other authorities**. In the main, collaboration was believed to be **strong** between IPSA and agencies within the House (Members’ Security Support Services and Parliamentary Digital Services). For established MPs’ offices, there were few issues in understanding the distinct remits of the House, PDS, and IPSA. Some anxiety, however, was expressed by a number of participants at “lamentable” **coordination** between IPSA and the House with the supplier of **security installations** at MPs’ offices or accommodation. No concerns were expressed at how IPSA itself handles, approves, or settles the costs of security applications.

Conclusions

66. Current and former MPs and staff were invited to summarise their relationship with IPSA as it currently stood. They were then asked how they believe they should be able to describe it, with any differences between the two visions further probed. Some examples are below:

Current relationship with IPSA	Ideal description of IPSA relationship
<i>Good, professional, helpful</i>	<i>That’s how I should describe it</i>
<i>Painful and ineffective</i>	<i>Productive and professional</i>
<i>Frustrating and impenetrable</i>	<i>Should work with MPs, as opposed to against</i>
<i>Dim view... [IPSA sees MPs as a] bunch of crooks</i>	<i>Honest and enabling</i>
<i>Appreciative but frustrated, grateful for the things done really quickly and well but when things go wrong, they go badly wrong</i>	<i>Continuity of service</i>
<i>Excellent... so much help</i>	<i>Happy to help</i>
<i>Incredibly helpful, keen, and showed itself to be keen to help and assist, and a real support</i>	<i>Hand in glove... IPSA is there to serve and protect MPs</i>
<i>Manageable as MP but fraught... felt like I was dealing with a machine [during winding-up]</i>	<i>Open... more accessible, responsive, and even anticipatory</i>
<i>I do not think there is a relationship</i>	<i>Accessible and be able to respond in a reasonable amount of time</i>
<i>No face to IPSA and no relationship with IPSA</i>	<i>Mutually supportive</i>
<i>Friendly, but professional</i>	<i>Rightly a professional distance</i>
<i>Helpful and supportive... with no sense of operating in a vacuum</i>	<i>Less nit-picky</i>
<i>Slow</i>	<i>Reliable and proactive</i>

67. A number of **concluding themes** emerge:

- Participants wanted IPSA to be more accessible and responsive, through more dedicated, direct, and personal channels of account management support.
- A more constructive relationship was required and any potential imbalance could be addressed through closer dialogue with MPs and staff (e.g. on guidance/system changes), reviewed email communications, and greater accessibility.

- A more proportionate approach to how IPSA queries and seeks to resolve issues was felt necessary. There was appetite for IPSA to be more proactive in helping to support MPs' offices resolve matters and carry out their parliamentary functions.

68. Participants **did not seek these improvements to customer service at the cost of weaker regulatory control**. Participants were broadly satisfied that the rules themselves were balanced, clear, and logical. Concerns centred on processes, culture, and frontline user-support.

69. Finally, it should be noted that the concerns cited here were raised constructively, in a **genuine effort to work with IPSA on improvements**. Given that there was broad support for its regulatory framework, transparency, and existence, there may be cause for cautious optimism that most participants are willing to engage with IPSA to improve day-to-day interactions and performance. As improvement is central to IPSA's 2020-21 Corporate Plan, participants will continue to be a source of useful feedback, and critical friends on the journey towards customer service as well as regulatory excellence.

Annex 1: Election-Specific Conclusions

Election-Specific Findings	
1.	IPSA's presence at the NMRA and Superhub, as well as one-to-one meetings, were praised for their content, length, and tone.
2.	Following the one-to-one meetings, it was difficult for new MPs and staff to receive timely, personalised, and reliable support from an IPSA representative.
3.	Many MPs' offices were unclear if IPSA had received or actioned forms or if their forms had been lost.
4.	The property registration process proved difficult.
5.	Participants felt there was a double standard of strict deadlines for MPs, but no urgency by IPSA when MPs' offices faced pressing issues.
6.	Respondents were frustrated that they could not easily talk to senior managers, who could exercise discretion and leniency.
7.	Respondents generally found the new starter process and the guidance provided by IPSA to be straightforward and helpful, although a minority disagreed.
8.	The start-up supplement and ability for unspent monies to be rolled over was welcomed.
9.	It is a steep learning curve and significant period of adjustment for new MPs and their staff, perhaps unfamiliar with Parliament, HR matters, and budget-holding.
10.	Initial meetings between IPSA and House of Commons staff and ex-MPs were sensitive and helpful, particularly with accurate redundancy calculations.
11.	IPSA's extension of the winding-up period was warmly welcomed, as was December's winding-up payment to all departing MPs.
12.	The phased withdrawal of equipment and parliamentary email accounts by the House of Commons, and payment cards by IPSA, before the end of the extended winding-up period caused practical problems, gave the impression that agencies were not coordinating.
13.	Participants felt that the querying of historic claims should be done in advance of or immediately after an election, when former MPs may still have equipment, parliamentary accounts, and staff in their employment.
14.	Many former MPs found the winding-up process to be reactive, opaque and slow.
15.	The guidance on the disposal of kit was good and satisfactory, subject to minor changes to improve layout and clarify the pros and cons of different options.
16.	The two-month break clause policy was felt to set unrealistic expectations, and held up the winding-up process.
17.	Guidance upon dissolution and on the use of kit, offices, and websites was felt to be clear, well-presented, and timely.

Annex 2: Conclusions on Day-to-Day Performance

Findings relating to other IPSA business	
1.	Participants were frustrated at not receiving responsive, reliable day-to-day support.
2.	There was a strong understanding of IPSA’s statutory functions, with the regulatory function seen to be prioritised, with some believing IPSA was not proportionate, or sending accusatory emails about regulatory issues.
3.	The IPSA Online system prompted negative feelings, though benefits were recognised and feedback on guidance and training was more even. Participants felt that time spent on IPSA business had risen unreasonably.
4.	Aside from the inability to save reconciliations in draft, the payment card was appreciated. The extension of the December reconciliation deadline was welcomed.
5.	There was support for the direct supplier relationships in place and a desire to expand this. There was cautious but overall support for central procurement.
6.	IPSA’s Scheme was felt to be clear, well-presented, and logical.
7.	MPs felt appropriately resourced, even if they felt the staffing budget uplift was overdue or insufficient. An accreditation scheme was deemed worthwhile.
8.	There was widespread acceptance of the principle of publication, though concern that transparency should be meaningful.
9.	A) There was real appreciation of IPSA’s coronavirus measures. The initial closure of IPSA’s phonelines for a month in March 2020 was considered problematic, but the subsequent phone booking system from April was welcomed. B) Participants felt that a bolder public engagement strategy is necessary.
10.	Participants were very happy with IPSA’s emailed communications bulletin, but believed that the website could be cleaner and more user-friendly.
11.	There was a good understanding of the respective remits between IPSA and House authorities. Concerns were mentioned, however, on coordinating security installations.