

Minutes of a meeting of IPSA's Board

Wednesday 10 July 2019

Board Members: Sir Robert Owen (Acting Chair)

Rt. Hon Jenny Willott

Will Lifford

Richard Lloyd

In attendance: Marcial Boo, Chief Executive

Vicky Fox, Director of Regulation and Insight

Georgia Wilson, Director of Improvement and MP Support

Alastair Bridges, Director of Finance and Corporate Services

Head of Policy and Assurance

Head of Communications

Guest Speaker: Georgina Kester, MAPSA (Agenda Item 3)

Investigations Officer (Agenda Item 4)

Head of IT (Agenda Item 10)

Head of Data, Publication, and Validation (Agenda Item 11)

Executive Assistant and Board Secretary (Minutes)

Apologies: Ruth Evans, Chairman

Status: Submitted for approval at the meeting of the Board on 19 September 2019

1. Welcome and Declarations of Interest

- 1.1 The Acting Chair opened the meeting and welcomed those attending, noting the apologies of the Chair. He invited the Board and members of staff to declare any interests not previously recorded. In advance of the Guest Speaker's remarks, Rt. Hon Jenny Willott stated that she had once been a member of MAPSA.

2. Minutes and Actions List

- 2.1 The minutes of the meeting of the Board held on 27 June 2019 were approved as a correct record.

Actions arising from the previous meeting

All actions due from the previous meeting had been completed.

3. Guest Speaker: Georgina Kester, MAPSA

- 3.1 The Acting Chair welcomed Georgina Kester to the room on behalf of the Board and noted that the Board was keen to hear her views and feedback on IPSA Online.

3.2 Georgina began by noting that MAPSA represented MPs' staff of all parties, whether they were Westminster or constituency based. Whilst MAPSA was not a union, it worked closely with all unions representing MPs' staff. Georgina was pleased that there was a good working relationship between MAPSA and IPSA and noted that the memorandum of understanding was an important step forward in formalising the joint working relationship. She highlighted work on the job descriptions and contracts of MPs' staff as an example of this effective working relationship.

3.3 That said, Georgina noted that communication was a problem. She cited the example of a recent bulletin sent to MPs and proxies which referred to the publication of P11Ds. She felt that IPSA was very good at asking for staff feedback through user groups and surveys, but was less clear on communicating what action will be taken in response to it and to what timescales.

3.4 Georgina then turned to system issues. She noted that, on the new system, it was not always possible to see what claims had been submitted, meaning that it is easy to accidentally submit a claim twice. She gave an example of when this had happened. The duplicate claim was subsequently processed very quickly by IPSA but then had to be repaid.

3.5 Georgina commented on the consistency of IPSA's advice to MPs' staff. She noted that IPSA had previously published a list of items that could not be claimed. Now, there was more discretion for MPs in how they used their budgets, but this could lead to a lack of

clarity in some MPs' offices about what could be claimed. The example of birthday cards from MPs to 18-year-old constituents was given. Greater clarity would benefit MPs' staff and save IPSA staff time by removing the need for queries.

3.6 Georgina noted some regular concerns with IPSA Online and thanked the Director of Improvement and MP Support for helping to address them. They included the need for more notifications and help with running reports. Georgina found the staff user groups to be very helpful and noted that this was a good resource for IPSA to use to test system changes. The Director of Improvement and MP Support agreed to involve members of MAPSA in designing future system changes. IPSA would also directly contact MPs' proxies more regularly in future, and help MPs' proxies to share best practice with each other.

3.7 Georgina was complementary about IPSA staff and the regular and positive dialogue between IPSA and MAPSA. She suggested that MAPSA should also be involved in IPSA's work to follow up on the recommendations of Gemma White QC's report. She also suggested that a data-sharing agreement could be put in place between IPSA and the House of Commons regarding MPs' staff information, if members of MPs' staff agreed.

3.8 The Acting Chair thanked Georgina for attending the Board Meeting and for her clear and measured words. The Chief Executive also thanked Georgina for attending and agreed that IPSA's relationship with MAPSA was important. IPSA Online was a single, secure IT system to support MPs' work, and IPSA needed to listen to the feedback from MPs' staff and involve them in making improvements.

4 Compliance Officer Report

4.1 The Board noted the apologies of the Compliance Officer and welcomed the Investigations Officer. She briefed the Board on the cases within the report and provided updates where appropriate.

4.2 The Board asked questions about specific cases, which the Investigations Officer clarified with further detail. The Head of Policy and Assurance also noted that she had discussed the assurance review on pooled services with the Compliance Officer.

5 Chief Executive's Report

5.1 Before the Chief Executive introduced his report, the Acting Chair put on record that the Board was mindful of the severe pressures faced by IPSA's staff, including its senior management. He conveyed to the Chief Executive the Board's appreciation for their hard work. The Chief Executive added his thanks to IPSA's staff and suggested that his colleagues would welcome a personal thank you from Board members after its meeting.

5.2 Introducing his report, the Chief Executive acknowledged that IPSA was facing a difficult time while both IPSA and MPs familiarise themselves with the new IT system. Phone call and email volumes remained high and there remained technical teething issues. MPs and their staff were therefore frustrated, and IPSA recognised this. Further measures were being taken to improve the system and IPSA's responsiveness, and these would be discussed later in the meeting.

5.3 The Head of Communications updated the Board on IPSA's response to the Information Tribunal's decision that IPSA should disclose European Research Group materials. IPSA would publish 40 ERG documents the following day. The materials had been found to be within the rules of the Scheme, as they were not party political. They would nonetheless be of interest to those with a view on the campaign by ERG members for the UK to leave the EU. Some media and social media interest could be expected.

5.4 The Head of Policy and Assurance noted that IPSA's rules had changed in 2017, such that any work for MPs to gain advantage in a referendum was no longer permitted. Since the materials in question were produced before this change in the rules, they were correctly allowed.

5.5 The Board then discussed the forthcoming inquiry report by Gemma White QC into allegations of bullying and harassment of MPs' parliamentary staff. The Director of Regulation and Insight believed that there would be recommendations for IPSA. The Chief Executive informed the Board that we would read Gemma White's report in detail upon its publication and assess its implications, providing further advice to the Board as appropriate.

6 Funding of MPs' Security Measures

6.1 The Board noted and adopted in full the recommendations made by IPSA's Audit and Risk Assurance Committee on the funding of MPs' security measures.

7 Board Governance

7.1 The Board noted that there had not been a review of IPSA's Board governance since 2014 and agreed that one should be conducted later in the financial year.

8 Parental Leave

8.1 The Director of Regulation and Insight introduced the paper on MPs' parental leave, noting that the House of Commons was still piloting proxy voting for MPs. The Board discussed the options presented in the report and concluded that IPSA's contingency application process should be streamlined, such that, while the House's proxy voting pilot was ongoing, all applications by MPs relating to parental leave should be pre-approved in

principle. The funding would be granted once MPs had provided IPSA with the necessary information relating to the contract of employment, job description, and salary of the staffing cover requested. The Board were clear that it was important to support all MPs when they took maternity, paternity and adoption leave. But the Board were also clear that this funding was not to create 'locum' MPs but rather to support existing MPs to fulfil their obligations to their communities.

8.2 The Board also agreed that this funding should be published against the name of the MP, as it was important for MPs and potential MPs to know that they could have this financial support. Therefore, the publication of this funding should not be hidden. This aligns with IPSA's commitment to transparency.

8.3 The Board agreed that it was important to work closely with the House of Commons on this issue. If proxy voting becomes a permanent feature of parliamentary procedure from January 2020, IPSA would consult on the creation of a separate fund specifically to provide extra funding to MPs taking parental leave. An equality impact assessment would be conducted at that time. In the meantime, immediate funding would be given to MPs through the pre-approval of contingency funding.

9 IPSA Online – Post Go-Live Report

9.1 The Director of Improvement and MP Support introduced her report on IPSA Online. The system was working well overall, with no outages since a short one in its first week. This resilience was noteworthy given the high volumes of sustained demand from users. The system was successfully running the payroll and making reimbursement payments quickly too.

9.2 However, she recognised there was more work to be done to support MPs and their staff in using the system. Immediate solutions included creating bitesize training guides. Additional staff had been recruited to answer calls more quickly, and IPSA recognised the effect of the sustained demand on staff morale.

9.3 The Board asked about the nature of the demand and whether certain aspects of the system repeatedly caused problems. The Director of Improvement and MP Support noted feedback from users about the system not alerting them about returned claims, not being able to delete claims and not being able to save payment card reconciliation in draft. The system changes have also allowed improved validation, and some MPs have queried why evidence requirements have changed. She also acknowledged that since moving office, improved data about call volumes has gradually become available, but initially we lacked detailed information. The data shows that the rate of abandoned calls remained too high, resulting in negative feedback from MPs and staff.

9.4 The Board asked whether financial controls were operating effectively. The Director of Finance and Corporate Services confirmed that they were, and indeed were more effective than under the previous system. The Chief Executive noted that this stronger level of inbuilt financial control, while welcome, may have added to the frustrations of MPs and staff. Some of their claims were now being challenged prior to payment, when previously IPSA had only followed up with queries after the MP had already been reimbursed.

9.5 The Chief Executive then presented the Board with proposals to further boost IPSA's capacity to manage the implementation of IPSA Online. The proposals would reduce demand, add capacity, provide better support to MPs and respond to their feedback. The Chief Executive confirmed that the core functionality of the system was working well. But it was important to quickly address MPs' concerns and to support hard-pressed IPSA staff. These measures must make a difference by the time MPs return from their summer parliamentary recess.

9.6 The Chief Executive listed the actions already taken to relieve pressure, including the extension of contract with the Civil Service Surge Team, additional guidance in bulletins, meetings with MPs and staff users, tailored training, an extended presence in Portcullis House, a lessons learned exercise, the establishment of a Change Advisory Board, and the deferral of non-essential planned activity until next year. The Board welcomed these moves.

9.7 The Board asked whether the Change Advisory Board should have an external facilitator. The Chief Executive was receptive to this idea and indicated that MPs' staff could also play a part in advising us on improvements, as already noted at the meeting. The Board agreed with the measures proposed, and asked for a further update at its next meeting in September.

10 Implementing our IT Strategy

10.1 The Board welcomed the Head of IT and congratulated his team for their hard work over the previous months. The Board also congratulated the IT Manager for winning IPSA's first 'Living the Values' award after being nominated by colleagues.

10.2 The Head of IT updated the Board on the rollout of new laptops, training staff and updating email and security monitoring services. A series of measures had been taken to enhance security, including new anti-virus software, an improved firewall, and a cyber essentials certification. New tools had also been implemented to allow screen-sharing with MPs' offices and video conferencing in internal meetings.

10.3 The next steps of the IT Strategy were to roll out Office 365 for email and to trial security awareness software with IPSA's Data Protection Officer. The Director of Finance and Corporate Services added that all staff already have face-to-face data protection training and that new staff have a mandatory induction meeting on data security after their

arrival.

11 Publication – Post IPSA Online

11.1 The Board welcomed the Head of Data, Publication and Validation. His paper reported how the publication of MPs' expenditure is changing with IPSA Online and that we intended to publish the first data from IPSA Online in November, rather than in September, so that there is time to check the accuracy of data on the new system. The format of some data would also change.

11.2 Following discussion about how we present MPs' expenditure data, the Board agreed that IPSA should aim for meaningful transparency, by publishing what is in the public interest and by avoiding unnecessary complication and confusion through the publication of multiple correction journals.

11.3 The Head of Data, Publication and Validation then noted that IPSA's new redaction process included the use of an IT tool which is quicker and provides better value for money. This enables automatic and specific checks, with the system more auditable and simpler to review. The tool is also capable of picking up simple spelling errors.

11.4 The Board endorsed the approach proposed and thanked the team for their work.

12 Staffing Budget Review

12.1 The Head of Policy and Assurance updated the Board on ongoing data analysis and interviews conducted as part of the review of MPs' staffing budgets. This work included analysis of staff numbers per MP, and where staff worked, as well as how the staffing budget is administered and whether additional flexibility could be introduced for MPs to make most effective use of their budgets.

12.2 The Board suggested developing principles to describe a good office, and that MPs should retain flexibility to make choices about their own working arrangements. Comparative information about good practice from other well-run small organisations could be useful.

12.3 The Board also asked that, in preparing further advice, it would be helpful to see data on the number of MPs who have given pay rises to their staff, so this can inform the Board's decision on MPs' staffing budgets which would in turn have implications for pay rises for MPs' staff.

13 Work of the Data Protection Officer

13.1 Due to time constraints, this item was postponed to a future meeting.

14 The Board's Programme of Work & Potential Meetings Post March 2020

14.1 Due to time constraints, this item will be considered in September.

15 Any Other Business

15.1 The Acting Chair thanked the Board and Executive for their work since the last meeting, bringing proceedings to a close.

15.2 The date of the next Board meeting was confirmed as 19 September 2019.

END