

Minutes of a meeting of IPSA's Board

Wednesday 18 March 2020

By conference call

Board Members: Richard Lloyd (Interim Chair)

Sir Robert Owen

Rt. Hon Jenny Willott

Will Lifford

In attendance: Marcial Boo, Chief Executive

Vicky Fox, Director of Regulation and Insight

Alastair Bridges, Director of Finance and Corporate Services

Georgia Wilson, Director of Improvement and MP Support

Head of Communications

Head of Policy and Assurance (until item 5)

Executive Assistant and Board Secretary (Minutes)

Apologies: Head of Human Resources (Item 5)

Status: Submitted for approval at the meeting of the Board on 21 April 2020

1. Welcome and Declarations of Interest

- 1.1 The Interim Chair opened the meeting and invited all to declare any interests not previously recorded. No such declarations were forthcoming. Following the update in Government advice regarding the coronavirus outbreak, and IPSA's subsequent decision to implement home-working immediately, it was agreed that some items of business would be dealt with by correspondence or through delegated authority to the Interim Chair if necessary.

2. Minutes and Actions List

- 2.1 The minutes of the meeting of the Board held on 25 February were approved. All actions due had been completed.

3. Chief Executive's Report

- 3.1 The Chief Executive opened by acknowledging the significant ongoing demand facing teams which has led to backlogs. This has been exacerbated by staff sickness and the implementation of home working due to the coronavirus outbreak. The approval of the 2020-21 corporate plan and main estimate, however, allows IPSA to better plan its activities for the coming year, and make improvements.
- 3.2 A planning meeting was held on 16 March by the Senior Management Team on business planning for 2020-21. The Improvement Portfolio Manager will now draw up a plan to sit alongside improvement priorities to be agreed by the Board in April. This will inevitably involve changing assumptions made only weeks ago, in the light of the coronavirus situation.
- 3.3 Following the Government's recommendation to avoid non-essential contact and to work from home, IPSA quickly shifted to remote-working to safeguard the health and well-being of its staff. The immediate priority was to respond to emails and clear the backlog of queries, as well as to support the wellbeing of staff working remotely. The approach is to ask MPs to email queries, marked urgent if necessary, so that we can route queries quickly to those best placed to answer. Staff from IPSA can then call back to follow-up.
- 3.4 The Board recognised the need for the swift decisions taken on 16 March and praised all staff who have adjusted to remote-working to maintain support to MPs and their staff. The Board was, however, concerned about the longer-term implications of phone line closure on support to MPs' offices and asked for this to be kept under review.

- 3.5 The Director of Improvement and MP Support provided the Board with the latest email data, which illustrated a sizeable increase in email volumes from 17 March, reflecting the phone line closure.
- 3.6 The Board sought further detail on the problem with expense codes flagged by the NAO. The Director of Finance and Corporate Services informed the Board that the functionality in question has now been disabled. The Board requested a report, as soon as possible, on the provenance and duration of this issue, as well as its impact on our accounting and on budgetary information provided to users. It also sought clarification on a potential problem with National Insurance calculations in staffing budget spreadsheets. The Director of Finance and Corporate Services agreed to provide this report and to liaise with the Chair of the Audit and Risk Assurance Committee. The Board also requested that it be alerted to any other issues noted by the NAO as the end of the financial year approaches.
- 3.7 The Interim Chair noted with disappointment an error made in the main estimate, which raised questions of quality control and oversight. The consequences of this and how to avoid such a reoccurrence would be discussed further by the Interim Chair. The Chief Executive formally apologised to the Board and agreed to work with the Board on action to prevent such mistakes in the future.

4. Business Continuity and Coronavirus

- 4.1 The Chief Executive informed the Board that the Director of Finance and Corporate Services was coordinating IPSA's response to the coronavirus. The Executive team were meeting daily and a greater devolution of responsibility to teams would be necessary for work to be done remotely at pace. At the meeting of 17 March, the Executive team agreed to immediately pause non-critical work to refocus efforts elsewhere. Other areas of work were under regular review.
- 4.2 The Director of Regulation and Insight presented proposals to the Board which would add flexibility to IPSA's Scheme in order to provide additional support to MPs at this time of national challenge. All of the enhanced funding and payment facilities proposed would support only coronavirus-related expenditure. The proposals included:
- waiving the 90-day claim submission deadline for costs incurred between 17 March and 30 June 2020 (with this end date extendable)
 - relaxing evidence requirements where reasonable, such as when such evidence is inaccessible due to staff illness,
 - an immediate uplift to the Office Costs budget to enable MPs to cover coronavirus-related expenditure,
 - switching on all payment cards,
 - raising MPs' payment card credit limits,

- streamlining the contingency process,
- reviewing year-end deadlines, and;
- considering advance loss-of-office payments before former MPs have fully wound-up.

- 4.3 Following discussion, the Board agreed to the principles recommended by the Director of Regulation and Insight, and to the detailed suggestions noted above.
- 4.4 On year-end, the preference of the Board was to extend the deadline, currently set for 26 April 2020, for all MPs, unless this raised significant risks. The Director of Finance and Corporate Services would liaise with his Finance team to consider the merits and demerits of this course of action and revert back to the Board. This was subsequently agreed by correspondence, in the hours following the Board meeting.
- 4.5 The Board supported an immediate uplift to the Office Costs budget for this financial year of £10,000. This will be available until the end of the next financial year. Should it be necessary, the Board accepted that IPSA should liaise with HM Treasury and parliamentary stakeholders on the resourcing of this emergency measure.
- 4.6 On the loss-of-office payment due to former MPs, the Director of Improvement and MP Support noted that 27 winding-up declarations had been received. We would also proactively contact MPs who appear to have no matters outstanding but who have not yet submitted their winding-up declaration.
- 4.7 The Board asked the Executive to consider offering advance loss-of-office payments to former MPs where appropriate and to find an administratively workable way to implement this. This should be done in a way that mitigates significant or material risks, notably on debt.
- 4.8 The Board was clear that this was its immediate response to the coronavirus and would regularly review its approach if the outbreak escalates further. The Board delegated authority to the Interim Chair to approve the communication of these measures to MPs. The Board thanked the executive for conducting this work at speed.

5. Staff Survey Results

- 5.1 The Board noted the results with serious concern.

- 5.2 The Director of Finance and Corporate Services advised that action planning within teams to respond to the survey results had been making progress until the adoption of home-working this week, following the Government's coronavirus advice. Teams have agreed actions and are working to involve and engage others. The planned all-staff event on 3 April was scheduled to discuss these matters further, though this was now likely to be cancelled. The coronavirus has clearly constrained our work in this area, which is now refocused on the achievable and the staff survey issues most relevant to our virus response.

6. Annual Survey Results

- 6.1 The Board noted the results of the annual survey of MPs and their staff with great concern. It was acknowledged that a report, including analysis of the results and a corresponding action plan, is usually published in May. This may be impacted significantly by the ongoing pandemic.
- 6.2 The Board noted that IPSA's planned improvement programme would need urgently to address the issues raised in the user survey, and asked the Executive to ensure that this is reflected in the paper the Board is due to receive for its meeting on 21 April.

7. Reflection on February Strategy Day, Review of Actions, and Next Steps

- 7.1 Following the successful February Strategy Day, the Chief Executive introduced a paper to record the discussion, agree actions, and maintain momentum in improving the organisation. The Board would be presented with a further paper on improvements in April, as well as on vision and strategy in June. SMT-level business planning was already underway.
- 7.2 The Board welcomed the paper, and agreed that its record of the discussion at the strategy day was accurate. The Board reiterated the importance of tackling silo-working, improving culture and communications, providing clarity of objectives, reconsidering end-to-end processes, and of having accountable, effective leadership within this improvement work. Visible improvement in our services to MPs and their staff was critical, particularly where decisions can be taken quickly and without prejudice to longer-term organisational design work.
- 7.3 The Board also noted the importance of engaging staff across the organisation, in order to ensure that there was appetite and capacity for improvement. The

Executive noted that there was appetite amongst the SMT to be further empowered, but some change fatigue within IPSA should be recognised. The improvement work should therefore follow an agile framework.

- 7.4 In the light of the coronavirus situation, the Board agreed that some work, even if in line with the corporate strategy, should be deprioritised to focus on more pressing or immediate issues. It was also important to ensure proportionality across IPSA's processes, in line with a risk-based approach and the decisions that the Board had made on coronavirus-related Scheme flexibilities. This would assist the drive for rapidly improved customer service and a vision of what good looks like. Greater leadership capacity may be required.
- 7.4 The Interim Chair recommended that a sub-committee of the Board, comprising two to three members, could oversee this improvement work to ensure the plan is sequenced, resources directed, and objectives prioritised appropriately.
- 7.5 The Board approved the recommendations of the Chief Executive and the additional suggestion by the Interim Chair of a new sub-committee. The Chief Executive would bring a paper to the Board on 21 April 2020, but not delay urgent changes before then where necessary and agreed with the Interim Chair or sub-committee.

8. Financial Position and Management Accounts

- 8.1 The Director of Finance and Corporate Services summarised his paper. Following a specific question on the inter-relationship between the winding-up and contingency budgets, the Board noted the report with thanks.

9. Board Work Programme 2020-21

- 9.1 The Board noted its programme of work for the next financial year.

10. Any Other Business

- 10.1 The Interim Chair encouraged Board Members to read the background paper on previous MP pay reviews, in advance of the scoping paper to be discussed in April. Within that paper, it would be helpful for the Board to see the range of potential approaches to the scope of the forthcoming review, whilst recognising that a minimal approach this year is likely to be necessary.

10.2 The Board agreed to consider the issues raised concerning death in the line of duty pension provision via correspondence and by separate discussions between the Interim Chair and, in particular, the Regulation and Insight directorate.

END