

MP parental leave & extended absence

Qualitative research and engagement:
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Background and methodology

Following extensive consultation, IPSA introduced an “MP Parental Leave Fund” in 2020/21 to provide additional staffing cover to MPs who become parents and take an extended absence from Westminster.

This was the first time that IPSA had established a bespoke budget for this support (provided previously under contingency funding) to help MPs balance their parliamentary and family lives, provide continuity of service for constituents, and ensure that being an MP was a viable option for people from all walks of life. As they are legally officeholders, statutory leave entitlements do not apply to MPs, who retain full pay and access to budgets throughout any absence.

In mid-2020-21, IPSA extended eligibility so that MPs away from Parliament for other long-term reasons, such as ill-health or hospitalisation, could access funding support for their offices to continue carrying out their parliamentary and constituency business. Following a further consultation exercise, IPSA formalised the “MP Parental Leave and absence budget” in 2022/23 to cover parental absence, ill-health, and cases in which MPs have caring responsibilities for another. IPSA also significantly increased the funding envelope, independently benchmarked and created a new senior staff cover job description, and updated its guidance.

Overall, IPSA believes a one size fits all approach to cover would not be right given the diverse ways in which MPs arrange their offices, and this was the consensus that emerged from the consultations. It is therefore for MPs to decide how they employ this funding, along with, or instead of, non-financial support measures offered by IPSA, so long as the normal rules of the IPSA Staffing Budget are followed. Several MPs have now accessed this support in different ways and for different reasons.

While the budget has been subject to continuous feedback, two consultations, and an Equality Impact Assessment, IPSA decided to conduct a targeted qualitative exercise to seek feedback on the support available. The exercise sought views from MPs, staff, and staff representatives, as well as external bodies, such as academics, charities, and professional organisations. Legislatures in the UK and across the world were also consulted to identify any gaps in IPSA provision, particularly in regard to protected characteristics, or other best practice both transferrable to IPSA’s statutory remit and MPs’ constitutional status as officeholders.

Invitations to interview were sent to a cross-party group of MPs reflecting positions on Select Committees and All-Party Parliamentary Groups (APPGs) engaged by this work. In a

sign of IPSA's commitment to these issues, they were led by IPSA Board member and former MP, Helen Jones.

Staff representatives from the Members' and Peers' Staff Association, Wellness Working Group, the Parliamentary Branch of Unite, the IPSA MP Staff User Group, and House of Commons Office Manager Group also participated. We also invited comments from all of Parliament's workplace equality networks. Interviews involved proactive feedback and queries from participants, free-flowing conversation, and specific questions from IPSA. A similar approach was followed in selecting and interviewing non-parliamentary participants. Non-MP interviews were led by IPSA's Chief of Staff, supported by the Policy team.

The work was supplemented by a general survey in IPSA's bulletin to MPs' offices, and a targeted questionnaire to MPs who had accessed funding for their real-life experience. While uptake there was low, other material, such as the Good Parliament Report 2016, various Select Committee findings, and a survey of MP experiences by Parliament's Members' Services Team, were consulted.

In addition, direct engagement was held with 10 MPs, two parliamentary committees, multiple MP staff representatives and meeting forums, four House of Commons teams, and 17 other external bodies. We are very grateful for their time and contributions. While the report must be read in this light, it provides valuable insight into satisfaction with the support available and a useful foundation upon which IPSA can base future changes.

As mentioned, there are limits within existing constitutional and legal arrangements to what IPSA can do given that MPs are officeholders. The term "leave" therefore means something different for MPs as they remain the elected constituency representative on full pay throughout any absence.

Nonetheless, the report tabled to the IPSA Board intends to help it understand and assess how IPSA's support could be refined and if new approaches to extended absence could be piloted within the bounds of its statutory remit.

March 2023

Executive summary

Across the interviews and variety of feedback channels, IPSA received a positive response on the support available in cases of parental absence, ill-health, and family care responsibilities. Many commented that the inbuilt discretion and inclusive nature of the package was right and encouraging, reflected best practice by focusing on need, and represented a welcome development in IPSA support. It is fair to say, however, that not all the MPs we engaged with had understood the wide range of circumstances covered, although most were content when this was outlined to them. All in all, it marked IPSA as an enabling and supportive organisation which met the needs of MPs seeking to balance their parliamentary duties with their personal circumstances and family responsibilities.

This conclusion is strengthened by the findings of the Women and Equalities Select Committee's [inquiry](#) into a Gender Sensitive House of Commons, which welcomed IPSA's support as a "major step forward". As outlined later, the Procedure Committee's positive reference to IPSA in its report recommending the expansion of Parliament's proxy vote scheme is also a great source of comfort in reaching this conclusion.

Comparisons were made with the approach taken in Scotland, Wales, New Zealand, and elsewhere. Notwithstanding different constitutional and electoral systems, many respondents observed that IPSA had gone further than many other jurisdictions in the world, including those held out as particularly progressive, and its compassionate model could be used as a template to support elected members. This was particularly the case in terms of the flexible coverage of all parents, the inclusion of ill-health (including mental health), the adaptable approach to the duration of the support, and the non-financial practical measures also available. A bespoke fund which facilitated pre-approval, and which was published in aggregate, also marked the Westminster system out for good reason.

More symbolically, IPSA support was seen as a positive signal, not only in ensuring that Parliament was an option for all, but also for MPs to set an example to other sectors in taking leave. This was felt particularly important on more complex or sensitive questions such as shared parental leave, adoption and surrogacy, and wider caring responsibilities. Promisingly, there was appetite to maintain the informal cross-legislature networks established during this work, not only to see the product of this engagement and continue to share best practice on these matters, but also to open further conversations on, for example, reasonable adjustments policy and supporting MPs and staff with disabilities.

MP respondents recognised that the support was symbolic of a wider shift in IPSA positioning to better support MPs to do their jobs and focus on what really matters.

In line with the Women and Equalities Select Committee's [finding](#) that the notion of a "locum" MP was "constitutionally difficult and potentially legally problematic", the clear majority, including MPs consulted, did not believe that such a role was constitutionally appropriate. The former point reflected IPSA's conclusion in the *MP Representative* job description and salary-setting process that, even though the role carried significant authority and autonomy, the staff member would be constitutionally barred from performing some duties which only MPs are able to do.

It was felt strongly, even among non-parliamentary respondents who endorsed significant legal change on wider questions of "locum" MPs, that IPSA support reflected a proper understanding of its statutory remit and the law.

MPs' staff also welcomed the provisions and wider practical measures available, such as an additional payment card and single point of contact. The overall package was thought fit for purpose and solution-focused, and the feedback from those who had accessed the scheme was positive, including at the MP Staff User Group.

So long as the annual dataset was large enough to avoid identifiability, there was agreement that IPSA had taken the right approach in publishing costs drawn from this budget in aggregate. This was in line with the Senedd, whereas the Scottish Parliament adds such expenditure to the global staffing cost per MSP published at year-end. The application for exceptional claims in Holyrood would ordinarily also be published but would be withheld if personal data exemptions so required it.

The consensus was therefore that IPSA had achieved a balance between providing public transparency and protecting MPs' privacy. This was felt crucial to avoid publication deterring potential claims if MPs, particularly women or those from lower socio-economic backgrounds, felt it would make them look "more expensive." The personal nature of the data captured, particularly on disability, also gave strong grounds for aggregation. Concerns, however, were noted in publishing dependant uplift figures against individual MPs.

While there was generally high satisfaction with the time period, eligibility criteria, and amount of budget, it was noted that the guidance could be drawn out more explicitly in

terms of shared parental leave, same-sex couples, stepchildren, and other circumstances such as baby loss, child bereavement, and long-term kinship care (such as when a grandparent assumes responsibility for a grandchild). Where the MP is absent for an extended period for such a caring responsibility (the term used in IPSA guidance), the budget applies regardless of sex, gender identity, or marriage/civil partnership status, or equally whether it arose via birth, adoption, surrogacy, or long-term kinship.

It was also felt that more emphasis could be placed on the flexibility of the scheme, such as the fact that the absence need not constitute one continuous period. Instead, several material periods of absence can be considered cumulatively as an extended absence, particularly in cases of medical treatment and adoption processes. The point that MPs were free to use the budget how they saw fit, so long as the rules of the IPSA staffing budget were followed, was worth flagging more explicitly too. This was because many MPs would likely wish to uprate, extend, or offer learning and development training to an existing staff member, pay overtime, or employ casework resource (or a combination thereof) than recruit a single, senior post.

Respondents additionally thought it useful to flag the existence of IPSA's disability assistance fund in this guidance to reassure MPs that support is also there for day-to-day reasonable adjustments.

While the consultation was welcomed as an essential way for IPSA to seek feedback and fulfil its obligations under the Public Sector Equality Duty, it was also suggested that it should improve its communications and join up with various teams in the House of Commons to raise awareness of the support available, such as Members' Services, Diversity and Inclusion, Members' HR, the Parliamentary Health and Wellbeing Service, and the proxy voting and other committee secretariats.

A joint induction for the *MP Representative* also received some support, as well as working with Members' HR on supporting staff to adjust to a new office structure and line management. By virtue of this exercise, IPSA has strengthened existing collaboration and built a base for future joint working.

It was also felt that IPSA needed to build stronger links with the Whips' offices so that the Whips – the first port of call for MPs seeking assistance or authorisation to be absent from voting – were equipped to signpost to or provide information on the IPSA support available, and that extra training might be needed to support this. It was also valuable to ensure this

knowledge is sustained over and above the induction received by new MPs following a by-election or General Election.

It was suggested that, while IPSA's main priority should be to raise awareness and bolster communications with existing MPs and staff, it has a positive story to tell on democratic participation and should work with other groups, such as political parties, representation groups, and others to inform prospective candidates that such support is available.

Important points were flagged on the publication of the dependant uplift, which IPSA has previously agreed before a parliamentary committee to "consider". Respondents largely felt this should be aggregated, with the issue considered within the body of the report and in the recommendations annexed to it. Where there were other significant policy recommendations, these questions often fell outside of IPSA's remit but remained relevant to the topic, such as House of Commons sitting hours.

It is fair to conclude that IPSA has delivered a strong support package and contributed to a healthier democracy by supporting MPs to balance their high-pressured parliamentary duties with their family lives and personal circumstances. Work now needs to be progressed on refining the guidance and to communicating what it covers more clearly so MPs know support is available.

Recommendations are included in the annex to the report and focus primarily on improvements to guidance, process, and communications. It is anticipated that most changes, if agreed, will not be subject to formal consultation nor fresh Equality Impact Assessment given they represent evolutions of, rather than a revolution in, the existing approach.

It is recommended that some proposed changes be subject to formal consultation where this would involve change to policy or involve IPSA voluntarily mirroring statutory provision despite MPs' status as officeholders, not employees.

Research and engagement

At the headline level, IPSA's provisions were welcomed as a major improvement on the support available and in marking the UK as having one of the most advanced and well thought-through frameworks in the world on business cost funding for these purposes.

Respondents felt the available support had improved significantly and met the needs of MPs who become parents, as well as that those taking time away for their own physical illness, mental ill-health, or to undertake a caring responsibility.

It was often necessary in discussions, however, to explain exactly what the guidance covers. It is sometimes not obvious to MPs and therefore the wording needs to be more explicit. That said, its inbuilt flexibility and willingness to pilot new assistance arrangements were supported. Throughout the work, the fact that comments largely focused on detailed points of process and systems indicated that the central policy was fit for purpose.

A bespoke fund and clear framework of support was also considered vital to ensure MPs' offices did not feel they had to "make do" and manage, often with significant workload and wellbeing pressures. Their past real-life experiences showed many MPs' offices would have benefitted from this more formal and structured approach to support.

A recurring theme, however, was that while the policy itself was effective, flexible, and person-centric, more effort was needed to make this clearer in the guidance, and to raise awareness of the support available in both IPSA's communications and its collaboration with other House and MP stakeholders.

Before turning to stakeholder-specific feedback below, fundamental aspects of the support were felt to be entirely suitable. For example, the amount of support offered by IPSA was seen as wholly sufficient to secure the support available, including from those whose offices had accessed the funding. This was particularly important to support offices in managing demand and their own wellbeing. given that many respondents commented on a sustained rise in casework.

Support period

The time period of support, usually covering absences of three months to seven months (but with case-by-case discretion to extend), was seen as a sensible framework.

In a House of Commons debate on proxy voting, the Chair of the Procedure Committee agreed the timeframe was a [“very good example”](#) of what should constitute a serious absence.

Respondents further welcomed the fact that the absence need not cover one continuous period. This was felt to be particularly sensible and sensitive in cases where the absence duration was hard to estimate, such as in cases of medical intervention and recovery, where the start date of leave is difficult to predict, or where a series of absences can accumulate into a larger period of leave.

The problem was felt to be acute in relation to the adoption process and in long-term kinship care, given the need for pre-adoption screening, a measured introduction of the child to the family, and “family-making” stabilisation time thereafter, particularly if the child had a tough upbringing or presents other challenges, as well as the potential for legal proceedings in formalising kinship arrangements. The fact that kinship care can happen with very little warning was also cited as a reason that the scheme needs to be flexible.

While some commentary was made on absences falling below three months, respondents were pleased that IPSA has discretion to cover significant absence periods falling under 12 weeks where appropriate and would, in any case, offer enhanced account management support and flexibilities to MPs experiencing major life events whatever duration, such as temporary kinship care.

For periods of less than three months, respondents were assured that IPSA did not take a binary cliff-edge approach and already offered more intensive operational support as appropriate when it becomes aware of an MP’s circumstances. As such, this needs to be made explicit in guidance.

It was also understood that the three-month period reflected not only a consideration of when was appropriate to deploy extra public funding but also reflected a practical challenge in that it is unlikely MPs could procure external staffing resource for shorter periods of absence given lead time for end-to-end recruitment and security clearance.

In those circumstances of shorter but still sizeable absences, it was noted the MP may prefer instead to uplift or extend existing staffing terms and that IPSA encouraged MPs to contact us in such cases to determine if discretion to offer funding should be exercised. In this regard, the non-financial measures were also welcomed, such as an additional payment card, single point of contact, and flexed proxy permissions (including amendments to ensure proxy claims can be approved in the MP's absence).

Eligibility criteria

No material concerns were raised as to the documentation required by IPSA for eligibility purposes.

Many of the documents were considered standard in many processes, including within other legislatures, and IPSA had secured the right balance between avoiding intrusion and excessive bureaucracy, and providing an audit trail to assure the public that their money was being used properly.

It was noted that IPSA may need to take a more flexible, but auditable, approach to assurance when MPs face a sudden responsibility, such as long-term kinship care, and may not be able to furnish IPSA with formal documentation either immediately or at all.

Provided this documentation can be sourced, it is worth noting that IPSA's approach of enabling MPs to employ the funding as they see fit within the normal rules of the staffing budget stood out within the engagement exercise. So long as MPs stay within the funding envelope, comply with the rules of the staffing budget, and documentation can be provided, their funding is pre-approved. Other legislatures, however, had adopted a discretionary application process for the decision of Members' Support teams (Wales), Corporate Bodies (Scotland), or Speaker of the House (New Zealand) on what was reasonable and value for money in the circumstances.

In some legislatures, these costs were also published at the individual level (Scotland). In others, they were consolidated (Wales) or not published at all (New Zealand). Among those surveyed, none had a bespoke fund like IPSA and instead drew this expenditure from uncapped "exceptional" or general contingency-based funding streams.

While the outcomes may well be similar in terms of the ultimate provision of staffing cover and appreciating that different electoral and parliamentary systems are at play, the difference in process, funding source, and publication is of note.

Life circumstances

Advice was also given that IPSA should draw out more explicitly which life circumstances may be eligible under the budget, but which may be left implicit or open to interpretation under the guidance as written. As MPs may be reluctant to send queries to a generic enquiries line, the step of having to ask about their circumstances may in itself be a barrier. With their high-pressured duties, it is feasible that a busy MP's office would only seek out and read this guidance as and when they need it. Clarity, therefore, is key.

While it is impossible to foresee, outline, and distil every scenario into an easily digestible guidance document, it was suggested that IPSA provide more examples, such as long-term kinship care, of what can be covered so that MPs can find clear information when they need it.

This was felt particularly vital with sudden, unexpected, and traumatic events where immediate clarity would be helpful, including on baby loss, child bereavement, and long-term kinship care.

Where there is baby loss after 24 weeks, it was proposed that IPSA consult on mirroring statutory maternity terms and explicitly recognise that this fund could apply over and above any additional non-financial support and account management measures offered to the MP in such cases.

Publication of costs

There was support across parliamentary and non-parliamentary stakeholders for IPSA's approach to publication in aggregating costs drawn from this budget across all MPs, subject to the Freedom of Information Act.

Individualised publication was felt to be inappropriate on data, privacy, and security grounds, as well as for potentially deterring MPs, particularly female MPs, who require additional cover from making use of the funds. This was deemed unfair and viewed as problematic if reluctant take-up of the budget created additional pressure on MPs' staff when support was indeed available.

Respondents considered IPSA's wider support for parents, those with caring responsibilities, or with individual health conditions in the round and thought that an aggregate approach to publication may be appropriate more broadly.

This view was formed out of concern that publication of the dependant uplift – an increase in accommodation budget enabling up to three children to stay with the MP in Westminster – may mean an MP is reluctant to take up this funding for fear of criticism of looking more expensive in published data and therefore be less able to balance their parliamentary and family lives.

This view was delivered formally by the [Women & Equalities Select Committee](#) upon considering evidence submitted to its inquiry, including from the Chair of the Administration Committee. In this work, many external advocacy bodies, professional organisations, and academics echoed the position with many feeling that the inconsistency in publication approach for these claims did not appear logical.

Publishing the uplifts in aggregate could provide a safer, more secure middle ground where the public has clarity of MPs' global expenditure in this regard, while removing any (potentially gendered) deterrent factor and better safeguarding the privacy of MP and child. It may therefore be appropriate to consult on this aspect of IPSA's publication policy for 2023/24.

Generally, however, IPSA's wider support on dependant travel and accommodation went further than the other legislatures considered (where it was either more restrictively defined/capped, subject to application, or otherwise unavailable), and was welcomed as well-placed to support MPs in balancing their parliamentary and family lives. Some, though, did allow direct care costs to be claimed for caring for children or dependants.

Canvassing views

Respondents were encouraged by the breadth of bodies that IPSA was proactively consulting and were invited to recommend any other organisations for their views.

Respondents found the support faithfully reflected IPSA's statutory remit, and the constitution. The bodies and individuals who favoured legislative change in this area also shared this view and, even if they wished the wider constitutional framework to be different, supported IPSA's provisions and position. This stance was reinforced when viewed in the round alongside accommodation and travel support offered to MPs' dependants.

While IPSA previously consulted on funding for extended absence, those consultations involved interested groups proactively seeking out the exercise. On this occasion, IPSA

proactively contacted and sought the insight of a variety of external subject matter experts on the basis of their knowledge, advocacy, or comparative experience as a legislative body.

Diversity and equality

General themes of their feedback are reflected throughout this report and, as we have seen, have been marked out especially as and when appropriate. While suggestions were made, the overall view of professional organisations in the HR sphere and advocacy groups focused on supporting those with particular protected characteristics, or increasing the diversity of parliamentary representation, supported the package as fit for purpose and often reflecting best practice.

It is important to note too that the Equality and Human Rights Commission, after expressing no concerns in 2019 with IPSA's contingency approach of the past, again welcomed the provisions included in the Scheme. It further recognised that this consultation was an essential way of testing assumptions made in the original Equality Impact Assessment and fulfilling IPSA's continuous obligations under the Public Sector Equality Duty.

MPs and MPs' staff

While the findings above are also generally reflective of the feedback from MPs and staff who contributed, it is worth noting further commentary specific to Members of Parliament and their offices.

Broadly, the MPs consulted and who contributed to our feedback exercise were very satisfied with the support and how IPSA had developed it over time. There were no concerns about the amount of support and few misgivings with the policy surrounding it, with comments instead focused on process or guidance improvements.

While the *MP Representative* job description explicitly recognises the scope for a one-month handover period – which can be taken before or after the absence or split between – parliamentary stakeholders raised the prospect of phased returns.

Staff welfare and extended absence

In most cases of extended absence, IPSA recognises that MPs do not and often cannot simply “switch off” from their role and remain regularly in touch with their team, their colleagues, and the wider political environment. As there is real merit in this for staff wellbeing, IPSA has not and does not wish to set hard and fast rules in terms of phased returns or “keep-in-touch” days, although the latter carries a statutory connotation. It therefore has no requirement that MPs are absent “from the precincts of the House” unlike the proxy voting scheme as originally constructed.

It may therefore be useful for IPSA to clarify that the funding would not be withdrawn if MPs periodically revisit the House or their teams while in receipt of extended absence funding.

While we do not expect such a case to occur, the funding could not, however, fairly continue if the MP’s presence on the estate was so frequent that they could reasonably be deemed to have returned to work. Liaising more closely with the proxy voting secretariat to identify when the proxy vote is no longer active, and with the Whips’ office to establish absence, may assist in these extremely rare and unlikely potential cases.

Caring responsibilities

Linking with the Whips was considered especially useful and important in cases where an MP required time away from Westminster to care for a partner, whether married, civil partnered, or cohabitating.

In other words, if Whips grant absence from voting and wider leave from Parliament in such cases, then IPSA could reasonably rely on that judgement as to whether the absence is serious and necessary.

In cases where the MP was unable to give consent to additional funding, such as if they were in a coma, it was also noted that IPSA would consult the caretaker MP nominated by the political party on the support available. Where no such caretaker is in place, IPSA would work closely with Members’ HR on supporting the MP’s staff.

Parliamentary Committees

The Women and Equalities Select Committee's inquiry into a Gender Sensitive House of Commons welcomed the "progress" in support offered by IPSA as a "major step forward". It also stated that "IPSA support for parent MPs was ... key to sustaining gender sensitivity" and made a number of recommendations to this end.

It is encouraging that many such recommendations had been agreed and/or implemented before the report's publication, including explicit reference to surrogacy in our guidance and a commitment to conduct an Equality Impact Assessment within the upcoming wider regulatory review.

Parental leave

The Committee further recommended that IPSA go further than the proxy voting scheme (at the date of the Committee's publication) on the entitlements of fathers, secondary adopters, and biological partners in accessing the budget. This principle was echoed by the Procedure Committee in its [report into proxy voting](#), who otherwise noted the "high level of support made available by IPSA for enhanced cover" and the "very favourable terms on which Members may take parental leave".

During the time of the engagement exercise, IPSA's support went further than the proxy voting scheme in a number of ways, particularly as it does not require the MP to be immediately absent upon the birth or adoption date. In the Senedd, in contrast, maternity or paternity leave was expected to be taken "no later than 23 weeks before the due date" and adoption "as soon as the Member has begun the process of applying". IPSA's flexibility here was felt critical in cases where a baby spends some time in a neonatal unit and does not immediately return home.

Unlike the proxy voting scheme at the time of the research interviews, the IPSA budget also enables 'keep-in-touch' days on the parliamentary estate and covers non-parental forms of extended absence, such as ill-health. Likewise, it enables a staggered approach to absence and does not assume which parent will undertake the domestic care duties for the purposes of this budget. As such, it is already the case that the parents mentioned above have equal access to the budget and this confirmation was provided in [writing to](#) the Women and Equalities Select Committee.

In her [response](#) to an inquiry led by the Administration Committee, the Chair of the Committee restated its view that the budget was a “major step forward”, and raised awareness of IPSA’s confirmation that the fund can apply flexibly to a range of parents and in situations of ill-health. This should be reflected explicitly in IPSA guidance.

Sickness absence and Proxy Voting

In its report, the Procedure Committee noted that IPSA had already made provision for MPs facing serious illness to access this fund and referred to it when themselves recommending a pilot expansion of the proxy voting scheme to include long-term illness and serious injury.

It also recommended equalising proxy voting rights for biological fathers, partners, or second adopters and that the proxy voting scheme more clearly cover circumstances in which there are complications in childbirth.

The Procedure Committee additionally concluded in its report that the bar on participation in House proceedings to those with a proxy vote be removed to better enable “keep in touch” days and attendance at Urgent Questions when time does not allow for the proxy vote to be suspended. As the Committee has recommended changes that would align the terms of the proxy voting scheme closer to the terms of the IPSA fund, IPSA’s support appears to be in the right place if other respected bodies are moving closer to, rather than away from, its position.

In its [response](#) to the Procedure Committee, the Government noted that the matters raised were for the proper determination of the House of Commons and stated its consistent view, which it had previously submitted to the Women & Equalities Select Committee, that it “welcomed IPSA launching the parental leave cover fund in April 2021 to allow Members to cover any additional staff resourcing and office cover costs in line with the normal rules on staffing”.

The proposals of the Procedure Committee were put before the House for debate on 12 October 2022 and a pilot was approved. In its response above, it is also worth noting that the Government committed to encourage departments to arrange appropriate access to briefings for members of staff nominated for such duties by proxy voting.

Conclusions

This engagement project found broad support for and satisfaction with the measures IPSA had put in place to assist MPs who require a significant period of time away from Westminster. As such, no Scheme-level changes are recommended immediately, pending the fundamental review of IPSA's regulatory model that is already underway.

The research did suggest, however, that some guidance, process, and communications improvements could be made to further support MPs in balancing their parliamentary and family lives, as well as to support MPs' staff in their absence. Two substantive questions were raised about whether IPSA should consult on mirroring statutory provisions on baby loss after the twenty-fourth week and, separately, whether its publication policy should be amended to publish uplifts to accommodation budgets for dependants in aggregate.

Recommendations

1. IPSA makes explicit in its guidance what it has confirmed in writing to the Women and Equalities Select Committee that the MP parental leave and absence budget is available on the same terms to fathers, second adopters, and biological partners who conduct the principal at-home care role. While the standard period of cover is aligned to the seven months offered by the proxy voting scheme, IPSA should also make clear the other features of its support which are less restrictive than the current permanent proxy vote system (though noting a pilot expansion has been agreed).
2. Stronger reference should be made to surrogacy, same-sex couples, shared parental leave, and adoption, with encouragement to MPs to contact IPSA, including via a single (and senior) point of contact, to discuss what may be feasible in their circumstances. This also includes confirming the eligibility of stepchildren.
3. While certain life events could be read as implicitly covered by the budget, IPSA should provide more examples of extended absence in which support could be available, such as baby loss and long-term kinship care. IPSA should also consult on mirroring statutory maternity rules as far as it concerns baby loss after 24 weeks.
4. The guidance should elaborate on the fact that absence need not be taken in one, continuous period, and that an MP facing a cycle of material absences accumulating

into an extended period of absence – such as in the case of the adoption process, long-term kinship care, or medical treatment and recovery, remains eligible for funding and should contact IPSA. IPSA should also make clear there is discretion within the provisions so that MPs facing material absences of fewer than three months can contact IPSA to discuss potential support, and in cases of shorter absence, enhanced account management is available, including for proxies.

5. IPSA should link to its disability assistance funding page to provide reassurance that provision is available for ongoing conditions which require reasonable adjustments.
6. While aggregated publication was welcomed, respondents tended to view support for parental responsibilities in the round and questioned why the dependant uplift was attributable to MPs individually. IPSA should consult on this change during 2023/24.
7. IPSA should ensure the guidance is well-communicated among MPs and staff, delivering it via the most effective means, and hosting it via the most effective sources and messengers. To this end, IPSA should formally seek to jointly communicate or share communications for onward circulation with House services, committee secretariats, and staff representatives mentioned above, and cement the relationships with respective Whips' offices across Parliament.
8. In addition to participants, IPSA should share its report with the Women and Equalities Select Committee, Procedure Committee, Administration Committee, House departments, MP staff fora, and Whips' offices for information. The guidance should also be shared with bodies with an interest in parliamentary representation.
9. IPSA should focus on public engagement, such as blog posts, on the value of this support in ensuring Parliament is a place where people of all walks of life, including those with children, dependants, or individual health conditions, aspire to serve as an MP, and that the funding is designed to provide continuity of service to constituents.
10. IPSA should write to MPs to outline the support available alongside the new guidance. To boost readership, this could be done using the House pigeonhole system, via a House magazine article, and in collaboration with the stakeholders above.