

IPSA IMPLEMENTATION ADVISORY PANEL
Minutes of third meeting, 11am Friday 29th January 2010
11 Tothill Street, London

Present:

Maurice Frankel (Campaign for Freedom of Information)
Dr Ruth Fox (Hansard Society)
Alexandra Runswick (Unlock Democracy)
Mark Wallace (Taxpayers Alliance)
Ben Farrugia (Taxpayers Alliance)

Andrew McDonald (interim Chief Executive, IPSA) – Chair of meeting
James Gerard (IPSA Implementation team)
Jamie Rubbi-Clarke (IPSA Implementation team)
Shellina Haq (IPSA Implementation team)
Sam Reed (Secretariat, IPSA Implementation Advisory Panel)

INTRODUCTION

1. Andrew McDonald opened by welcoming everyone to the meeting. He then briefly set out the progress that has been made since the last panel meeting, highlighting the good response to the consultation and the completion of the second OGC Gateway Review.

KEY PROPOSALS OF THE CONSULTATION PAPER

ACCOMMODATION

2. Shellina Haq began by setting out the key proposals regarding accommodation contained within the consultation paper. SH then asked the panel for their views on these. Ben Farrugia began by stating that he felt the proposal setting out the eligibility criteria for claiming accommodation expenses (outside zones 1-6) should cover a larger area. BF recognised the need for a simple system but stated fairness should be the top priority. SH asked how a wider area could be defined and BF replied that it could be measured from the nearest mainline train station, suggesting 1 hour from a station could be sufficient.
3. Alex Runswick disagreed with this suggestion. AR recognised that no system would be perfect but that the zones 1-6 proposal was clear, simple, and objective. There could be no debating whether the constituency contained a station within zone 6. AR thought that measuring the commuting time was far more complicated and mentioned that public transport performed better in certain areas. AR also said that ideally MPs should justify their need for accommodation and be judged on the merits of such a justification, but admitted this system would not be possible in the current political climate.
4. Mark Wallace suggested that it would be possible to extend the area to mainline ticketing zones outside of zone 6. Whilst there were no maps, MW suggested, there were fare zones. MW thought it might be worth

IPSA contacting the Association of Train Operating Companies. RF thought it would be difficult to compare fare zones of different train operators. AR pointed out that some MPs would be within zone 6 but over an hour away and questioned whether they should be eligible? MW agreed that this was one of the issues to be resolved.

5. Ruth Fox pointed out that sitting times in Parliament mean that MPs do not have a regular commute. RF suggested that the need for MPs to stay late for votes could increase if the upcoming election produces a hung Parliament. RF also mentioned that the problem with a more complex system was that it would increase the burden on IPSA to make judgements on what areas are eligible. AM agreed that in any case it was vital that there was uniformity in the way IPSA communicated with MPs. RF agreed with AR that the zones 1-6 proposal might be the simplest way to administer this expense.
6. RF noted that after the general election there would be great pressure on the new intake of MPs to submit claims responsibly and a desire to do so and not be caught out would be very much in their minds. It should be made very clear to the new intake of MPs that even where they might fall outside the boundary drawn for accommodation, such provision was not an absolute entitlement and particularly for those bordering the boundary if they could commute as reasonably as colleagues within the boundary then they should do so. MW agreed that MPs would be very conscious about the public perception when submitting claims.
7. Maurice Frankel questioned whether a system needed to be so rigidly enforced as a strict choice between either zones 1-6 or 1 hour commute to Westminster. The two could be combined, so that an MP who met either criterion might qualify, MF thought the eventual system should measure the travelling distance from the MP's home rather than a train station.
8. SH asked the panel for their views on the proposal to allow MPs with caring responsibilities to apply for higher levels of accommodation expenses. MW stressed it was vital to define what we meant by 'caring responsibilities'. It was important to draw a distinction between MPs with caring responsibilities for disabled family members and MPs with children. BF mentioned that he had checked with various private companies and that the norm is to provide for the employee to stay in London and not their families. BF was sympathetic to the situation but stressed it was part of the choice to become an MP.
9. RF expressed concern that whatever accommodation system was put in place it should not act as an impediment to the possibility of securing improved representation of women in Parliament. RF stressed that at present only 19% of MPs are female and therefore Parliament remains deeply unrepresentative. If Parliament is to truly represent the population it serves then increased female representation is necessary – including women with young children. RF noted that over the last decade MPs such as Yvette Cooper and Ruth Kelly had been able to

be MPs and have babies and young children in part because the children were with them in both the constituency and London, though clearly decisions about where an MP's children might primarily be based might change when they reach school age. If a rental cap was to apply, or under a future system of centrally provided accommodation, then some flexibility should be retained to take account of this. BF suggested that an MP with a family could choose to move further out to zone 4 where it was possible to obtain more suitable accommodation. MW stated the need for a system that was equal for all MPs, irrespective of gender. AR pointed out that the reality was that caring responsibilities were not divided up equally between genders.

TRAVEL

10. SH asked the panel whether they agreed with the proposal to allow MPs with caring responsibilities to claim for the travel of those they are caring for. AR agreed, stressing that MPs with young children need to be able to move easily between Parliament and their constituency. It was also a key factor in increasing the representation of women MPs. MW reiterated his previous point about the need to distinguish between different definitions of caring and suggested a starting point could be to agree definitions and categorise what is not being disputed.
11. JG asked if there was any empirical evidence of whether an expenses scheme could affect the representation of women as MPs. RF said she was not aware of any specific evidence and that the problem of low levels of representation of women was caused by a complex set of factors. BF expressed reservations about using IPSA as a vehicle to increase representation of women MPs. RF agreed that IPSA should not and could not be the vehicle for securing increased representation, but equally it should not establish an expenses system that builds in more barriers which further inhibit women from becoming MPs. RF noted that the Society's evidence to the Kelly inquiry had recommended abolition of the current rules governing family travel – the provisions were arbitrary – a small fixed number of single journeys – and had been claimed without receipts. Any improvement on this system would be welcome.
12. SH asked for views on the proposal for MPs to normally travel in standard class and only be entitled to claim expenses for first class travel in exceptional circumstances. MW, BF and AR all agreed with the proposal.
13. SH asked which assurance arrangement they favoured (with reference to para 7.7 in the consultation paper), MW stated MPs should specify the amount, state what it is for, and provide a signature. AR agreed.

STAFF

14. Jamie Rubbi-Clarke asked the panel's views on the proposal to prohibit the use of public funds in the employment of family members by MPs. RF mentioned that where MPs employ family members, it can create various employment issues for other staff which could be difficult to resolve. RF noted that it was important that MPs adopt good employment practices, that there was the potential for conflicts of interest and that the situation was not helped when the parliamentary authorities did not formally recognise the trade union representatives of MPs staff. MF didn't think IPSA could publicly justify banning MPs from employing family members on the grounds that in some cases this had led to employment issues for other staff.
15. AR was sceptical about the effectiveness of such a ban, suggesting that family members will just work for another MP. MF suggested such ideas were already being discussed in Parliament. MW thought this was the biggest issue for the public and that public opinion alone would mean this proposal had to be agreed. BF mentioned that abuse was not necessarily wide-spread but that just a few occasions were enough to create a public perception problem.
16. AR pointed out that the debate is just about the use of public funds to employ family members and that political parties were free to pay, which could create all of the same problems. MW thought the major problem was the use of public funds, which RF agreed with stating it was a matter of probity and good employment practice.
17. JRC asked if an open and fair competition for all employees, including family members, would help? MF agreed, mentioning that abuses of employment practices could occur more generally than just with family members. MW thought that any system that allowed MPs to employ family members would be a step too far for the public. There were also practical issues as to how this would be administered. JG raised the idea of having an independent assessor for each recruitment campaign but MF argued that the majority of these positions were administrative grades and it would be exceptional to have this level of scrutiny for each position.

OTHER KEY PROPOSALS

18. JG asked the panel for views on the IPSA's proposals regarding communications expenditure as set out in the consultation paper. MF thought it was absurd not to allow MPs to post political material on their website. MW agreed that there was, at present, an imbalance. AM noted it was difficult to find an apolitical representative role distinguishable from their party role. MW thought it was possible to distinguish between posting political material on their website and sending out leaflets about themselves to constituents. MF agreed, noting that clearly it was the constituents' choice to visit a website as opposed to receiving leaflets. MW thought annual reports were not necessary and there was a concern around content. AR agreed and thought they would become the worst excesses of a communications allowance.

19. AM summarised four themes from the discussion:

- The need for a trade off between complexity and responsiveness to individual circumstances, and the need for administrative simplicity;
- The extent to which IPSA should study comparators;
- The extent to which it is appropriate to promote broader social aspirations for Parliament
- Public perceptions versus unfairness in individual circumstances.

IPSA GOVERNANCE – STAKEHOLDER INPUT

20. Sam Reed led a brief discussion on how IPSA could get the best out of working with organisations when it was operational. AR suggested that often advisory panels are set up but soon interest is lost. It was important to be clear about what IPSA wanted to achieve through such activities. MF suggested that a useful future consultation would be around transparency of the expenses scheme. MF also suggested that IPSA should consider holding open board meetings and cited the Food Standards Agency as an example.

End