



National Audit Office

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Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority

Findings from the NAO's survey of MPs

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This report presents the findings from the NAO's survey of MPs which was conducted in May and June 2011 as part of our value for money study on the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority (IPSA) and its administration of MPs' expenses.

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This report can be found on the National Audit Office website at www.nao.org.uk/ipsa-2011

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Introduction

This report presents the findings from the NAO's survey of MPs which was conducted in May and June 2011 as part of our value for money study on the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority (IPSA) and its administration of MPs' expenses. A questionnaire was sent to all MPs, and responses were received from 325, or 50 per cent of MPs. A full account of the methodology is provided at Appendix Two, and a copy of the questionnaire with topline findings can be found at Appendix Three.

The survey questionnaire contained a mix of pre-coded and open-ended questions. MPs were also invited to raise issues about the scheme and how it could be improved, and a number of MPs also made additional comments on particular questions. In order to reflect all the information MPs returned, two types of analyses were undertaken. We used **quantitative analysis** to describe the profile of survey responses and how these varied for different groups of MPs. We also used **qualitative analysis** to draw out and identify the main themes raised in the additional comments provided.

Quotes from individual MPs' responses to the survey are included throughout the report for illustrative purposes. These are only included if they represent views that are widely held by MPs.

Headline findings

- 1** The majority of MPs accept many of the new Scheme's key principles:
 - Most agree that the old system needed to be reformed.
 - Most also accept that evidence should be submitted for all reimbursements.
 - Small majorities agree that independent regulation is better than self-regulation and that all claims should be published.
- 2** However, the majority of MPs see the current claims system as complex, burdensome and bureaucratic. In particular:
 - MPs find the online system cumbersome to use and submitting claims difficult.
 - MPs and staff report spending a lot of time on the process of submitting claims and clarifying queries.
 - MPs felt that undue repetition was built into the system with multiple layers of validation and checking.
- 3** The support and advice provided by IPSA was not well rated by MPs (particularly support via email and in writing). MPs articulated a need for more accessible, consistent and clear support from IPSA to help them use the system effectively.
- 4** Relationships between IPSA and MPs are strained in the eyes of the latter:
 - MPs made references to poor relationships between MPs and IPSA staff, e.g. that staff distrusted MPs' claims or were not respectful.
 - The system was seen by some MPs as inherently punitive and 'anti-MP'.
- 5** The majority of MPs did not claim for certain expenses or could not claim enough to meet their costs. The publication of claims and their use in the media compounded a perceived disincentive to claim. MPs pointed to potentially adverse effects, in particular:
 - MPs reported that they were personally subsidising their role.
 - MPs identified a longer-term risk that this would shape the future profile of MPs, in that only those who could afford to subsidise the system might choose to stand for parliament.
- 6** MPs felt that the current system did not facilitate their work, the nature of which was poorly understood by IPSA staff. In particular:
 - Levels of satisfaction in this respect were generally low.
 - The qualitative analysis found that the system was seen by MPs more as a barrier, not an enabler, to their work.
 - Some MPs highlighted particular scenarios (e.g. routine travel claims) where systems could be streamlined to meet needs better.

MPs' views on IPSA and the expenses system

IPSA and the expenses system

Seven out of ten MPs (70 per cent) agreed that the expenses system in place prior to the 2010 election required major change; 23 per cent disagreed (and the rest neither agreed nor disagreed).

There were mixed views on whether independent regulation by IPSA was better than self-regulation. A small majority (53 per cent) of MPs agreed with this, while 23 per cent disagreed (the rest neither agreed nor disagreed).

There were also mixed views on whether IPSA was right to adopt a cautious approach to expenses, given the context in which it came into being. Twenty eight per cent of MPs agreed with this statement, while around half (49 per cent) disagreed.

Most MPs did not think that recent changes to the expenses system (made in April 2011) would improve the scheme's ability to facilitate MPs' work. Three quarters felt the changes would not improve the scheme very much (61 per cent) or at all (13 per cent), while 27 per cent thought it would improve it a great deal or a fair amount.

New MPs were more likely than existing MPs to agree that the system needed change (84 per cent compared to 62 per cent). MPs with constituencies outside London and the South East were more likely to agree that independent regulation was better than self-regulation or to be neutral in their opinion. Otherwise, there was no (significant) difference between groups on these questions.

In their responses to open-ended questions, many MPs told us that they did not feel the expenses system was designed to meet their needs. Many reflected that IPSA had a poor level of understanding about what their job entailed.

"IPSA fails to understand family commitments and the hours MPs work. IPSA fails to understand the volume, pace or range of an MP's work."

"It feels, as an MP, as if IPSA was set up to punish this generation of MPs for the sins of the last."

MPs felt that the system was designed in reaction to the recent expenses scandal and associated media attention. As a result, they felt it was a punitive system and that IPSA assumed their guilt. They felt this was unfair, particularly for new MPs.

MPs commented that the new system was too heavy-handed and that, in their view, multiple validation methods were disproportionate to requirements.

The rules and procedures for claiming expenses

Three quarters (75 per cent) of MPs agreed that receipts and documentary evidence should be required for all claims; 18 per cent disagreed with this. There were mixed views on whether IPSA should continue to publish details of individual claims: while the majority (57 per cent) agreed with this, nearly a third (32 per cent) disagreed.

There were also mixed views on whether MPs should no longer be reimbursed for the cost of mortgage interest payments or other associated costs. Thirty per cent agreed this should be discontinued, while 56 per cent disagreed.

New MPs were more likely than existing MPs to agree that receipts and documentary evidence should be required (84 per cent compared to 69 per cent), and that mortgage repayments should be stopped (37 per cent compared to 27 per cent). Those with dependants were more ambivalent about the requirement to publish (55 per cent of MPs with dependants agreed and 18 per cent were neutral; the equivalent figures for MPs without dependants were 60 per cent and 7 per cent).

Qualitative evidence showed that most MPs felt the system for claiming expenses was too complex, leading to wasted time and effort. In particular:

"It is often not clear what category you should claim under and whether it is allowable."

"There is little chance to explain a claim that does not fit the drop down options."

- They said there were too many expenses categories and that these were too prescriptive, with insufficient guidance from IPSA and hence confusion around which ones to use for particular claims. This meant that MPs had to bear the 'risk' of making an incorrect claim (which would be later published).

Despite its complexity, many MPs felt the system provided them with insufficient information to reconcile their claims and was too inflexible to take account of non-standard arrangements, such as MPs sharing offices.

They felt the system would be simpler and more cost-efficient if certain costs were not categorised as 'expenses', and instead paid from a central budget, for example office costs.

MPs regarded the system as too restrictive and said this made it difficult to make claims. In particular they raised the following issues:

- They felt there was not enough use of direct payments and that the use of payment cards was too restrictive.
- They reported that the system did not allow for them to claim repeat or routine costs easily (for example a routine train journey).
- They felt that the requirement for exact dates on invoices and receipts could be difficult to meet.

- They thought that the system did not easily accommodate expenses that were split across two financial years.
- MPs felt that the system was too inflexible to take account of modern, e-billing, and they were frustrated that the system did not accept online bills or receipts.
- The rule that claims must be made within 90 days was unpopular amongst MPs.

MPs said that some rules around what can be claimed for were also too restrictive. Particular concerns included:

- They felt that the rules about the levels of pay for staff and the inability to pay bonuses made it difficult to retain staff. Under the Third Edition of the Expenses Scheme, MPs may only pay their staff 'modest' reward and recognition payments.
- They thought it was unfair that they could not claim for costs associated with meetings and entertainment, including coffees.
- They felt that travel rules were too restrictive.

MPs found the way that IPSA administered the system to be mistrusting and intrusive:

- They felt it was excessive in the amount of detail it demanded from them regarding evidence of expenses.
- Some did not see why they should always be required to provide the original receipt.
- They did not like the publishing of all claims, with particular concerns about their privacy, and the way that rejected claims were published which appeared to show that they had attempted to make an illegitimate claim – when often it had been rejected on a technicality and later paid.

"I had claims rejected simply because I had put them in the wrong category and then IPSA published them as unpaid claims, despite the fact they had by then paid them!"

Some MPs viewed the rules as unfair, principally because they had an unequal impact on MPs according to their personal wealth/income, or family status:

- Some MPs reported that those with personal wealth or second jobs could afford not to make claims, whilst those reliant on their MPs' salary alone could not avoid the disadvantages of the system (such as invasion of privacy or time burden).
- A few MPs felt that the rules were unfair to those with young families. Although the impact on family life overall was unclear, particular issues raised by MPs related to childcare and limitations on travel (spouses can only claim travel if accompanying dependants).

"It's wasteful of time to have to do every expense claim twice – online and paper."

MPs identified certain rules and processes as increasing and not decreasing cost to the taxpayer. The key issues were:

- Overall, they saw duplication in using both a paper and an online system for expenses.
- MPs raised the issue of the greater cost of paying rent rather than claiming back mortgage interest. Under a transitional arrangement, returning MPs are only able to claim mortgage interest subsidy until 31 August 2012.
- Some MPs felt that work time was wasted by generally not being allowed to travel first class by train.

MPs' use of the claims process

Nearly all MPs (99 per cent) responding to the survey had claimed for staffing expenses in the financial year 2010-11 after the 2010 General Election. Most had also made claims for travel (88 per cent), office accommodation (87 per cent) or other office expenses (86 per cent) and personal accommodation expenses (72 per cent). A lower proportion, 41 per cent, had claimed for subsistence expenses.

Sixty three per cent of MPs found it difficult to submit claims, while 37 per cent found it 'very' or 'fairly' easy. (There were no significant differences between any key groups.)

On average, MPs estimated that submitting claims took about four hours (of personal time) a month, and twelve hours of staff time.¹ However, this varied widely: answers ranged from 0-80 hours of MP time, and 0-100 hours for staff time.

MPs were asked how much time they thought was appropriate for them and their staff to spend on dealing with expenses. On average, MPs felt they should spend about two hours a month, while their staff should spend about four hours a month. However, as for actual time, there was a wide range of answers.

A comparison of the amount of time actually spent and what MPs thought was appropriate showed that 70 per cent of MPs spent more time than they thought was appropriate, while 83 per cent of MPs thought staff spent more time than was appropriate. The equivalent figure for total (MP and staff) time was 93 per cent.

There were mixed views on whether the system took more or less time to operate now than it had directly after the General Election. Around one in three MPs (32 per cent) thought they and their staff spent more time now, 24 per cent that it had stayed the same and 44 per cent that they spent less time now.

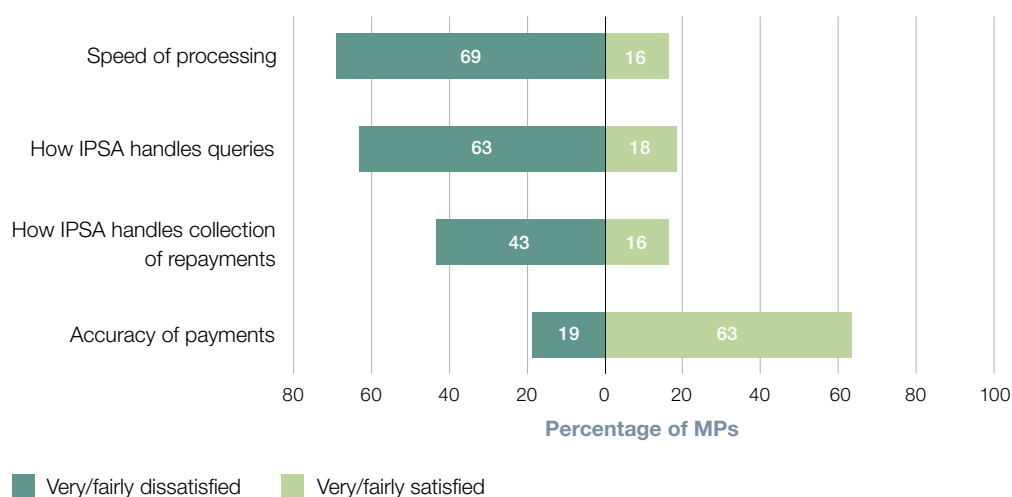
¹ The majority of MPs gave low-value time estimates, while a small number gave very high-value estimates. The median measure is quoted for actual and appropriate time, as this provides a more stable estimate when answers are distributed in this way.

MPs were asked how satisfied they were with different aspects of IPSA's service (**Figure 1**). Levels of dissatisfaction were high for the speed of processing claims (69 per cent) and how IPSA handled queries (63 per cent) and the collection of repayments (43 per cent). However, most were satisfied with the accuracy of payments made by IPSA (63 per cent). (There were no significant differences between any key groups, with the exception that MPs with more staff tended to be more polarised in their views towards how IPSA handled queries.)

Seventy two per cent of MPs said they used payment cards. Reported usage was higher for MPs with constituencies further away from London and with higher numbers of staff. About half of users (53 per cent) found them 'very' or 'fairly easy' to use, with the remainder (47 per cent) finding them difficult. Despite this, there was support for extending their use: 66 per cent of MPs were in favour of this (21 per cent did not have a strong view and 13 per cent were opposed).

Sixty per cent of MPs said they used direct payment arrangements. New MPs were more likely to use these than existing MPs (71 per cent compared to 53 per cent). About half of users (49 per cent) found them 'very' or 'fairly easy' to use, with the remainder (51 per cent) finding them difficult. There was widespread support for extending use of these arrangements: 86 per cent of MPs were in favour (12 per cent did not have a strong view and two per cent were opposed).

Figure 1
Satisfaction with different aspects of IPSA's service

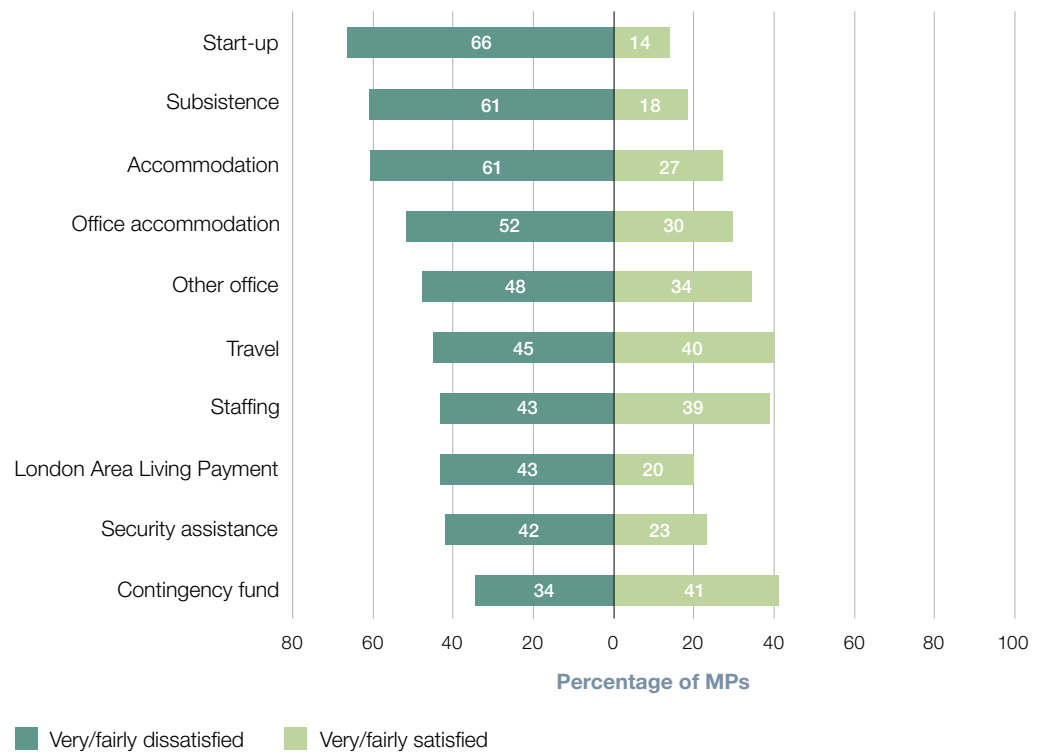


Source: National Audit Office, survey of MPs 2011. Base varies from 118 to 323

MPs were asked how satisfied they were with specific claims budgets, in terms of how well they facilitated their work as an MP (**Figure 2**). Overall, there were high levels of dissatisfaction. This was particularly so for start-up expenditure (66 per cent of MPs receiving this were dissatisfied), subsistence (61 per cent) and accommodation (61 per cent). Overall, 89 per cent of MPs were dissatisfied with at least one category of claim.

Figure 2

Satisfaction with how IPSA facilitates work of MPs for different categories of claims



Source: National Audit Office, survey of MPs 2011. Base varies from 79 to 321. Percentages for disability assistance and wind-up expenditure not shown due to small numbers of MPs answering question.

"The system is cumbersome, requires claims to be duplicated, often requires the same information twice and uses up too much of my, and my staff's time."

In their responses to the open questions, many MPs highlighted technical problems with using the claims system. Most reported they did not find it user-friendly, mainly because:

- They found it difficult to use from home, meaning that MPs had to use 'work time' to do their expenses.
- They thought it was slow and cumbersome, with too many 'steps' required at each process.
- They found it 'fiddly', leading to errors which were difficult to correct. Several MPs reported having to re-submit entire claims due to an error on one claim line.

MPs raised particular technical glitches and frustrations with the computer system:

"It's too easy to tick the wrong category box inadvertently and then too difficult to amend."

- Some had problems logging in.
- They found the system regularly froze or crashed.
- They reported that the system was sometimes 'down' at weekends – when some MPs would have liked to do their expenses. These may be historical issues given that IPSA's Key Performance Indicator (KPI) data indicate that the expenses@work system up-time has run at or near 100 per cent since October 2010.
- They reported that some forms 'go across screens' requiring you to scroll across to see all the fields.
- They found printing complicated and time-consuming (requiring the user to click through up to six different screens).
- Many MPs felt that IPSA had not provided clear enough guidance on how to use the claims process. They reported being given inconsistent information by IPSA staff and said the available guidance was unclear and too general. A few MPs also referred to unannounced rule changes.

"Contradictory verbal advice has been received on a number of claims and IPSA staff can be very reluctant to confirm in writing."

Querying/rejecting claims

Fifteen per cent of MPs said that IPSA queried or rejected their claims 'very' or 'fairly' often. The majority (85 per cent) said this happened 'not very often' or 'never'. Of those who had claims queried/rejected, 49 per cent said that none of the queries had been reasonable while 36 per cent said only some had.

In responses to the open questions, several MPs provided examples of problems that had arisen when their claims had been queried. These included:

"It's impossible to get advice around any uncertainty in categories – you're left to get on with it and to make mistakes that could inadvertently ruin your career."

- MPs had experience of inconsistent decisions, where an identical claim was approved in one case but not another.
- MPs reported being unable to get advice from IPSA when they were uncertain about how to make a claim, instead being told simply to 'submit and see'.

- MPs found a lack of institutional memory at IPSA (for example, a 'flag' system) which meant that the same claims were routinely challenged, resolved, and then challenged again. The example was given of a taxi claim for an identical journey being repeatedly refused because they were expected to take public transport, and on each occasion they had to explain that there was no public transport available for that journey.
- MPs were frustrated about queried claims being published and reported as 'rejected claims'.

Some MPs referred to errors being made.

- MPs told us about errors made by IPSA staff, such as losing MPs' evidence or not reading the submission carefully enough. MPs were frustrated if they felt that IPSA had not apologised for these errors. This was seen as a double standard.
- MPs admitted making mistakes themselves, often due to the complexity of the rules and the system.

"In one case, advice from IPSA led to the submission of a receipted invoice in the wrong way. Persuading them of their error – which was finally accepted – took hours of work."

Advice, help and support and contacting IPSA

Sixty one per cent of MPs found the published guidance provided by IPSA 'not very' or 'not at all useful'; 39 per cent found it 'very' or 'fairly' useful.

Nearly all MPs or their staff said they had received advice from IPSA by phone (98 per cent) or in writing/by email (96 per cent). Half (50 per cent) had had a face-to-face meeting.

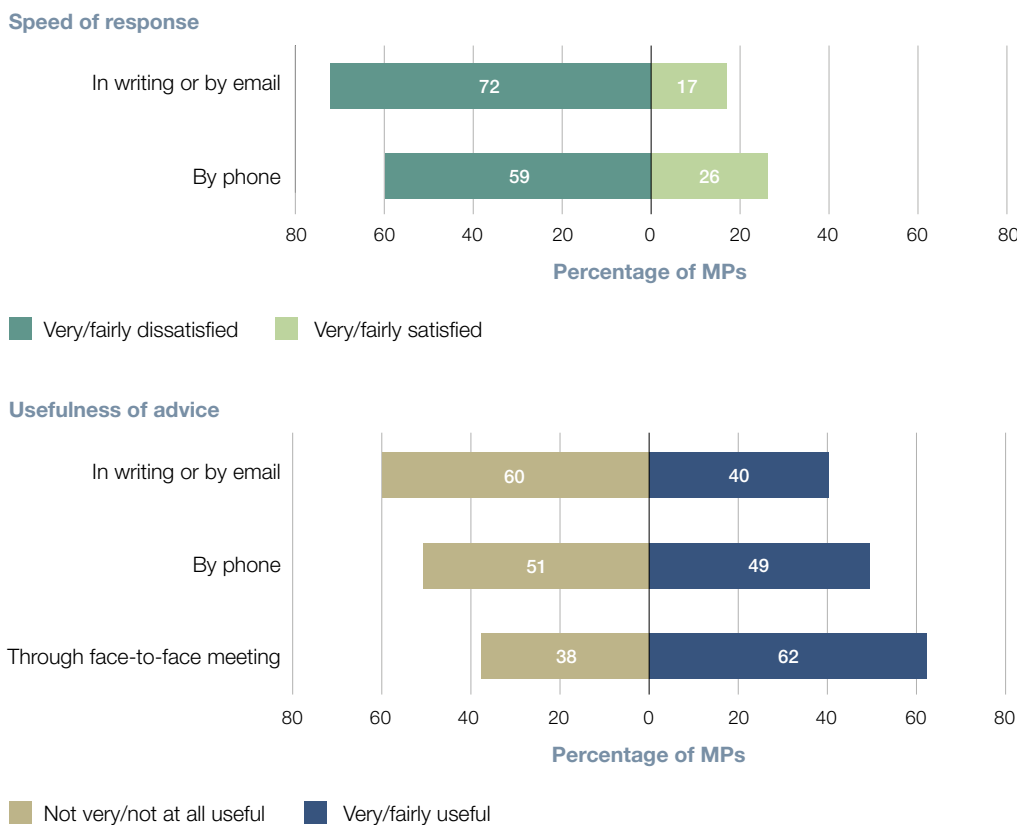
MPs were particularly dissatisfied with contact via email or in writing. MPs were asked how satisfied they were with the speed of response through different channels. For contacts via email or in writing, 72 per cent were 'very' or 'fairly' dissatisfied with the speed of response (11 per cent were 'neither satisfied nor dissatisfied'); for phone contacts, the equivalent figures were 59 per cent and 15 per cent.

"It is almost impossible to get telephone help from IPSA whilst using it [the system] as they have restricted their telephone opening to the afternoon only and even then it is hard to get through."

MPs were asked how useful the advice from IPSA was through different channels (**Figure 3** overleaf). A majority of MPs found advice provided through face-to-face meetings (62 per cent) 'very' or 'fairly' useful. By contrast, most (60 per cent) found the advice provided by email or in writing 'not very' or 'not at all' useful; the figure for phone advice was 51 per cent.

Seventy eight per cent of MPs said they had received face-to-face training from IPSA in using the claims system. Sixty two per cent of those receiving the training said it was 'not very' or 'not at all useful'.

Figure 3
Satisfaction with speed of response and advice given by channel



Source: National Audit Office, survey of MPs 2011. Base varies from 157 to 320.

It was clear from the qualitative comments that most MPs were unhappy with the service they received from IPSA staff, and what they perceived to be a lack of support available to them. In particular:

- They found the opening hours of the telephone helpline too restrictive.
- They did not feel that email was a sufficient means to deal with queries.
- They felt that responses to their queries were too slow (in a few cases it had apparently taken days or even weeks to resolve a query). IPSA's Key Performance Indicator is that 90 per cent of correspondence should receive a response within five working days: it achieved this target in three of the last six months of 2010-11.

"IPSA are very reluctant to give advice – even in obvious 'grey' areas. They will not respond to emails or commit anything to print, but expect you to address all queries in writing. It is an unbalanced relationship."

Some MPs complained that IPSA gave them insufficient, inconsistent or inaccurate advice.

MPs who felt that the training they had received was insufficient argued that it should have been done using the 'live' expenses system.

The impact of the system on MPs

Ninety per cent of MPs said they had decided not to claim expenses to which they thought they were entitled under the new system.

The main reasons given for this were: it was only a small claim (59 per cent of MPs overall), the process was too complicated (49 per cent), it would take too long (49 per cent) or the MP was concerned about the claim being published (41 per cent). Other reasons given were that MPs were not sure whether the item was claimable (27 per cent) and that they were worried the claim would be rejected (24 per cent).

About three quarters (76 per cent) of MPs felt they had not been able to claim enough because of the levels at which different budgets were set. Those living furthest from London, those with three or more full-time equivalent (FTE) staff and those without dependants were all more likely to say this had happened.

MPs were most often unable to claim enough for expenditure on staffing (45 per cent of all MPs), personal accommodation (33 per cent), office accommodation (34 per cent) and other office costs (26 per cent).

Most MPs (61 per cent) thought that public perceptions of MPs' expenses had remained the same over the last year. Similar proportions thought they had got better (20 per cent) and worse (19 per cent).²

Nearly all MPs (91 per cent) agreed that MPs had to subsidise their own constituency work (7 per cent disagreed, **Figure 4** overleaf).

Eighty five per cent of MPs agreed that the time taken to complete claims was hindering them from doing their job (8 per cent disagreed).

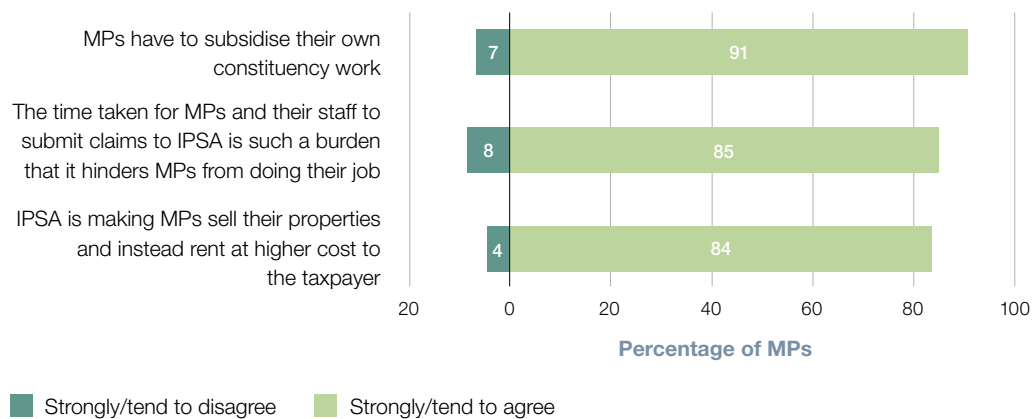
A similar proportion (84 per cent) agreed that IPSA was making MPs sell their properties and rent instead at higher cost (4 per cent disagreed).

Seventy one per cent of MPs felt that IPSA did too much work to give taxpayers assurance that money spent on MPs' expenses was for legitimate purposes (17 per cent said they were not doing enough, while 12 per cent said they were doing the right amount).

Views on these questions differed little amongst MPs, with the exception of the statement about the time burden impacting on MPs' work. While levels of agreement were high across all groups, they were slightly lower for new MPs (77 per cent, compared to existing MPs) and those with fewer than 3 FTE staff (70 per cent, compared to those with more staff). Levels of disagreement were also lower for MPs with dependants compared to those without (5 per cent compared to 12 per cent).

² In fact, it appears that public attitudes have improved more than MPs think. We commissioned Ipsos MORI to gauge public opinion on MPs' expenses, and we found that 55 per cent of the general public thought the situation with MPs' expenses had got better in the last year.

Figure 4
MPs' views on IPSA and the expenses scheme



Source: National Audit Office, survey of MPs 2011. Base varies from 273 to 323.

In their open responses, many MPs described considerable bad feeling between MPs and IPSA, with a deep-seated 'us and them' attitude.

"IPSA has a 'presumption of guilt' stance towards MPs."

MPs described low levels of morale. Some said that the expenses system had made their job more difficult and left them feeling disillusioned and victimised.

"We have many Members who are now actively deterred from claiming allowances for fear of how these claims will be reported. This is particularly the case relating to late night subsistence payments and constituency mileage."

Because of planned changes to the rules on claiming back mortgage interest subsidy, a few MPs reported having to sell their properties and rent instead at a higher cost to the taxpayer than previously, which they pointed out was not value for money.

"It makes things intolerable at times. I have to meet basic office costs out of my own pocket and meet the cost of simply doing my job – at the end of which MPs are still portrayed in a poor light."

Some MPs told us that they were out of pocket because of the system. In some cases this was a short-term issue related to cash flow. They told us that they had to borrow more on their credit cards and use their overdraft facilities.

In other cases MPs reported a permanent loss of income due to unclaimed (or unclaimable) expenses. Some said they were sometimes choosing not to claim for expenses because of fear and this was compounded by concerns for privacy, especially for their children. MPs highlighted subsistence costs and accommodation costs as areas where they were regularly opting not to reclaim costs.

"I have sold my flat, losing a substantial amount of my own money and the cost to the public has more than doubled as a result of the fact that I now claim rent rather than mortgage interest."

Some MPs also reported that the system as it was did not provide them with enough information to reconcile their claims with payments, making budgeting difficult. The system is supposed to offer this functionality, so it is possible that MPs need more training on how to use it. Either way, this supports MPs' assertions that the system is not currently a sufficient enabler to help them do their jobs.

"[IPSA] need to assist MPs in their duties, not deter them. We do not want to end up with the situation where only the rich can become Members of Parliament."

"Wealthy MPs don't have to claim, leaving those who can't afford not to, to bear the scrutiny."

Many MPs considered that the current expenses system could potentially change the profile of parliamentary candidates, as there was an increasing need to subsidise their work out of their own income; i.e. you increasingly needed to be wealthy to be an MP.

Poorer MPs also felt disadvantaged because MPs were avoiding using the expenses system if they could afford to: this meant that poorer MPs who had to put in claims were finding themselves near the top of the 'league table' of expenses which they felt reflected badly on them in the media (even if all their claims were legitimate).

Some MPs commented that they felt that the expenses system was wasting money. They also described the system itself as much too expensive, both in terms of IPSA's costs and their own.

MPs' recommendations for improvements

"The staff and systems are improving as their understanding [has] grown, but it has been a painful year."

Almost all MPs suggested changes to the system, some of which IPSA has already started to introduce. The most commonly mentioned were:

- More use of payment cards.
- More use of direct payments.
- Excluding some costs from expenses (e.g. office costs).
- More use of allowances – some felt large allowances should replace the whole system, whilst others suggest small subsistence allowances of £10-£15 to cover daily attendance costs.

A more flexible system was widely advocated:

- A few MPs recommended remodelling the current system based on other expenses systems within the private sector, in the House of Lords, or in the Scottish Parliament.

MPs made a number of suggestions for simplifying current processes. These included:

- Improving the website.
- Setting up auto-complete or default functions within the forms.
- Scrapping the online system and reverting to a paper system.
- Using fewer and/or clearer payment systems.
- Paying claims quicker.

MPs suggested changes to the following specific rules:

- Allowing MPs to choose to maintain a second home and claim for mortgage interest payments, if these were cheaper than the cost of renting.
- More use of travel season tickets, having parliamentary Oyster cards, and permission to travel first class if the booking could be made in advance. Current rules state that MPs may travel first class by rail, if they can obtain the ticket for less than the cost of the standard economy fare available at the time.
- Abolishing the 90-day rule for submitting expenses.
- Publishing claims daily to avoid peaks in media interest and the creation of expenses 'league tables'.

MPs hoped to see a change in attitude within the system/IPSA:

"The underlying problem with IPSA is one of organisational culture. It is profoundly anti-MPs. This means it is very difficult for it to perform the enabling role that it should."

- They would like more respect and an end to the (perceived) assumption that they are all "crooks".
- They want a system which aims to meet their needs and facilitate rather than hinder their work.

MPs would like better support from IPSA to enable them to use the system. In particular:

"There is no concept that they are there to help MPs manage their financial affairs in the public interest."

- a consistent named individual to support them.
- more access to support over the phone and face-to-face.
- support (i.e. the telephone helpline) to be available over longer hours.

Profile of MPs

Thirty six per cent of respondents were first-time MPs in this Parliament, very close to the proportion of new MPs in the whole House (35 per cent).

The regional profile of responding MPs was close to that of Parliament overall.

Forty six per cent of MPs said they had dependants (children aged 16 or under, or aged 17 and over in full-time education, or adult dependants).

On average, MPs responding to the survey employed three full-time equivalent staff, with the exact number ranging between one and six.

Appendix One

The data

Quantitative data

All percentages and means shown are unweighted. The number of responses on which percentages/means are based can be found in Appendix Three where the full survey results are provided. Where only one response was required, percentages may sum to more/less than 100 per cent because of rounding.

'No response', 'not applicable', 'don't know' and 'no opinion' responses have generally been excluded from the figures quoted. Because of this, bases vary slightly between questions.

Where indicated, differences between the following groups were tested for significance: MPs new to parliament in this sitting compared to existing MPs; MPs with dependants versus others; MPs with fewer than 3 staff, and with 3 to 3.5 staff versus 3.5 staff and over; MPs living in London/South East; East/West Midlands and East of England versus those living elsewhere. Chi-squared tests were used, and a significance level of 95 per cent adopted.

Qualitative data

Many MPs took time to share their views and experiences, writing lengthy responses to open-ended questions. Others shared short specific points.

Open-ended responses were provided by MPs from all geographical regions, and both new and long-serving MPs.

Whilst some views are clearly general perceptions amongst MPs and may not be based on MPs' own experiences, many of the respondents give specific examples of expenses issues relating to their work.

Appendix Two

Survey methods

Design and piloting of questionnaire

Questions were drafted initially by members of the study team, in conjunction with the VFM Practice and Quality team. The questionnaire then underwent a number of stages of stringent testing and review. NAO staff tested the questionnaire with a small number of MPs. Ipsos MORI reviewed our questionnaire and provided detailed suggestions and feedback to improve design and question balance. They agreed that the resulting questionnaire was fit for purpose. There was additional internal scrutiny and sign-off. Comments arising from these stages were incorporated into a final draft. A covering letter was also drafted and reviewed alongside the questionnaire.

The draft was professionally designed and formatted by the NAO's in-house design team.

Ensuring anonymity

A number of steps were taken in order to ensure the anonymity of MPs responding to the survey:

- A paper survey was conducted (in preference to an online survey where there would by default exist a link between the name of the respondent and their survey return).
- The covering letter and introduction to the survey reminded MPs that their responses could be subject to Freedom of Information requests, and that they should bear in mind that their answers could identify them (or others).
- MPs were reminded about this at all open-ended questions.
- A limited set of background questions was included in the questionnaire.
- Survey questionnaires were completely anonymous and only numbered once they had been received in the office.

The measures to ensure anonymity meant that there was a risk that duplicate questionnaires could be returned. A number of design features were therefore incorporated to minimise this risk. All questionnaires were carefully validated and numbered on receipt at the office.

Survey fieldwork

In addition to reviewing our questionnaire, we asked Ipsos MORI to review our overall approach to the survey. While they favoured a face-to-face survey, they recognised our logistical constraints and agreed that a postal survey was the most appropriate alternative.

Questionnaires were posted to MPs on 13 May 2010 along with a covering letter and postage-paid (stamped) return envelope.

An email reminder about the survey was sent to all MPs' assistants by the Leader of the House on 20 May. A further email reminder was sent to MPs from the National Audit Office on 24 May.

A phone number helpline was established to deal with any queries MPs had about the survey. A small number of replacement questionnaires were sent out on request.

The original deadline was set at 27 May but this was extended to 3 June during fieldwork. However, questionnaires were received (and included in the final data) up until 17 June.

Response rates

At the time of the fieldwork, two seats were vacant, leaving 648 MPs, all of whom were sent a questionnaire. Three hundred and twenty five questionnaires were received, giving a response rate of 50 per cent. One questionnaire was received too late to be incorporated into our data.

Ipsos MORI commended the high response rate we achieved and the close match between the sample profile and that of the population, in terms of region and whether or not a first-time MP this Parliament.

Quantitative and qualitative analysis methods

To ensure the accuracy of data entry, quantitative responses were entered twice, and any discrepancies identified were checked back to the original questionnaire. A sample of qualitative responses was checked for accuracy.

It was possible to compare the profile of responding MPs to that of all MPs in the House (in terms of the proportion of new MPs and location of constituency). As these were close, no adjustment (through weighting) to the survey profile/responses was deemed necessary.

Using information derived from IPSA data, it was possible to calculate the approximate proportion of MPs making claims for different types of expenses. Some categories were matched – to some extent, although not exactly – by the survey. Differences of definition aside, the correspondence between the survey and IPSA figures was close for most of the categories we could compare. This gives more reassurance that the sample of MPs was broadly representative in terms of what expenses were claimed (see **Figure 5**).

Figure 5

Proportion of MPs claiming different categories of expenses, comparison of IPSA and survey figures

	IPSA (%)	Survey (%)
Accommodation	66	72
Constituency rent (IPSA)		
Office accommodation (survey)	87	87
General administration (IPSA)		
Other office costs (survey)	99	86
Contingency fund claims	26	28

Source: IPSA figures, 2011. National Audit Office, Survey of MPs 2011. Base=324.

The majority of questions were pre-coded, allowing one response only. Where more than one response was given, these have been recoded as such and generally excluded from analysis.

MPs were asked to estimate the approximate number of hours per week/month they and their staff spent filling out expense claims. In the event of missing or contradictory answers or responses not in the form of hours per week/month, the following assumptions were made: where a range was given, the midpoint was taken; where contradictory figures for hours per week/month were given, the hours per month figure was taken; hours per week were multiplied by four to give hours per month; where an estimate was given for MP time but not staff time, staff time was assumed to be zero; where an estimate was given for staff time but not MP time, MP time was assumed to be zero; hours per quarter were divided by three to give hours per month; hours per day were multiplied by five to give hours per week. The same rules were used for the questions about how much time was appropriate for MPs and their staff to spend.

MPs were asked to give the number of full-time equivalent staff working for them. If a figure was not given, the following assumptions were made: part-time staff were counted as 0.5 of full-time equivalent; vacancies were not counted; interns were not counted.

SPSS was used to analyse the quantitative data. Frequencies for all questions were run, along with tables to explore any possible relationships between MPs' views and experiences and the location of their constituency, number of staff, presence of dependants and whether they were new MPs since 2010 or had experience of the old expenses system.

All open-ended responses were read and carefully considered. These responses were coded into themes using Excel to ensure a data trail. Three researchers applied the codes to the data, reading through each other's coding to ensure accuracy and enable familiarity with the full data set. The researchers then reviewed the coded data and drew out emerging findings. These were discussed and the data reviewed again to ensure the rigour of the findings. Lastly, any additional annotations or comments made by respondents on the survey forms were scanned to check for any contradictory comments and enable us to confirm our findings again.

Quotes from individual MPs' responses are included in the report for illustrative purposes, and are only included if they represent views that are widely held by MPs.

Appendix Three

Questionnaire and full topline results



National Audit Office

MPs' VIEWS ON THE INDEPENDENT PARLIAMENTARY STANDARDS AUTHORITY

A survey of MPs by the National Audit Office

Introduction

The following pages show the results of the NAO's postal survey of MPs conducted in May and June 2011.

Please note the following:

Percentages are of the total number of respondents to each question, excluding those who left the question blank, or who answered "not applicable", "no opinion" or "don't know". The majority of questions allowed one response only. Where two or more responses were given, these have also been excluded from the total number of respondents.

The base size (i.e. number of respondents) is shown in brackets against each question.

Percentages may not always add to 100 due to rounding. For Qs 1, 3a, 15b and 17b, more than one response was allowed so percentages generally add to more than 100 per cent.

An asterisk denotes a non-zero value below 0.5 per cent.

For numeric questions, summary measures are shown (medians for Q6 and Q7b, and means for Q27). No breakdowns are shown for open-ended questions which were analysed qualitatively.

Your expenses

1. Which of the following types of expenses, if any, have you claimed from IPSA relating to the period between the 2010 General Election and 31st March 2011?

<i>PLEASE TICK ALL THAT APPLY</i>	<i>%</i>	
<input type="checkbox"/> Cash advance for start-up expenditure	29	
<input type="checkbox"/> Accommodation expenses	72	
<input type="checkbox"/> The London Area Living Payment	19	
<input type="checkbox"/> Office accommodation expenses	87	
<input type="checkbox"/> Other office expenditure	86	
<input type="checkbox"/> Staffing expenditure	99	
<input type="checkbox"/> Travel expenditure	88	
<input type="checkbox"/> Subsistence expenditure	41	
<input type="checkbox"/> Claims on IPSA's contingency fund	28	
<input type="checkbox"/> Any other expenses (please specify)	6	
<input type="checkbox"/> I have not made any claims in this period	0	(324)

IF YOU HAVE CLAIMED ANY EXPENSES IN THIS PERIOD, PLEASE ANSWER Q2 ONWARDS; OTHERWISE PLEASE SKIP TO Q18

Advice and guidance from IPSA

2. IPSA provides MPs with guidance on the expenses rules and the system for claiming expenses. How useful is the published guidance provided by IPSA?

	<i>%</i>	
<input type="checkbox"/> Very useful	2	
<input type="checkbox"/> Fairly useful	37	
<input type="checkbox"/> Not very useful	43	
<input type="checkbox"/> Not at all useful	18	
<input type="checkbox"/> No opinion		(316)

3a. In which of the following ways, if any, have you or your staff sought further advice from IPSA?

PLEASE TICK ALL THAT APPLY

	%	
<input type="checkbox"/> In writing or by email	96	
<input type="checkbox"/> By phone	98	
<input type="checkbox"/> Through a face-to-face meeting	50	
<input type="checkbox"/> None of these	*	(325)

3b. Generally speaking, how satisfied or dissatisfied have you been with the speed of response when contacting IPSA using each of the following channels?

	VERY SATISFIED	FAIRLY SATISFIED	NEITHER SATISFIED NOR DISSATISFIED	FAIRLY DISSATISFIED	VERY DISSATISFIED	NOT APPLICABLE	
(i) In writing or by e-mail	2%	15%	11%	33%	39%		(316)
(ii) By phone	4%	22%	15%	28%	31%		(320)

3c. Generally speaking, how useful was the advice provided by IPSA when you have contacted them through each of the following channels?

	VERY USEFUL	FAIRLY USEFUL	NOT VERY USEFUL	NOT AT ALL USEFUL	NO OPINION	NOT APPLICABLE	
(i) In writing or by e-mail	4%	37%	40%	19%			(310)
(ii) By phone	7%	42%	32%	19%			(310)
(iii) Through a face-to-face meeting	27%	36%	19%	18%			(157)

4a. Have you received face-to-face training from IPSA in using the claims system?

<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No	
78%	22%	(322)

PLEASE ANSWER Q4b IF YOU ANSWERED YES TO Q4a

4b. How useful was this face-to-face training?

	%	
<input type="checkbox"/> Very useful	9	
<input type="checkbox"/> Fairly useful	28	
<input type="checkbox"/> Not very useful	39	
<input type="checkbox"/> Not at all useful	23	
<input type="checkbox"/> No opinion		(253)

Completing claims

5a. Thinking about your most recent claims, how easy or difficult did you find it to submit these claims?

	%	
<input type="checkbox"/> Very easy	4	
<input type="checkbox"/> Fairly easy	33	
<input type="checkbox"/> Fairly difficult	39	
<input type="checkbox"/> Very difficult	24	
<input type="checkbox"/> No opinion		(319)

PLEASE ANSWER Q5b IF YOU FOUND IT VERY OR FAIRLY DIFFICULT TO SUBMIT CLAIMS

5b. Which aspects of the claims system did you find difficult?

PLEASE AVOID USING NAMES OF INDIVIDUALS AND PLACES, AND OTHER INFORMATION THAT MIGHT IDENTIFY YOU OR OTHERS. IF YOU NEED MORE SPACE TO ANSWER, PLEASE DO SO IN THE BOX PROVIDED ON PAGE 15 OF THE QUESTIONNAIRE.

- 6.** In the period since January 2011, how much time on average have you and your staff spent dealing with expenses? Please write the average number of hours spent per WEEK or per MONTH for you and for your staff in the boxes below.

	Hours per week	OR	Hours per month	
You personally	<input type="text"/>		4 (median)*	(291)
Your staff	<input type="text"/>		12 (median)*	(291)

- 7a.** How does this compare to the amount of time you and your staff were spending in the 3-4 months after the general election in May 2010?

Compared with the 3-4 months after the general election...

	%	
<input type="checkbox"/> A lot more time now	28	
<input type="checkbox"/> A little more time now	4	
<input type="checkbox"/> About the same amount of time now	24	
<input type="checkbox"/> A little less time now	33	
<input type="checkbox"/> A lot less time now	11	
<input type="checkbox"/> Don't know		(300)

- 7b.** And how much time do you think is appropriate for you personally and your staff to spend dealing with expenses? Please answer either in terms of the number of hours spent per WEEK or per MONTH.

	Hours per week	OR	Hours per month	
You personally	<input type="text"/>		2 (median)*	(291)
Your staff	<input type="text"/>		4 (median)*	(291)

* Hours per week responses were converted to provide hours per month estimate. See Appendix 2 for full details of how answers were coded after interviews.

Processing of claims by IPSA

8. How often does IPSA query or reject your claims?

1% Very often 14% Fairly often 71% Not very often 14% Never Don't know (320)

PLEASE ANSWER Q9a IF IPSA HAS EVER QUERIED OR REJECTED YOUR EXPENSES CLAIMS

9a. How many of IPSA's queries about your claims do you think have been reasonable?

	%	
<input type="checkbox"/> All of them	6	
<input type="checkbox"/> Most of them	9	
<input type="checkbox"/> Some of them	36	
<input type="checkbox"/> None of them	49	
<input type="checkbox"/> Don't know		(278)

9b. If you think any of IPSA's queries have been unreasonable, please explain briefly why.

PLEASE AVOID USING NAMES OF INDIVIDUALS AND PLACES, AND OTHER INFORMATION THAT MIGHT IDENTIFY YOU OR OTHERS. IF YOU NEED MORE SPACE TO ANSWER, PLEASE DO SO IN THE BOX PROVIDED ON PAGE 15 OF THE QUESTIONNAIRE.

10. How satisfied or dissatisfied are you with each of the following aspects of IPSA's service in relation to your expense claims?

	VERY SATISFIED	FAIRLY SATISFIED	NEITHER SATISFIED NOR DISSATISFIED	FAIRLY DISSATISFIED	VERY DISSATISFIED	NOT APPLICABLE	
(i) Speed of processing	1%	15%	15%	32%	37%		(323)
(ii) Accuracy of payments to you	18%	45%	18%	12%	7%		(314)
(iii) How IPSA handles any queries they have about your claim	3%	15%	19%	33%	30%		(306)
(iv) How IPSA handles the collection of repayments from you when required	3%	13%	41%	16%	27%		(118)

Payment cards and direct payment

11a. Do you use a payment card for some of your expenses?

72% Yes 28% No (323)

PLEASE ANSWER Q11b IF YOU SAID YES TO Q11a

11b. How easy or difficult do you find using the payment card, including the reconciliation process?

8% Very easy 44% Fairly easy 26% Fairly difficult 21% Very difficult No opinion (216)

12. IPSA is planning to use the payment card system more in future. Are you in favour of or opposed to recovering more of your expenses using this method?

66% In favour 13% Opposed 21% No views either way (319)

13a. Do you make use of any direct payment arrangements from IPSA to meet your expenses (but **excluding payments of your staff's salaries)?**

60% Yes 40% No (318)

PLEASE ANSWER Q13b IF YOU SAID YES TO Q13a

13b. How easy or difficult do you find the process of arranging direct payment by IPSA?

8% Very easy 40% Fairly easy 35% Fairly difficult 16% Very difficult No opinion (193)

14. IPSA is planning to extend the use of the direct payment system in the future. Are you in favour of or opposed to recovering more of your expenses using this method?

86% In favour 2% Opposed 12% No views either way (320)

Allowance and terms of the scheme

15a. Since the new expenses scheme started, have you ever decided **not** to claim any expenses to which you believe you were entitled?

90% Yes 10% No (324)

PLEASE ANSWER Q15b IF YOU SAID YES TO Q15a

15b. Which of the following, if any, were reasons for not claiming your entitlement when this has happened?

PLEASE TICK ALL THAT APPLY

	%*	
<input type="checkbox"/> The claim process was too complicated	49	
<input type="checkbox"/> It was only a small claim	59	
<input type="checkbox"/> It would take too long	49	
<input type="checkbox"/> I wasn't sure if it was claimable	27	
<input type="checkbox"/> I wasn't sure what amount I could claim for	18	
<input type="checkbox"/> I was concerned about the claim being published	41	
<input type="checkbox"/> I was worried the claim would be rejected	24	
<input type="checkbox"/> Other (please specify)	15	(320)

* Percentage based on all MPs answering Q15a/b, not just those answering Q15b

16. How satisfied or dissatisfied are you with how the scheme facilitates your work as an MP under each of the following headings?

	VERY SATISFIED	FAIRLY SATISFIED	NEITHER SATISFIED NOR DISSATISFIED	FAIRLY DISSATISFIED	VERY DISSATISFIED	NOT APPLICABLE	
Start-up expenditure	1%	12%	20%	21%	46%		(145)
Accommodation expenses	3%	24%	12%	25%	35%		(269)
The London Area Living Payment	5%	15%	37%	16%	27%		(81)
Office accommodation expenses	3%	27%	19%	30%	21%		(305)
Other office expenditure	4%	31%	18%	28%	20%		(311)
Staffing expenditure	6%	33%	18%	17%	26%		(321)
Travel expenditure	8%	32%	15%	22%	23%		(302)
Subsistence expenditure	4%	14%	21%	22%	39%		(207)
Claims on IPSA's contingency fund	6%	34%	25%	13%	22%		(125)
*Disability assistance	0	7	10	3	5		(25)
Costs of security assistance	5%	18%	35%	14%	28%		(79)
*Wind-up expenditure	0	0	13	4	14		(31)

17a. Have there been occasions when you feel you have **not** been able to claim enough because of the levels at which different budgets are set?

76% Yes 24% No (319)

* Number of responses shown for these categories due to small base size.

PLEASE ANSWER Q17b IF YOU SAID YES TO Q17a:

17b. For which of the following types of expenses have you felt you have **not been able to claim enough?**

PLEASE TICK ALL THAT APPLY	%*	
<input type="checkbox"/> Cash advance for start-up expenditure	7	
<input type="checkbox"/> Accommodation expenses	33	
<input type="checkbox"/> The London Area Living Payment	8	
<input type="checkbox"/> Office accommodation expenses	34	
<input type="checkbox"/> Other office expenditure	26	
<input type="checkbox"/> Staffing expenditure	45	
<input type="checkbox"/> Travel expenditure	21	
<input type="checkbox"/> Subsistence expenditure	22	
<input type="checkbox"/> Claims on IPSA's contingency fund	3	
<input type="checkbox"/> Any other expenses (<i>please specify</i>)	2	(316)

Perceptions of the scheme

18. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement:

The system for reimbursing MPs' expenses that was in place before the last General Election required major change in order to safeguard public money.

	%	
<input type="checkbox"/> Strongly agree	36	
<input type="checkbox"/> Tend to agree	33	
<input type="checkbox"/> Neither agree nor disagree	8	
<input type="checkbox"/> Tend to disagree	14	
<input type="checkbox"/> Strongly disagree	9	(315)
<input type="checkbox"/> No opinion		

* Percentage based on all MPs answering Q17a/b, not just those answering Q17b

19. To what extent, in your personal opinion, have public perceptions of MPs' expenses got better or worse over the last year?

	%	
<input type="checkbox"/> Got much better	1	
<input type="checkbox"/> Got a bit better	19	
<input type="checkbox"/> Stayed the same	61	
<input type="checkbox"/> Got a bit worse	10	
<input type="checkbox"/> Got a lot worse	8	
<input type="checkbox"/> Don't know		(318)

20. Below are some statements from the report on MPs' expenses by the Committee on Standards in Public Life from November 2009. Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with each statement.

	STRONGLY AGREE	TEND TO AGREE	NEITHER AGREE NOR DISAGREE	TEND TO DISAGREE	STRONGLY DISAGREE	NO OPINION	
Receipts or documentary evidence should be required for all claims	42%	33%	7%	12%	6%		(302)
The independent regulator should continue to publish each individual claim for reimbursement made by MPs	23%	34%	12%	19%	12%		(308)
MPs should no longer be reimbursed for the cost of mortgage interest payments or any other costs associated with the purchase of a property	16%	13%	15%	23%	32%		(301)

21. Listed below are some of the statements that have been made about IPSA and MPs' expenses. Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with each statement.

	STRONGLY AGREE	TEND TO AGREE	NEITHER AGREE NOR DISAGREE	TEND TO DISAGREE	STRONGLY DISAGREE	NO OPINION
MPs have to subsidise their own constituency work	55%	36%	3%	2%	4%	(321)
The time taken for MPs and their staff to submit claims to IPSA is such a burden that it hinders MPs from doing their job	57%	28%	7%	7%	2%	(323)
IPSA is making MPs sell their properties and instead rent at higher cost to the taxpayer	59%	25%	12%	3%	1%	(273)
MPs' expenses are now independently regulated by IPSA: this is better than self-regulation	15%	39%	23%	15%	8%	(311)
Given the context in which it came into being, IPSA is right to take a cautious approach to MPs' claims now	4%	24%	23%	29%	19%	(313)

22a. Below are three statements about IPSA. Which of these comes closest to what you think?

12% IPSA is doing **the right amount of work** to give taxpayers assurance that the money spent on MPs' expenses is for legitimate purposes

17% IPSA is **not doing enough work** to give taxpayers assurance that the money spent on MPs' expenses is for legitimate purposes

71% IPSA does **too much work** to give taxpayers assurance that the money spent on MPs' expenses is for legitimate purposes

No opinion (245)

22b. As you may know, IPSA announced a number of changes to the expenses scheme in April 2011. To what extent do you think that these changes will improve the scheme's ability to facilitate your work as an MP?

3% A great deal 24% A fair amount 61% Not very much 13% Not at all Don't know

(309)

- 23.** If there is anything else you would like to say about the scheme or how it could be improved, please use the box below and continue on page 15 if necessary.

PLEASE AVOID USING NAMES OF INDIVIDUALS AND PLACES, AND OTHER INFORMATION THAT MIGHT IDENTIFY YOU OR OTHERS. IF YOU NEED MORE SPACE TO ANSWER, PLEASE DO SO IN THE BOX PROVIDED AT THE END OF THE QUESTIONNAIRE.

Information about you

We need to ask some questions about you, in order to check that the responses are representative of the House as a whole, and to allow comparisons between different groups. We have kept the number of these questions to a minimum, and, as with all the information you provide, all answers will remain anonymous.

24. Were you elected as an MP for the first time this Parliament?

36% Yes 64% No (318)

25. Do you have any children aged 16 or under, or aged 17 or over **and in full-time education, or are there any dependent adults for whom you are the primary carer?**

46% Yes 54% No (317)

26. Which of the following best describes the location of your constituency?

	%	
<input type="checkbox"/> Scotland	9	
<input type="checkbox"/> Wales	7	
<input type="checkbox"/> Northern Ireland	2	
<input type="checkbox"/> North West	11	
<input type="checkbox"/> North East	5	
<input type="checkbox"/> Yorkshire and Humberside	7	
<input type="checkbox"/> West Midlands	9	
<input type="checkbox"/> East Midlands	7	
<input type="checkbox"/> East of England	10	
<input type="checkbox"/> Greater London (the area covered by the Greater London Authority, rather than the area within which MPs are entitled to the London Area Living Payment)	11	
<input type="checkbox"/> South East (excluding London)	14	
<input type="checkbox"/> South West	7	(307)

27. How many staff do you employ?

PLEASE WRITE IN THE FULL-TIME EQUIVALENT IN THE BOX BELOW (FOR EXAMPLE, IF YOU EMPLOY TWO MEMBERS OF STAFF WORKING HALF A WEEK EACH, PLEASE ENTER 1).

3 (Mean)

(313)

PLEASE CONTINUE ANY ANSWERS OR MAKE ANY ADDITIONAL COMMENTS YOU HAVE IN THE BOX BELOW.

PLEASE AVOID USING NAMES OF INDIVIDUALS AND PLACES, AND OTHER INFORMATION THAT MIGHT IDENTIFY YOU OR OTHERS.

**Thank you very much
for taking part in this
survey.**

Please return it to the
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