

The background of the entire page is a photograph of the Regina City Hall clock tower, a Gothic Revival style building with a large clock face and ornate spire. To the right, a modern building with a glass facade and black metal balconies is visible, partially obscuring the clock tower. The sky is overcast with grey clouds.

MPS' STAFF, THE UNSUNG HEROES

An examination of who they are and what they do

Rebecca McKee

The Constitution Unit

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THEY DO

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The Constitution Unit
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Front cover image: London, United Kingdom - October 1, 2022: The famous Big Ben behind Portcullis House by Ester Virt

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Executive summary

A good deal is known about the 650 MPs who sit in the House of Commons, and they are frequently the focus of research. Far less is known about the over 3,500 people who work for them across their Westminster and constituency offices. Yet these people play a key role in our political system: serving as gatekeepers for MPs; providing them policy advice, research, and legislative support; engaging with constituents and providing essential administrative assistance. This report sheds new light on who these people are and what they do, introducing original data from a survey of MPs' staff. The first part (chapters 2 – 5) presents background research on MPs' staffing; the second part (chapters 6 – 10) then explores the survey results.

Chapter 1 of the report briefly sets out the background and research questions. These include how MPs organise their offices, what kinds of people work for them, what work they do, what motivates them, what ambitions they have, and how they gained their roles.

Chapter 2 examines the historical evolution of staffing support for MPs. In the past MPs needed to financially support themselves, including any staffing. Salaries for MPs were only established in 1911, with funds for secretarial support introduced in 1969. Since then both staffing allowances and staffing levels have significantly grown, and MPs are now each entitled to employ five full-time equivalent (FTE) staff. Importantly, staff are employed by individual MPs, rather than directly by parliament or any other body.

Chapter 3 sets out the role and remit of the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority (IPSA) in relation to MPs' staff. Since the MPs' expenses crisis in 2009 IPSA has been responsible for overseeing and administering staff pay. It also provides some advice to MPs as employers (with more available in-house from the Members' Services Team). This chapter sets out IPSA's role and introduces the 'job families' (administrative, executive and research) and pay bands that apply to MPs' staff. It highlights a tension that the autonomy of MPs as employers means it is not currently possible for House authorities or IPSA to take a strategic oversight over the support that MPs receive.

Chapter 4 sets out the staffing arrangements in several other legislatures – in Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland, Ireland, Australia and New Zealand. The devolved legislatures adopted similar staffing models to Westminster, where direct employment of staff by members seeks to strike a balance between regulation and allowing members autonomy. But other models exist. Notably in New Zealand, the Parliamentary Service – rather than the MP – is the employer.

Chapter 5 provides an overview of information on MPs' staff publicly available from existing sources. It explores the numbers of staff employed over time, how many staff work in each job role, the rate of staff turnover, and gender, which is the only demographic characteristic available from IPSA. It shows that overall, more women than men work for MPs, but that there are key differences between job families. Administrative and (to a lesser extent) executive staff are majority female, while research staff are majority male. Staff turnover is extremely high.

Chapter 6 begins the use of survey data, exploring the different roles that staff have, their day-to-day activities and the choices that MPs make in how they structure their offices. It

shows that most MPs employ staff both at Westminster and in the constituency, usually from at least two different job families. Research staff make up 65% at Westminster, and executive staff 57% in the constituencies. Staff report conducting a mixed and overlapping set of duties which do not necessarily match their job descriptions.

Chapter 7 presents data on staff demographics, qualifications and prior experience. Beyond the gender data provided by IPSA, this chapter adds in ethnicity and age, alongside educational, work and prior political experience. Overall, it shows that there are very big differences between staff working in Westminster and constituency offices. Staff at Westminster are significantly younger and more male than constituency staff, with 71% of research staff being under 30 (and 87% at the junior level). Those who went to private school or Russell Group universities are overrepresented compared to the general population. Over 90% of staff who are graduates overall studied social sciences and humanities subjects, with very little representation of Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) subjects. Westminster staff are more likely than constituency staff to have been to private school.

Chapter 8 considers the recruitment process by which staff got their jobs. An analysis of job advertisements shows that MPs value prior experience in parliament when hiring. Survey data highlights the role of parliamentary internships as pathways into a job with an MP. Overall, the decentralised nature and informality of recruitment processes, plus opportunities through informal internships, present challenges to monitoring and achieving diversity and equity among MPs' staff.

Chapter 9 looks at how staff view their own role and the support available to them. Key terms used to describe the role include 'rewarding', 'interesting' and 'varied', but also 'stressful' and 'challenging'. In terms of support, staff greatly value in-house services, such as the House of Commons Library, but express more concern about IPSA and training opportunities. Most have very regular contact with their MP, while those in Westminster and constituency offices rarely have face-to-face contact with each other.

Chapter 10 explores why staff originally wanted to work for an MP and their future plans. Research staff, typically younger and male, are more likely to seek political experience for future careers, while administrative and executive staff, often from the local area, are more motivated by alignment with the MP and party values. Research staff are more likely than others to themselves want to be an MP.

Chapter 11 sets out key conclusions, highlighting some problems that have emerged from the analysis. Notably, staff in Westminster and constituency offices are very different. Westminster staff are far more likely to fit the stereotype of ambitious young men themselves seeking a political career. There is a very narrow pool of subject area expertise covered by such staff, with STEM subjects particularly poorly represented. High turnover puts a major strain on staff and MPs themselves, while MPs' understandable focus on recruiting staff with parliamentary experience risks perpetuating the inequalities that currently exist (and have probably long existed). In a decentralised system, dealing with these problems is challenging, but they deserve careful consideration to ensure that MPs' staff, MPs, parliament, and our political system as a whole are well supported.

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1 Introduction

'The services provided by Parliament are crucial to MPs being effective. We are elected to come here, to scrutinise, and to get things done for the people we represent. We do that with the support of the House of Commons; we cannot do it ourselves...Being effective MPs requires the right services to be in place – not just the same services that were there 40 years ago, but the right services for today.

Dame Maria Miller MP (Conservative, Basingstoke), 2023¹

We know more than ever about the 650 MPs who are elected to the UK parliament – who they are (Butler et al., 2021), what motivates them (Sobolewska et al., 2017), and what they say and do in the course of their work (Hargrave and Blumenau, 2022, Russell and Gover, 2017). They work hard and their workload is growing. But we know much less about the just over 3,500 staff directly employed by MPs to support their work. These staff, working in MPs' Westminster offices, and in constituency offices across the UK, are called on to assume a wide variety of roles. They serve as gatekeepers, controlling access by constituents and interest groups; as resources, providing policy advice, research, and legislative support; as channels of communication, engaging with constituents and linking the constituency to Westminster; and as providers of essential administrative support. They sit at a 'representational nexus', representing both the work of their MP to their constituents and the demands and needs of the constituents to the MP (Cloutier, 2019).

MPs' staff support not only the MP they work for, but by extension the institution of parliament as a whole. Like many people working behind the scenes, their contributions often go unrecognised; indeed, former Commons Speaker John Bercow remarked that they are the 'unsung heroes' of Westminster (Dale, 2015b). But it is important that the work of MPs' staff does not go unrecognised. To be able to look across the institution as a whole and take strategic decisions on how best to support parliament and the staff themselves there needs to be a far better understanding of who these staff are, their roles in the system and the work that they do.

These staff are employed directly by the MP, not by parliament, and as such lack some of the employment protections and support systems provided to their colleagues employed by the parliamentary authorities, such as House of Commons Library researchers or committee clerks. Despite these limitations, working for an MP can offer significant benefits. Those who work for an MP may be able to trade on the valuable experience they have gained and the networks to which they have become privy. Some roles can be a stepping stone to a career as an MP, as a political journalist, in a public affairs agency, or any other role where knowledge of 'the inside' and a demonstrable ability to engage with it counts for a lot. But given the wide range of MPs (backbench, frontbench, committee members, those with ambition to be in government and those

¹ HC Deb 9 February 2023, vol. 727, col. 1093.

without), and the variety of work undertaken across Westminster and the constituency offices, not everyone will have the access to take advantage of these opportunities.

There is now a large body of research on what our representatives do in parliament and how they carry out the function of representation; what it means, why it matters, how it works. The existing research has been conducted on MPs themselves (Lamprinakou et al., 2016, Lovenduski and Norris, 2003, Saalfeld and Bischof, 2012), parliamentary organisations (Allen and Childs, 2019), parliamentary candidates (Murray, 2021, Sobolewska et al., 2017), and those who give evidence to select committees (Geddes, 2017). It has not focused on the staff who work on their behalf. These staff sit at the heart of our democracy and, in supporting MPs, they are themselves performing many of the important functions of our elected representatives. What research has been done on those who support MPs has been on special advisers (Hazell, 2014, Yong and Hazell, 2014) – a role sometimes filled by those who have previously been MPs’ staff – but has excluded MPs’ own office staff, even though they occupy an important place within the policy and representation process.

There are, inevitably, reasons for these gaps in our knowledge. One is that the situation is complex. MPs’ staff have an unusual employment status; they are not public servants in the way that a civil servant is, and they are not employed by the House of Commons in the way that other staff on the parliamentary estate are. MPs are responsible for managing their own offices, employing their own staff directly. In effect, there are 650 small organisations run by MPs, each of whom has the freedom to decide the scope of work of their staff, the type of support roles that they need, and who should fill these roles. Yet MPs do not have complete freedom. They work within a framework created and overseen by the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority (IPSA). IPSA sets out in detail the expenses that they can claim, the salaries that they can pay, and the job descriptions that they should use.

The UK parliament should be a model workplace. But it is very difficult for parliament to take a strategic overview of staff working for MPs and whether there is an adequate depth and breadth of support both for MPs and for their staff. Given all of this, and that these roles can afford benefits and access to networks for some staff, it is important to understand the role of these staff better.

Recent interest in this topic is demonstrated by the fact that in 2022 the Speaker of the House of Commons Sir Lindsay Hoyle launched a Speaker’s Conference to look into the employment conditions of MPs’ staff. Speakers’ Conferences are modelled similarly to select committee inquiries, and are used to find cross-party consensus on a subject, with membership drawn from across the House of Commons. The Speaker’s Conference reported in July 2023 (Speaker’s Conference, 2023) made recommendations for reform in several categories: community, culture and behaviour; HR support for members and their staff; and IPSA regulation and reform. It drew on a range of sources including written evidence from MPs and their staff, as well as analysis of the survey conducted for this report.

This report seeks to widen our understanding of the work of parliament and directly contribute to the work in parliament on improving MPs’ staffing – including following the Speaker’s Conference report – by looking at who MPs’ staff are and what they do. The information that it includes is drawn from a mixture of desk-based research and discussions with those working in parliament,

the devolved legislatures and regulatory bodies. The key source, and a unique contribution to this field of research, is a survey of MPs' staff conducted in the autumn of 2019. The results of the survey are drawn on in the second part of the report.

Key questions

The overarching question addressed in this report is 'who works for MPs and what do they do?'. There are six key questions that it will answer to help us understand how parliament as a whole is supported by these staff:

Why do MPs have staff? MPs have had funding from parliament to employ their own staff since 1969. Originally intended to fund one secretary, the allowance now covers up to five FTE staff per MP with a mix of roles and responsibilities. The development of the staffing budget has overall been ad hoc, usually in response to MPs' demands for further support, and historically without much strategic planning. But how has the role of MPs' staff developed in parliament? And how has the staffing budget and employment model developed alongside this?

How does the employment model work? The current employment model is unusual and puts these staff in a different position to their peers elsewhere in Westminster. But what exactly is the employment model? Who recruits, pays, and sets the employment standards for MPs' staff? Are there lessons we can learn from other parliaments?

How do you get a job working for an MP? For some staff, though certainly not all, the role can offer a pathway to a political career. Noted examples include the former Prime Minister David Cameron (Elliott and Hanning, 2007), the former Speaker of the House of Commons John Bercow (Dale, 2015a), and former MP and current Mayor of Greater Manchester Andy Burnham (Tempest, 2007).² In all, 30% of the 2015 Cabinet had previously worked, in some role, for an MP (Dale, 2015a). Given these roles can open doors, how are these staff employed? What procedures are in place for hiring new staff? And what reasons do staff give for wanting to work for an MP?

Who are the staff? MPs carry out a wide variety of work across different topics. MPs themselves come from a range of backgrounds, bringing in different expertise from their previous employment or other experiences. But the stereotype of MPs' staff is that they are from a relatively narrow background, that they are male, young, politics graduates – but is this correct? Who works for MPs? What qualifications do they have? How are people with different characteristics spread across the different types of roles? How do they compare with MPs themselves and the rest of the population?

What do these staff do? MPs themselves have a broad and varied job and their staff support them in almost all their roles. While the employment model has the benefit of providing flexibility it also means that there is no one body with strategic oversight of the work that MPs' staff do.

² David Cameron worked as a researcher for his godfather, Conservative MP Tim Rathbone. John Bercow worked part-time as a researcher for Dr Michael Clark MP. Andy Burnham worked as a researcher for Labour MP Tessa Jowell.

What job roles do these staff have? What do they do day-to-day? Do their job titles reflect this? And what facilities do they have to support their work?

How do MPs staff their offices? MPs have a lot of freedom to employ who they want and in which roles. Given this, how do MPs choose to staff their offices? What are the mix of roles and how are they spread between their constituency and Westminster offices? How do MPs from different parties staff their offices? And are there any patterns in the choices MPs make?

Data sources

To provide a missing piece of the puzzle – information about MPs’ staff, who they are and what they do – the analysis presented in the second part of this report draws extensively on a survey of such staff conducted in autumn 2019 (see the appendix for more detail on survey methodology). The survey was designed specifically to provide an overview of MPs’ staff to answer the key questions set out above. I am very grateful to the staff who took the time to engage with this project. In total, 520 responses were received (some only partial, as respondents did not have to answer every question). Of these, 472 responses were completed online and 48 on paper. Based on information from IPSA at the time the survey was conducted, there were 3,312 staff working for an MP.³ The 520 responses therefore correspond to a response rate of 15.7%.⁴

Where there are gaps in the data, or more complete information is available elsewhere, insights have been included from other sources such as information on IPSA expenses, Freedom of Information (FoI) requests (see Appendix B), desk-based research reviewing previous studies, academic literature, and reports on staff and on policies relating to staffing. Other insights were obtained from meetings with staff from IPSA and the House of Commons, as well as some time spent shadowing staff in MPs’ offices.

By drawing on this range of sources, it became possible to paint a more detailed picture of who works for MPs and what they do, going beyond what we have previously known.

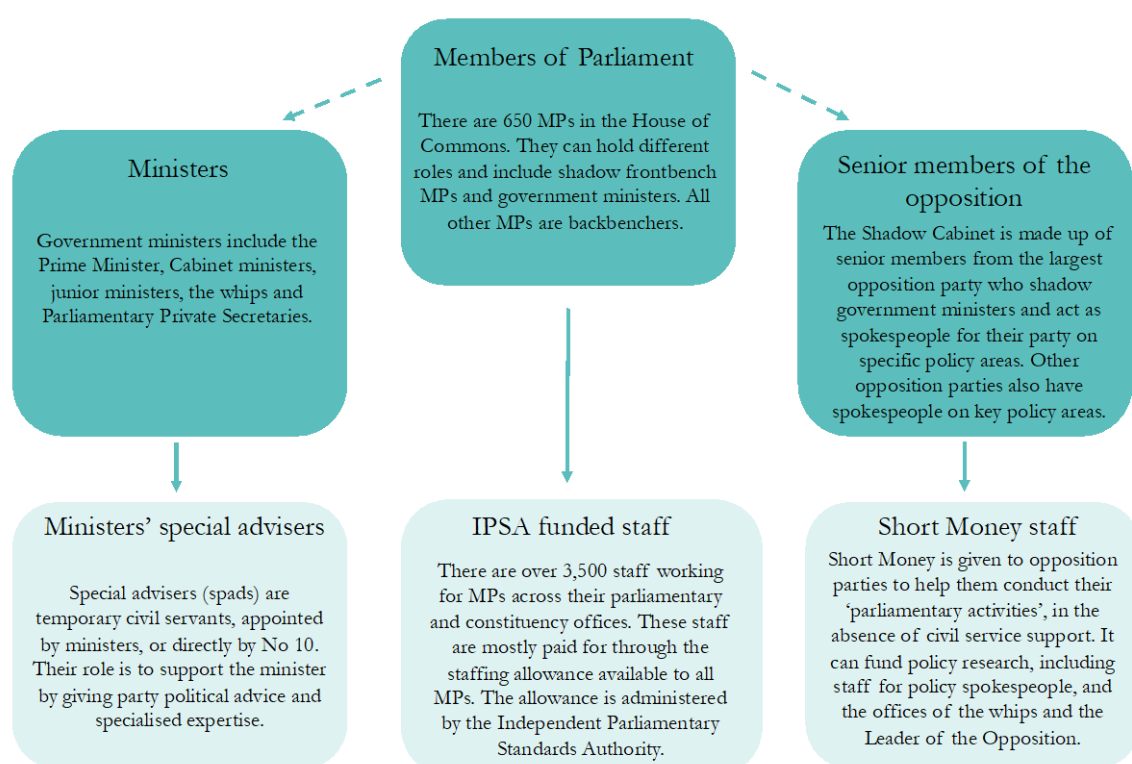
Defining MPs’ staff

There is often misunderstanding about who works for MPs and under what conditions. This report is concerned with the staff who work directly for an MP, most of whom are paid for through their staffing allowance administered by IPSA and some through Short Money (which is made available to opposition parties in the House of Commons). However, MPs do receive a wider range of support to enable them to carry out their role, such as research and other services provided for by parliament. Figure 1-1 outlines the different categories of staff that various MPs may be directly supported by.

³ IPSA FoI May 2020 RFI202005 2.

⁴ For comparison the IPSA annual user survey in 2019 had a response rate of 6% including MPs, MPs’ proxies and other staff. A study in 2018 of Canadian constituency staff had a response rate of 18% (Cloutier, 2019).

Figure 1-1 MPs in the House of Commons and their staffing arrangements



Office holders can have both IPSA funded staff and either spads (government) or staff funded by Short Money (opposition)

An important distinction here is between MPs' personal office staff (staff that all MPs are entitled to through the IPSA staffing allowance) and special advisers (staff specifically for government ministers).⁵ These staff have slightly different roles, for example MPs' personal office staff cannot engage in campaign activities for the MP or the political party in that role. This report is concerned only with those staff who work in MPs offices, most of whom are funded by the IPSA staffing allowance.

Report outline

To answer the key questions outlined earlier, the main body of this report falls into two parts: background chapters (chapters 2 – 5) and results chapters (chapters 6 – 10). The first part is described as background because it explains how the current situation operates and what we know already, putting the later results in a wider historical and international context, including:

Chapter 2 The history of MPs' staffing from early secretarial support to today.

Chapter 3 The role and remit of IPSA as it relates to MPs' staff.

Chapter 4 How staffing works in the devolved legislatures of the UK, with some novel alternative examples from elsewhere.

⁵ For an in-depth look at the role and function of special advisers see Yong and Hazell, 2014.

Chapter 5 What we already know about MPs' staff from existing data sources.

The second part of the report contains the main results of this study, primarily from the staff survey, which can be read independently of the background chapters. Given the breadth of what is covered in this report there are multiple ways that these results could be presented, but they have been set out in what is felt to be the most logical order. The text is signposted to make it easy for a reader who wants to dip in and out in their search for specific areas. The results chapters look in turn at:

Chapter 6 The different job roles MPs' staff have, and the way different MPs structure their offices.

Chapter 7 Staff characteristics and demographics that are not covered in chapter 5 including age, ethnicity, qualifications, and past experience.

Chapter 8 The recruitment process for staff, how they heard about the job, and internship experience.

Chapter 9 How staff are supported in their role including the facilities available to them and the level of contact they have with the MP and other colleagues.

Chapter 10 Motivations for wanting to work for an MP and future career plans.

Finally, **chapter 11** sets out key conclusions, highlighting the key problems that have emerged from the analysis.

This report only covers some of the issues that relate to MPs' staff. The recent Speaker's Conference covered other aspects including the community, culture and behaviour of MPs and a detailed look at the HR support (Speaker's Conference, 2023). Elsewhere, others have done excellent work covering harassment of staff and grievances procedures. That is such a large and complex subject that it could not be addressed within the scope of this report. Instead, the interested reader is pointed to some good existing literature, including the independent report *Bullying and Harassment of MPs' Parliamentary Staff* (White, 2019) and academic work on the subject (Krook, 2018).

Part I: Background

2 The history of MPs' staffing support

No one can get a secretary for £500 a year, and many hon. Members occupy a position in public and political activity where they receive a very large mail...The more speeches one makes, the more correspondence one gets. The more correspondence a Member gets, the more it costs to deal with it. The more work a Member does, the less take-home pay he has. That is really putting any vocation on its head.

Douglas Houghton MP (Labour, Sowerby), 1969⁶

Today it is almost impossible for an MP to fulfil their multiple roles effectively, as a constituency MP and legislator holding the government to account, without the support of staff. Even Philip Hollobone, who was at one time titled 'Britain's cheapest MP', declaring 'I don't need staff' (Parkinson, 2009), relented and claimed staffing costs for several years after 2017–18.⁷

All MPs can currently draw on a funding package administered by IPSA to enable them to do their job. This funding includes their own salary as well as expenses to cover the costs of running an office, having somewhere to live in their constituency or London, travel between parliament and their constituency and employing staff. Although we are used to our MPs in the UK having access to such a package of salaries and expenses, remuneration for MPs was only introduced in 1911. Before then they relied on personal funds or financial support from wealthy donors, their party, or other organised groups. A formal system of payment to cover expenses for support staff was only introduced in 1969.

This chapter sets out how funding for MPs' staff evolved through the 20th and 21st centuries into the structure we are familiar with today. The history of funding for MPs' staff provides important background context for the rest of this report and for anyone who wants to understand how the system works. This is not a system anyone would design from scratch and when a staffing allowance for MPs was first introduced, no one could have foreseen the expansion of MPs' roles into what they are today. The system developed over time with ad hoc adjustments as the demographic characteristics of MPs shifted, the workload increased, and MPs called for more support. As this chapter will show, the adjustments have offered relatively short-term solutions and the evolution of staff funding has lacked an explicit overarching vision of the role of an MP, what support they need, and how it can most effectively be delivered. Before we look at recommendations for improvement we should know how and why it developed in the way that it did.

⁶ HC Deb 18 December 1969, vol. 793, col. 1697.

⁷ IPSA record of MPs' expenses for Philip Hollobone MP.

The foundation for change – reforms in the 19th century

The foundation of remuneration for MPs in the UK starts with the labour movement and the reforms in the 19th century.⁸ Widespread discontent with the existing political system, visible in the work of the Chartist movement, led to Reform Acts resulting in the extension of the franchise, redistribution of seats to the North and the Midlands, and the end of most property and income qualification requirements to vote. These reforms created the conditions that would make it possible for Labour MPs to enter parliament, which happened in 1900 and 1906.⁹ Prior to the 1858 Property Qualification for Members of Parliament Act, MPs had to prove that they owned property over a certain value to take their seat. Yet even after this was abolished, the absence of remuneration arrangements for MPs remained a barrier to working-class representation.

It took until 1911 for MPs to be able to claim funds from parliament to support them in carrying out the role. From 1911 they received an annual sum of £400. From 1912 part of this sum was treated as an allowance for necessary but unspecified expenses and so was tax free (Giddings, 2005). The amount stayed the same (bar a temporary reduction in the early 1930s, during the Great Depression) until 1937 when it was increased to £600. In 1957 and 1964 it was increased further to £1,750 and then £3,250 (Kelly, 2009b). These ad hoc increases continued until 1971 when MPs' salaries and expenses were referred to the newly established Top Salaries Review Body (TSRB), which later became the Senior Salaries Review Body (SSRB). The first report of the TSRB in 1972 drew a distinction between salary and expenses for MPs; expenses were from then treated as conceptually, if not administratively, distinct. The introduction of MPs' salaries made it possible for those without the personal financial means previously necessary to support themselves to take up seats. However, MPs who wanted personal staff still had to fund this themselves. The type of financial support for MPs' staffing that we have today took much longer to develop.

Development of staffing support for MPs

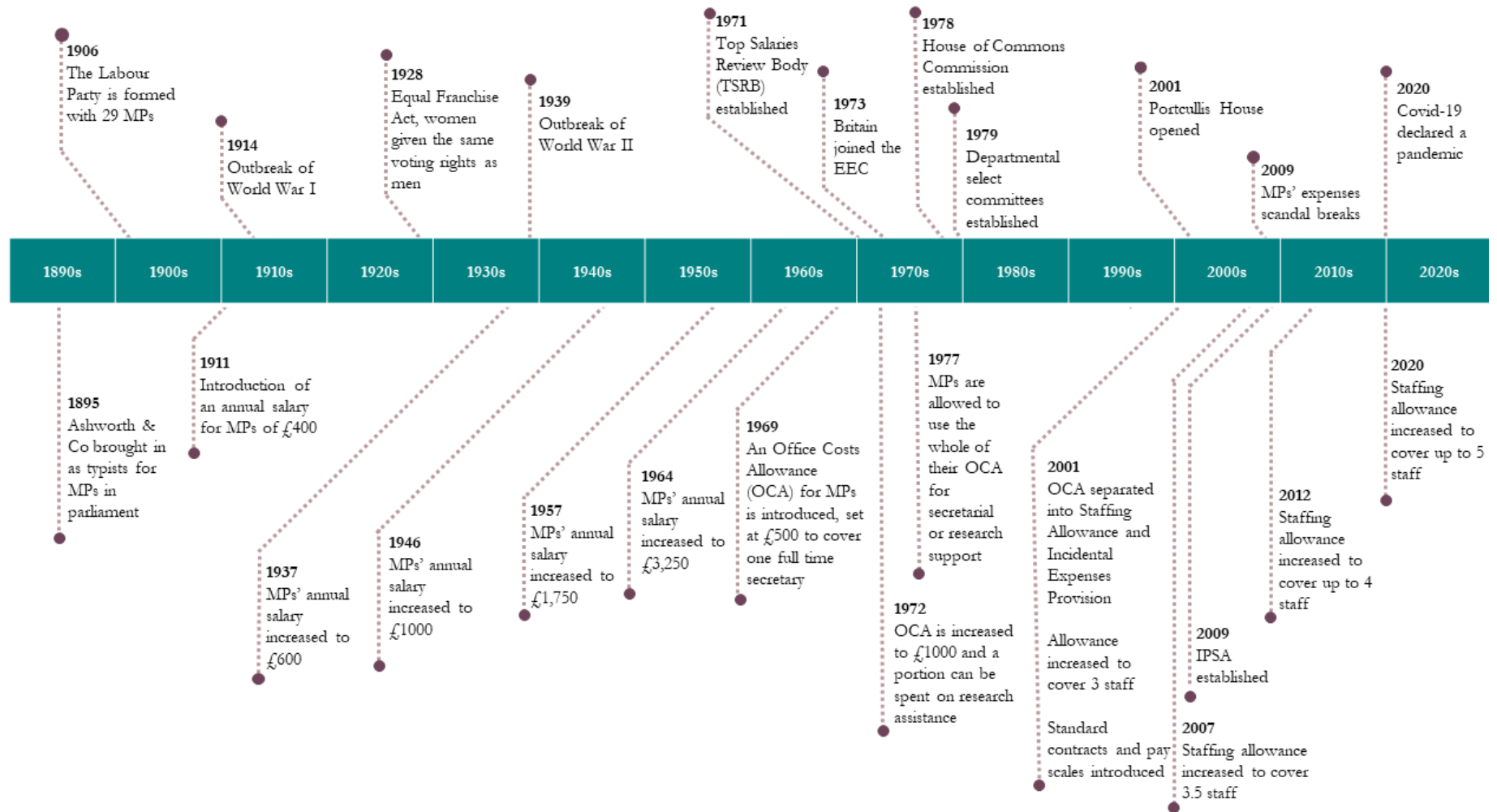
Early secretarial support

Although MPs did not initially receive funding for staff, they did have access to an early source of staffing support in the form of a shared pool of typists in the House of Commons. Beginning in 1895, and continuing until after World War II, Ashworth & Co was engaged by the Sergeant-at-Arms as the first official typewriting agency for the House of Commons (Takayanagi, 2014). The company was founded by Mary Ashworth and, unusually for the time, was predominantly managed by women. The arrangement placed within the House of Commons, and at the disposal of any MP who required their services, a group of skilled typists, who were also qualified to write shorthand. These typists became known colloquially as the 'Ashworth Girls' (Takayanagi, 2014). By 1925 Ashworth & Co employed 14 women and they reported having 35–40 visits per day, providing services to 250 MPs (Takayanagi, 2012).

⁸The Representation of the People Act 1832; Property Qualification for Members of Parliament Act 1858; Redistribution of Seats Act 1885.

⁹The Labour Representation Committee changed its name to the Labour Party in 1906 shortly after the election.

Figure 2-1 A timeline of MPs' salaries and staffing expenses, 1895–2020



Some MPs did also have personal staff, usually a secretary, that they funded themselves. Dr Mari Takayanagi's (2012) thesis provides accounts from some women who worked for MPs as secretaries from as far back as the early 1900s. However, many others who worked for MPs are absent from the parliamentary records as their employment arrangements were with the MP not parliament. The few who do appear in official records tend to be people who worked for especially prominent MPs. They included Margaret Travers Symons who worked as a secretary to Labour Party founder Keir Hardie. Her actions, if not her name, are recorded in Hansard after a dramatic incident in which she burst into the chamber of the House of Commons in 1908 to demand votes for women.¹⁰

1969 introduction of the office costs allowance

By the late 1960s, there had been an influx of MPs who, because of their previous employment, were used to having administrative and secretarial support but who lacked the private means, then necessary, to employ their own staff. This cohort of MPs were also different because they favoured taking on a greater casework load in their role, changing the nature of the relationship between MPs and their constituents and making themselves more visible (Norton and Wood, 1993).

By 1969 this had led to calls for greater support for MPs to assist with the greater workload. Douglas Houghton MP (Labour, Sowerby) was one of those who complained about the working conditions of MPs and their lack of staffing support. Speaking in the chamber he said:

'This is not good enough for the so-called Mother of Parliaments. What have we to be proud of in this place if we cannot ask for reasonable conditions to do a job of work which is becoming increasingly complex, increasingly onerous, and an increasing strain upon hon. Members.'¹¹

Later in 1969 the first allowance for MPs' administrative and secretarial costs was introduced. It was called the office costs allowance (OCA) and provided expenses up to £500 to cover the cost of one full-time secretary for each MP (£9,500 in 2023 prices).

Increasing workload for MPs and expansion of the OCA

In the latter half of the 20th century MPs' workloads continued to grow with demands on them increasing in three key areas. First, scrutiny of the executive expanded with the introduction of departmental select committees; second, demands from the public stepped up; and finally legislation became more complex with primary, secondary and European elements (Committee on Members' Expenses, 2011). At the same time, the House of Commons and MPs were taking more control and responsibility for their budgets and planning, and in 1978 the House of Commons Commission was established. Although some MPs saw research support for backbench MPs as unnecessary – as one frontbench Labour MP put it at the time, 'mere lobby fodder does not need research assistance' (quoted in Rose, 1974) – others felt it was necessary. The OCA was increased

¹⁰ HC Deb 13 October 1908, vol. 194, col. 243. Although Margaret Travers Symons was not named in Hansard she is attributed in other sources as being the person who entered the chamber (e.g. www.suffrageresources.org.uk/database/2536/mrs-margaret-travers-symons)

¹¹ HC Deb 18 December 1969, vol. 793, col. 1698.

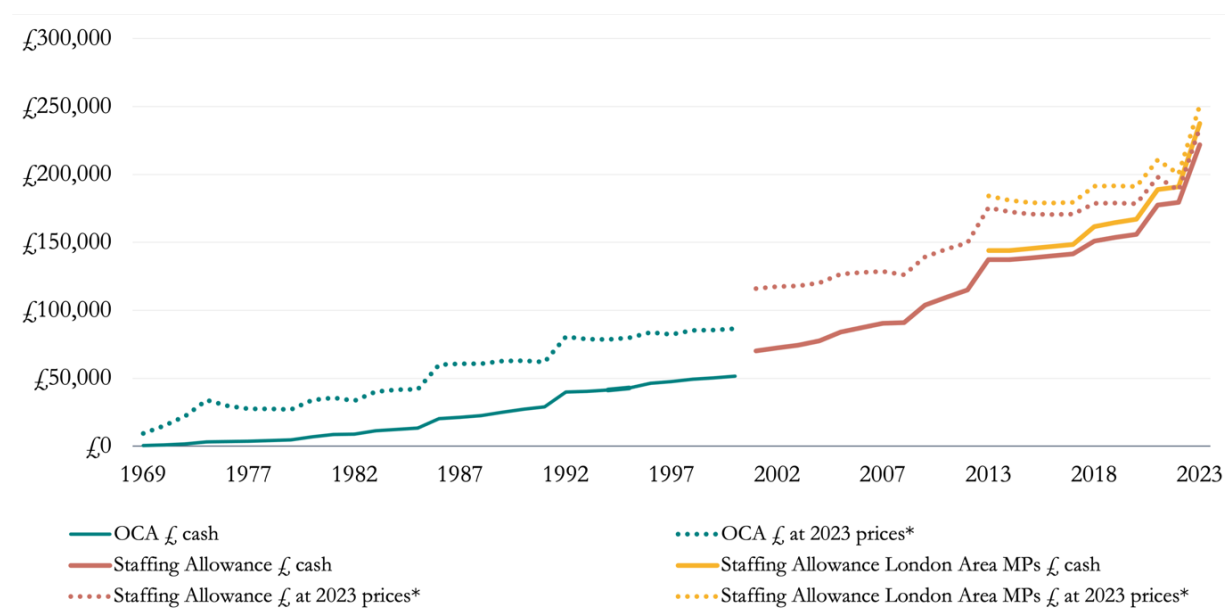
in 1972 to £1,000 (£15,000 in 2023 prices) and MPs were given the option to use some of the money to pay for a research assistant as well as a secretary. By 1977 arrangements were formalised that meant MPs could choose to use the whole of the allowance for either secretarial or research assistance. The allowance was increased annually, and, from 1984, it was indexed to civil service salaries (Kelly, 2009b).

In 1984 the issue of MPs' staff support was raised once again, this time by Alf Dubs MP (Labour, Battersea South). Speaking in the chamber he said:

'Whether we like it or not, most of us have an ever-increasing burden of welfare or constituency case work, I welcome that fact. It is right that we should do that work. It keeps us in close touch with what is going on...However, the corollary is that we are short of time to cope with the wide range of other work for which we are responsible.'¹²

A series of incremental changes to the OCA continued through the later part of the 20th century (see Figure 2-2). By the turn of the new millennium, MPs were entitled to claim a maximum of £51,572 (£86,500 in 2023 prices) for office costs allowances, including the salaries of their support staff. Figure 2-2 outlines the increases in the OCA since its introduction in 1969. The dotted line shows how much the money would be worth in today's (2023) prices.

Figure 2-2 MPs' staffing and office costs allowance, 1969–2023



Source: 2001–11 Factsheet M5 'Members' pay, pensions and allowances', House of Commons July 2011; 2011–23 Scheme of MPs' Business Costs & Expenses, IPSA. **Note:** The dotted lines indicate the allowance as it would be in 2023. *Calculated using HMT GDP deflators.

¹² HC Deb 20 July 1984, vol. 64, col. 625.

Other forms of research support for MPs

There are two other major changes that fundamentally shifted the way MPs received research support. The first was the changing role of the House of Commons Library. The second was the external funding of research staff for opposition frontbench MPs which provided funding for roles that are similar to that of Spads today. Both of these changes provide important context for the way that the role of MPs' staff developed in this period.

The House of Commons Library

The House of Commons Library, established in 1818, has over 200 years of experience providing resources for MPs. The way in which the Library supports MPs has evolved in this time, with vast changes happening in the relatively short period since 1945. Some of its evolution over the decades has been in response to the changing nature of MPs and in turn their staffing support. As most of the new Labour MPs in the 1940s and 1950s had little independent means to support their own researchers, and very little office space in the Palace, the Library became an essential space for these MPs in Westminster (House of Commons Library, 2010). The Library then opened a Research Division which provided briefings to MPs and detailed, confidential, and non-partisan responses to their enquiries. Between 1961 and 1965 the Research Division saw a 40% increase in the number of enquiries it received (Gay, 2017).

By the 1970s the Library was working with an increasingly professional and demanding cohort of MPs, alongside an expanding workforce of research assistants working for them. Speaking about her time in the Library, Priscilla Baines remembers this period as a time of great change as 'Members also changed a great deal and made new demands, with much more focus on constituency cases and difficult enquiries. They also acquired personal staff on a scale that changed how we worked with many of them' (House of Commons Library, 2018). In order to keep staff enquiries separate from the Library's main priority, which remained support for the members themselves, the Library set up a distinct branch especially for MPs' researchers.

Increasing demands meant the Library had to grow rapidly through the 1970s and 1980s. In 1945 it had seven staff, in 1960 this had grown to 32 staff and by 1975 it had expanded to 76 staff (Gay, 2017). This period of expansion of both members' research staff and the Library had an impact on the way that the Library was run with its limited resources. In the 1970s the Library began to prioritise responding to individual MPs and their staff over support for other House services, such as the newly formed departmental select committees. These committees now have their own system of research specialists. The demand for Library resources was so high that in 1975 there was a limit of 100 passes for MPs staff to access the Library (Gay, 2017).

With finite resources to fund research services for MPs, the Committee on Assistance to Private Members in 1975 recommended the Library as the best option given the breadth of specialist and institutional knowledge it held. MPs' own research staff were often only able to provide generalist knowledge, and only to one MP; there was also a high turnover of staff as MPs left or lost their seats. With this came a loss of institutional knowledge. In contrast the Library had built up specialist expertise in a range of areas, including a new statistics section, and staff who knew how to access and make the most of the resources available to members in the Library. In addition, the increase in members' personal staff meant that members were now dealing with an entirely new

role, as employers and managers: a role they were mostly untrained for, and for which the Commons services were ill-equipped to support. In contrast the Library avoided many of these issues because its staff were employed by the Commons and managed centrally.

Members' staffing numbers were not curtailed, and as this chapter will show, has continued to expand. The House of Commons Library has evolved to meet the needs and demands of members and their staff and there is now a strong relationship between the Library and members' staff. The introduction in the 1980s of an Education and Social Service section of the Library, to support the increase in constituency enquiries, is one way in which this relationship has continued to develop. The House of Commons Library has, especially since reforms in the 1940s, offered research assistance, resources, and space, for MPs. The development of the Library in the latter half of the 20th century is an important part of the narrative in the evolution of MPs' staffing support and is an important service today for MPs' staff as it continues to offer vital research services, resources and training.

External sources of research funding

While the House of Commons Library was doing a good job of providing non-partisan research services to all MPs, some people were concerned about the lack of specific research support for opposition frontbenchers. These opposition MPs were poorly equipped compared to the government ministers they were shadowing who had access to the civil service. Frontbench opposition MPs had no more research resources provided for them than backbenchers. Amongst those concerned was Pratap Chitnis, Secretary of the Joseph Rowntree Social Service Trust (now the Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust). He instigated the Political Fellowship Scheme in 1971 which was funded by the Trust (Smith, 2004). The scheme offered funding for research staff for certain opposition frontbench MPs, to improve the quality of parliamentary opposition. It provided these MPs with a grant for £25,000 a year for three years to pay for parliamentary assistants (Rose, 1974). Given the origins of the Joseph Rowntree Social Service Trust in the confectionary business, these assistants became known as 'chocolate soldiers' (Flower, 2004).¹³

Some Rowntree scheme assistants went on to have political careers of their own, including Archy Kirkwood (who became the Liberal Democrat MP for Roxburgh and Berwickshire, and later Lord Kirkwood of Kirkhope), who worked for David Steel MP in the Liberal Whips' Office in 1971 under the fellowship scheme.¹⁴ Kirkwood later said 'People were very curious about what somebody helping a member of parliament would do... We were objects of interest and I had the run of the whole place – access all areas' (Jacobs, 2018). Following the Rowntree scheme, the philanthropist and Labour donor Sigmund Sternberg funded a similar scheme for Labour Party shadow ministers later in the 1970s.

¹³ This should not, of course, be confused with the derogatory term originally coined by George Bernard Shaw in *Arms and the Man* to describe a soldier who looks good in uniform but is otherwise useless and who would melt away in battle.

¹⁴ A letter signed by Archy Kirkwood from the office of David Steel MP is in the Wellcome Collection catalogue and can be accessed online. The details are: Wellcome Collection catalogue 17 June 1973 Collection 1971 – 1974 Reference SA/BCC/D.19. Accessed here <https://wellcomecollection.org/works/vq742gh6/items?canvas=33>

Because the support was offered to frontbench MPs only, these roles were in effect more like special advisers (spads).¹⁵ However, the provision of research support by external sources at that time set an important precedent for MPs in general and, with the introduction of secretarial support, signified recognition of the changing role and expectations of MPs.

2001 – a new millennium and a new building

The numbers of staff continued to grow throughout the late 20th century, although there was very little change to the way they worked. By the 1990s there was an urgent need for more space to house an expanding parliamentary workforce. In 1992 parliament commissioned a new building – Portcullis House – which opened in 2001 to house MPs, staff and other services. The newly designed building created offices for 210 MPs and 400 staff alongside complementary services and facilities, including a post office (Bourn, 2002).

Also in 2001, the staffing allowance was further increased to provide funds at a level that covered the employment of up to three full-time staff, having previously been set to cover 2.5 full-time staff (Strickland, 2001). It was later increased again in 2007 to 3.5 full-time staff (Review Body on Senior Salaries, 2008). MPs required more staff to keep up with the demanding role, and as a result the workforce was expanding rapidly. The Members Estimate Committee 2007–08 Review of Allowances captured these changes, describing how MPs were dealing with far greater quantities of constituency work and parliamentary correspondence (Members Estimate Committee, 2008). It stated that in the 1950s and 1960s an MP received, on average, 12–15 letters per week but by 2007 this had increased to over 300, plus emails, faxes and phone calls (Gay, 2005).

An increasing workforce meant that there was more attention being paid to the staff who supported MPs. In 2001 the SSRB made further provisions for MPs' staff which included ring-fencing staff pay from other office costs – the OCA was replaced by two separate budgets, a staffing allowance and the incidental expenses provision which included money for staff training. Around the same time the responsibility for administering the staffing allowance was transferred to the House of Commons, although the money still came out of the individual MP's expenses and the MP remained the employer. Figure 2-2 outlined how the staffing allowance has increased since it replaced the OCA. At the same time the House of Commons introduced a structure of pay scales and standard contracts for all MPs' staff (Strickland, 2001).

2009 – considering another model of employment

There were two immediate issues faced by MPs as the workforce of parliamentary staff increased. First, MPs' expanding workloads, for which they required more staffing support, were being added to by the administrative burden of employing and managing these extra staff. Some MPs entering parliament were ill-equipped and unprepared for the role of employer and manager. Second, MPs were becoming increasingly concerned with the public perception of their growing expenses which

¹⁵ Spads are political appointees who give advice directly to ministers and thus differ from conventional civil servants and MPs' parliamentary research staff. They are recruited directly by their minister to provide a political angle to advice that the independent civil service is unable to do, while working closely with civil servants to deliver on the minister's priorities.

were rising in part because of the increases in the staffing allowance. Although the staffing allowance had been separated from the other office costs expenses, it was often wrapped up with overall expenses when the media reported it. Discussing this in the chamber Dr Nick Palmer MP explained that as the staffing allowance is connected to individual MPs it ‘allow[s] the continuation of the fiction that we are passing £130,000 through our own pockets’.¹⁶ Some members thought that moving the employment of staff out of the hands of MPs might allow a distinction between the staffing allowance and MPs’ other expenses.¹⁷

In April 2009, MPs agreed with a government proposal that the House of Commons should become the employer of MPs’ staff. A main impetus for this proposal was concern about the adverse public perception of MPs’ overall expenses. Other reasons given were that if the House of Commons were the employer it could take steps to create greater consistency of pay and terms of employment among staff and offer regular, consistent pay rises and comparable pension provision with House staff. It could also provide human resources support, offer better protection of staff experiencing exploitation and grievances, and recognise trade unions.

The House of Commons Commission was tasked with considering these proposals and making recommendations. It considered in detail how this model of employment might work and reported its recommendations in October 2009 (House of Commons Commission, 2009). Ultimately the Commission did not recommend that the House of Commons become the employer of MPs’ staff. The Commission viewed it as very expensive, lacking clear benefits, creating an ambiguous employment relationship for members’ staff, and significantly reducing the flexibility of members to manage their staff. Instead, the Commission recommended a range of reforms that could be conducted within the existing model of employment. However, by the time the Commission reported, the expenses scandal had broken and the establishment of IPSA was on the horizon, bringing the matter of MPs’ staffing allowances and issue of the employment of their staff with it.

Staffing in the IPSA era

The establishment of IPSA

IPSA was set up as an independent body to oversee MPs’ expenses and allowances in 2009. This was a huge shift as the House of Commons, which until then had been considered sovereign in these matters, transferred responsibility for members’ pay, expenses and allowances to an independent body. MPs remained the employer and IPSA by default became responsible for setting and distributing MPs’ expenditure on staff.

IPSA was set up in the wake of the expenses scandal (see box 1 in chapter 3). The scandal saw revelations of a series of misuses of public funds by MPs resulting in some resignations and even a few criminal convictions (Van Heerde-Hudson, 2014, Crewe and Walker, 2019). Importantly it led to a range of radical reforms in parliament, one of which was the establishment of IPSA. The misuse of funds included claims on expenses and allowances to do with mortgage payments,

¹⁶ HC Deb 30 April 2009, vol. 491, col. 112.

¹⁷ HC Deb 30 April 2009, vol. 491, col. 1095.

second homes, renting out homes, overclaiming for council tax and furnishing and renovation of homes. The staffing allowance had become administratively different from MPs' other expenses in 2001 when the House of Commons took on the responsibility for payroll. However, as it formed part of the overall package of MPs' expenses the staffing allowance became the responsibility of IPSA when it was established.

Box 1 The 2009 expenses scandal

IPSA has proven to be the most significant and lasting consequence of the 2009 expenses scandal. Legislation establishing IPSA was brought in swiftly after the scandal, in part because MPs had already been looking at ways of reforming the expenses system in the months before the scandal broke.

In January 2008, the government had published the SSRB Review of parliamentary pay, pensions and allowances 2007, which included several recommendations for changes to the expenses system. The House agreed to implement a recommendation to increase the staffing allowance, to cover up to 3.5 full-time equivalent members of staff per MP. Around the same time, Derek Conway MP (Conservative, Old Bexley and Sidcup) had the whip removed after the Commons Standards and Privileges Committee found that he had overpaid his son, whom he had employed as a part-time researcher while he also attended university full-time. The committee found there was 'no record' of his son's work and ordered Conway to repay a portion of the money (Standards and Privileges Committee, 2008). In March 2009 the Committee on Standards in Public Life (CSPL) announced that it would conduct an inquiry into MPs' allowances (Kelly, 2009a).

As a result, by early 2009 public and media interest in MPs' expenses was already heightened. Then in May the Daily Telegraph began publishing the 'expenses files', containing unredacted information on claims made by MPs. This set off what became known as the parliamentary expenses scandal. The scandal laid bare the inability of parliament to manage the expenses of MPs effectively, as 'both the rules and the spirit of the rules were well and truly broken by some' (Fisher and van Heerde-Hudson, 2014). Although it was only a minority of MPs who were involved, and even fewer who stood trial and were convicted of offences, the fallout exposed systemic problems in parliament's ability to regulate itself.

In the same month that the story broke, party leaders met and agreed that parliamentary expenses should be overseen by an independent body. The Prime Minister presented the paper Proposals for Fundamental Reform of the Parliamentary Allowances System the next day, and the Parliamentary Standards Bill received its first reading on 23 June that year. IPSA officially took on the responsibility for MPs' pay and expenses on 7 May 2010 (Erskine May, 2019).

2010 onwards

At first, IPSA continued the staffing budget as it was, providing funds for each MP to employ 3.5 FTE staff. Then, in 2012, IPSA increased the staff budget to accommodate up to four full-time

members of staff and later increased it to five (IPSA, 2022b). At the same time, it introduced a differential allowance for MPs who represented constituencies in or near London, known as London Area MPs, and those who did not. This was to reflect the higher cost of living in the capital. IPSA includes 96 constituencies in the London Area calculation. Figure 2-2 shows the development of the staffing allowances since the establishment of IPSA, and the introduction of a higher allowance for London Area MPs. Since its inception, IPSA has played an important role in the development of MPs' staff. In recent years it has run several policy reviews looking at conditions for staff although it is limited in its remit because MPs remain the employer. The current arrangements for MPs' staff and the role and remit of IPSA in relation to staffing are explored in more detail in the next chapter.

Conclusion

The funding for MPs' staffing support has grown from £500 in 1969 to over £237,000 in 2022 (the equivalent of approximately £13,000 in 1969). During this time MPs' roles have expanded, as they deal with more complex legislation, undertake greater scrutiny of the executive, and conduct more administrative work, both as managers of staff and meeting requirements for transparency through reporting of their finances. Crucially the way that MPs interact with their constituents has changed immensely since MPs were first paid in 1911, with MPs' offices now the first port of call and last resort for many constituents on a broad range of issues.

The idea that MPs have staff to support them has become normalised; these staff are a regular feature of the bustling activities across the parliamentary estate and in constituency offices across the country. The increase in staff has put pressure on MPs, who have a new role as managers, and on parliamentary services which have had to adapt their delivery. As a result of being more present there is now a greater focus on MPs' staff, what they do, and their working conditions. This had led to more attention from outside, and inside parliament – most recently the current Speaker, Sir Lindsay Hoyle, led a Speaker's Conference inquiry into the employment conditions of MPs' staff (Speaker's Conference, 2023).

MPs in the UK are somewhat unusual in having a package of expenses that cover up to five members of staff for their personal office. For example, in the Portuguese parliament three or four members can share one secretary. The history of staff funding, and the ad hoc nature in which it has developed, makes clear that the current system is one that has evolved organically rather than being designed strategically in a way to best serve the needs of MPs today. Looking back at its development helps us to understand why the system in the House of Commons exists in its current form and helps form a basis to consider changes or reform.

This chapter has presented some of the key steps in the evolution of MPs' staffing support. The next chapters cover the current role of IPSA in relation to staffing, followed by an exploration of how staffing works in the devolved legislatures of the UK and some other legislatures elsewhere.

3 The Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority

We should not walk away from the fact that members of parliament need expenses in order to do their jobs on behalf of their constituents. We need to make that absolutely and abundantly clear. Paying staff, renting offices and providing accommodation for members of parliament whose constituencies are a long way from London is part of the responsibility of the House, in order to enable Members to do their jobs properly.

David Heath MP (Liberal Democrat, Somerton and Frome), 2009¹⁸

The days when only those with significant private financial means could afford to be an MP are thankfully long gone and it is now widely accepted that MPs should be paid for their work, adequately supported, and reimbursed for expenses incurred. Any pay and expenses system needs regulation and oversight. Since 2009 this has been the responsibility of the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority (IPSA) which sets, regulates, and administers MPs' pay and expenses. IPSA is also responsible for operating the payroll system for MPs' staff, who are paid through a staffing allowance that forms part of an MP's expenses package. It is the body which has the most interaction with MPs' staff: IPSA creates policies that impact the way staff are employed and holds most of the data that is available on these staff. It is therefore worth looking in detail in this report at the role and remit of IPSA in relation to the employment and pay of staff.

This chapter looks at the role and remit of IPSA as it relates to MPs' staff. It does not provide an exhaustive account of the rules and regulations pertaining to these staff, but instead extracts the key information that readers will need to understand the system. It should be noted that MPs can employ staff outside of their staffing allowance and, therefore, outside the remit of IPSA. For example, they can use Short Money if they are on the opposition frontbench or make use of private donations. However, staff employed in this way comprise a small minority of those working for MPs.

This chapter can be used as a reference point for readers interested in specific areas, such as staffing budgets and salaries or recruitment, but also provides context for understanding the findings from the survey reported in later chapters. Notably, it highlights the unusual and precarious employment position of these staff.

¹⁸ HC Deb 30 April 2009, vol. 491, col. 1081.

What is IPSA?

As the independent statutory body tasked with regulating and administering the pay and pensions of MPs and their staff, IPSA has three main responsibilities: regulating MPs' business costs and expenses; determining MPs' pay and pension arrangements; and supporting MPs in making eligible claims on their expenses as they carry out their parliamentary duties. In carrying out its role, IPSA also sets the regulatory framework under which MPs can make claims, including some rules on employing staff. The relationship between MPs, their staff, and IPSA is not a formal relationship of the kind in New Zealand, where staff are employed by the Parliamentary Service and managed by the MP. It's a more informal relationship, whereby the MP employs the staff but IPSA has a responsibility for their salaries and expenses. As MPs are the legal employers of their staff, IPSA can only intervene in the employment relationship when there is an interest in ensuring that public money is being spent well. In recent years, IPSA has taken on a greater role in relation to staffing, insofar as it relates to the framework of employment (while making it clear that in other areas, such as HR and grievance procedures, it is happy to support the House of Commons where it does not have a remit). The distinction is not always clear cut and it has been a tricky relationship to navigate.

Legislative basis

The Parliamentary Standards Act 2009, subsequently amended by the Constitutional Reform and Governance Act in 2010, sets the legislative basis for IPSA. This legislation and the establishment of IPSA marked a huge shift for the House of Commons, as it moved from self-regulation to regulation by an independent body. Until then parliament had been considered sovereign in these matters. The 2010 Act gave IPSA the responsibility for determining MPs' salaries and pension arrangements, thus IPSA assumed responsibility for the entire package of MPs' expenses, including expenses to cover the costs of running an office, a place to live in their constituency or London, travelling between parliament and the constituency, as well as the staffing allowance.

Independence

Legislation gives IPSA the responsibility for making *fair and impartial* decisions, independent of parliament, government, and political parties. In 2011 the chair of IPSA told MPs that 'Independence is absolutely critical, so that we can make tough decisions that may not endear us to the outside world, as well as to make tough decisions that may not endear us, from time to time, with yourselves' (Committee on Members' Expenses, 2011).

IPSA is an independent body, but it is not entirely removed from parliament or government. It is funded by an annual budget from HM Treasury. Organisational costs account for 5% of IPSA's budget, the rest covers MPs' staffing and business costs. In 2021–22 the total budget amounted to £238,591,000. It is reviewed annually by the Speaker's Committee for the Independent

Parliamentary Standards Authority (SCIPSA)¹⁹ and then submitted to the House of Commons for approval.

Governance

IPSA is overseen by a board with five members, including a chair. The chair and other board members are appointed by the Speaker of the House of Commons, acting in his or her role in SCIPSA. Members are appointed for fixed terms of up to five years, after which they can be reappointed for up to three more years. The board, which appoints IPSA's chief executive, is supported by an executive responsible for IPSA's day-to-day running. The legislation also provides for a compliance officer, appointed by the board, who conducts investigations if there is reason to believe that an MP has been paid wrongly in accordance with IPSA's rules. The compliance officer also reviews decisions by IPSA if it decides not to reimburse an MP for a claim.

IPSA also appoints other staff needed to support its work. In 2020–21 it had employed an average of 84 full-time equivalent staff (Kelly, 2022). These are overseen by the occupants of three senior leadership positions: director of policy and engagement, director of strategy and change, and director of MP services. The process for these appointments, and the remit and functions of IPSA are set out in the Parliamentary Standards Act 2009.

Role and remit of IPSA

The relationship between IPSA, MPs and their staff

Before describing the role and remit of IPSA it is worth clarifying the employment model of MPs' staff which is the context in which IPSA functions. MPs' staff, who work directly for MPs across their Westminster and constituency offices, are not employed by parliament or IPSA. Instead, they are employed directly by the MP for whom they work. It is up to the MP to decide how they will staff their office, how many people they will employ, how they will allocate roles, and where the staff will be based. The MP, as the employer, has legal responsibility for issuing contracts, setting the terms and conditions of employment, and providing necessary training. IPSA's role is to regulate and administer the expenses available to MPs to ensure that public money is spent appropriately. The staffing allowance used to fund the salaries of MPs' staff comes under IPSA's remit. In practice this means that although MPs have a lot of freedom over their staff, they need to adhere to certain rules set by IPSA. These rules are set out in the sections below.

In law, IPSA has three main responsibilities:

- to regulate MPs' staffing and business costs;
- to determine MPs' pay and pension arrangements;
- to provide financial support to MPs in carrying out their parliamentary functions.

¹⁹ SCIPSA is a statutory body established under the Parliamentary Standards Act 2009.

In carrying out the second of these responsibilities, IPSA has created a framework under which MPs can make claims on their staffing allowance and therefore employ staff. The determinations, as well as the fundamental principles that underpin provision of pay and expenses for MPs, are laid out in the *Scheme of Business Costs and Expenses* ('the scheme'). MPs must make expenses claims in accordance with the scheme and IPSA's decisions on the validity of an MP's claim must also be made within the rules of the scheme. The scheme is reviewed each year and is published at the start of the financial year. The sections below highlight determinations in the scheme that are relevant to MPs' staffing.

Box 2 Considering other employment models

Before IPSA was created, the House of Commons Commission was responsible for managing the payroll function for MPs' staff, and MPs' expenses were paid by the Fees Office within the House of Commons. As set out in the previous chapter, in 2009 MPs debated the possibility that the House of Commons would also become the employer of MPs' staff. This resolution was looked at by the House of Commons Commission which ultimately did not recommend a change. It also did not recommend that IPSA become the employer, for two reasons. First, IPSA had not been set up to employ staff and, given its early teething problems, the Commission felt it would be overwhelmed by the additional responsibility of employing almost 3,000 staff. Second, MPs would likely have to have some involvement in the process of hiring and managing staff, and as IPSA was designed to be entirely independent of MPs it was not clear how this could be done. A similar suggestion, to move the employment of staff to either the House of Commons Commission or IPSA, was considered in the 2019 Gemma White report on bullying and harassment of member's staff but was not recommended (White, 2019).

Budget and salaries

Staffing allowance

The staffing allowance is set by IPSA each year based on several assumptions about the staffing support that an average MP needs. The current assumptions are that an MP needs:

- five full-time equivalent (FTE) staff;
- a mix of roles and responsibilities, to include an office manager, a senior parliamentary assistant and caseworkers;
- all staff to be based in London, if they are a London area MP or three staff in the constituency and one in London if they are a non-London area MP.

The staffing allowance is separate from MPs' other office costs. It is split equally among all MPs regardless of factors such as whether their party is in government, their length of service, or their constituency size. The only difference is between the 96 London area MPs and non-London area MPs, with a higher cap introduced by IPSA in 2012 to account for the higher cost of living in London where the latter MPs' staff will be based. Salary bands for London-based staff include a London weighting allowance.

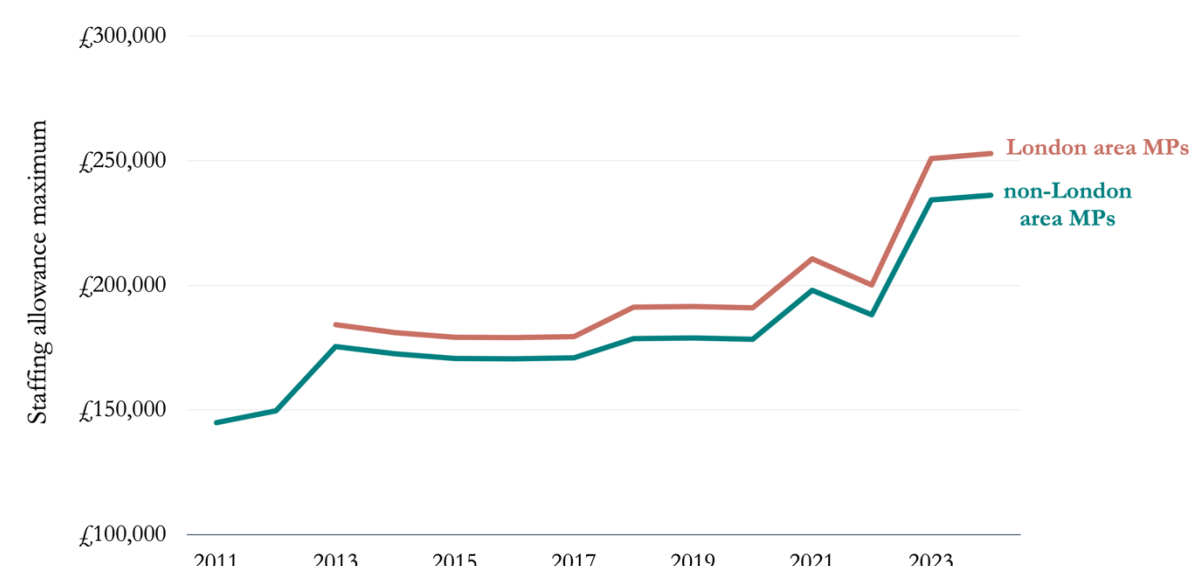
The maximum staffing allowance available to MPs for 2022–23 is set at £221,750 for non-London area MPs, and £237,430 for London area MPs. MPs never see this money as payroll is handled by IPSA.

In addition to staff salaries, the staffing allowance covers employers' contributions to National Insurance and pension schemes, overtime payments, childcare vouchers for staff, cycle-to-work schemes and other salary sacrifice schemes, as well as reward and recognition payments. It can also be used for pooled staffing services which are discussed later in this chapter.

💡 In the financial year 2018–19 London area MPs claimed on average £148,976 in staffing costs and non-London area MPs claimed £139,136. That's between £14,500 and £15,500 less than they could have claimed for staff that year.

The allowance is designed to provide MPs with an adequate level of support and is reviewed by IPSA from time to time. Most annual budget increases are small, but there have been two larger increases in recent years. In 2012–13 the allowance was increased based on a new assumption that on average each MP required four FTE staff, increasing from the previous 3.5. In 2017–18 IPSA adjusted the budget after an independent market review of MPs' staff salaries. It also adjusted the calculation for non-London area MPs upwards on the assumption that these MPs would have one staff member based in the Westminster office. Most recently in 2020 IPSA conducted a review into the funding of MPs' staff which resulted in a budget and salary band increase for the 2020–21 scheme. The allowance is now designed to cover up to five FTE staff.

Figure 3-1 Staffing allowance for MPs set by IPSA, 2010–23 (2023 prices)

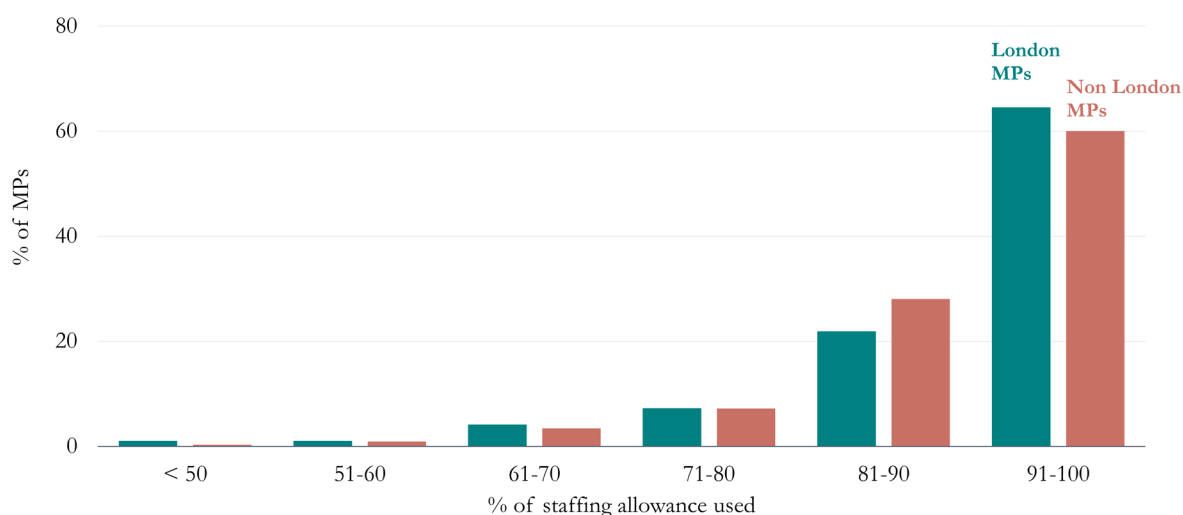


Source: Annual Scheme of MPs' Business Costs & Expenses, IPSA 2010–23. **Note:** In 2012 IPSA introduced a higher staffing allowance for London Area MPs.

The staffing allowance is the highest figure MPs *could* possibly claim and is designed to cover the maximum costs that they would be expected to incur. MPs must make evidenced claims to be able to use the money; it is not automatically granted to them. In 2018–19 the vast majority of MPs

(88%) used over 80% of their staffing allowance (Figure 3-2). London area MPs, who have a larger allowance, tended to use a higher proportion of their staffing allowance.

Figure 3-2 MPs’ use of their staffing allowance, 2018–19



Source: IPSA total spend 2018–19 data. **Note:** 2018–19 data is used to reflect normal spending habits as the 2019 general election and Covid-19 uplift skew later data.

Job titles and job families

IPSA has set out three job families – administrative, executive, and research – which are a way of grouping roles with shared characteristics that require similar qualifications, knowledge or experience. The aim of this structure is to offer a degree of consistency across 650 different MPs’ offices. The job families are further divided into levels each with their own corresponding pay range. Together the job families and the levels form seven job roles.

The job roles are designed to cover the range of tasks and roles for which an MP may need support.²⁰ Each job role has a set of job titles and a suggested job description to guide MPs when they are hiring. MPs must allocate a new member of staff with one of the approved job titles. It is up to MPs to decide which job title the staff member has, the only stipulation is the title(s) must be chosen from among those listed by IPSA and the staff member must be paid a salary within the corresponding salary band. The rationale for this framework is that staff with similar roles, and with similar levels of responsibility, should be paid a similar salary, regardless of which MP employs them. Table 3-1 shows the various job titles, pay ranges and how they fit within the job families and levels.

We can find evidence of a precursor to job families and bands in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests from 2009. The document indicates seven job titles grouped into secretaries/office managers, caseworkers, and researchers/parliamentary assistants, each with

²⁰ In 2020–21 the job titles were amended after a review. The job titles and descriptions in the table are the ones that are currently available for new starters. Existing staff may have some of the old job titles.

corresponding pay bands. Anecdotally however it seems that there was little consistency in the use of these job titles and pay bands. The three IPSA job families that are used today are first mentioned in the 2017–18 scheme. When the survey for this report was undertaken there were 27 job titles within these categories that MPs could choose from but, after this, IPSA commissioned a *Pay and Reward Review* that recommended some minor changes to job titles, descriptions, and pay grades; there are now 33 job titles.

Table 3-1 Job families, job descriptions and pay scales for MPs’ staff, 2022–23

Job Families		Administrative		Executive		Research	
Location		London Area	Outside London	London Area	Outside London	London Area	Outside London
Salary ranges (£)	1	22,402 – 32,127	19,305 – 27,301	24,000 – 36,413	21,529 – 32,938	–	–
	2	26,251 – 38,425	23,397 – 34,071	32,000 – 43,740	28,311 – 41,593	25,500 – 37,466	23,839 – 34,401
	3	33,759 – 50,310	30,000 – 47,389	–	–	36,575 – 53,630	32,811 – 47,261
Job titles	1	Personal Assistant Executive Officer Administrative Officer Administration and Communications Officer		Caseworker Communications Officer Constituency Assistant Support Officer Constituency Support Officer Press Officer			
	2	Senior Executive Officer Senior Administrative Officer Administrative Manager Executive Assistant		Senior Caseworker Constituency Communications Manager Constituency Support Manager Senior Communications Officer Senior Casework Team Leader/Manager Senior Communications Adviser Senior Press Officer		Parliamentary Assistant Researcher Research Officer Policy Assistant	
	3	Office Manager Executive Office Manager Chief of Staff				Senior Parliamentary Assistant Senior Researcher Research Manager Senior Policy Researcher	

Source: IPSA MPs’ staff job descriptions and pay bands for 2022–23.

MPs do, however, still have considerable discretion in the roles that they hire their staff to do within this framework. In practice, some staff have job titles that cover more than one role, for example caseworker and administrative officer, or they work part-time in two or more roles across different contracts, or they may simply find that the activities they do relate to a different job family than the one in which they are employed. This makes it very difficult to monitor consistency in pay and staff career paths.

💡 IPSA's website hosts a job description generator for MPs to help them create an appropriate job description for the role they are hiring for. MPs input the job family and job title and the generator returns the correct pay range and produces a list of key responsibilities that the MP can choose from, with free text boxes for any additional responsibilities. This system gives MPs guidance when hiring but provides a lot of flexibility recognising that the needs of individual MPs and their offices will vary. MPs can download the document and use it for recruitment. Once they've found someone to hire for the role MPs can use the IPSA online contract generator tool.

Salaries and pay ranges

IPSA has set salary bands that correspond to the seven job roles as shown in Table 3-1. The pay ranges are set by IPSA to ensure that MPs are able to pay their staff the voluntary Living Wage, and salary bands are higher for the staff that work for London area MPs to reflect the higher cost of living in the capital. New staff will usually be paid on the lowest band of the pay scale for the job they are doing, with the opportunity to move up to the maximum over time. However, as MPs have a cap on their staffing allowance staff can only be moved up the pay bands if this can be achieved within the cap.

Reward and recognition payments

Bonuses are not allowed under the IPSA scheme. Under the previous system MPs could award bonuses to their staff (including employed family members) with minimal restrictions. Instead, MPs can make reward and recognition payments to their staff. When first introduced the guidance stated that these should be 'modest payments' but ultimately it is at the MP's discretion. Despite some pushback from members the arrangements for reward and recognition payments were tightened by IPSA (IPSA, 2014). Since 2017 individual staff can only receive up to £1,000 a year, and in total these payments cannot exceed 2% of the MP's annual staffing allowance. Any payments over the allowance must be funded by the MP themselves. Connected parties (see below), who may still be in post under legacy arrangements, cannot receive reward and recognition payments.

New starters

IPSA has very little oversight of the recruitment process. MPs are relatively free to decide who they recruit and how they do it. The determinations made by IPSA are relevant only after a candidate has been recruited for a role. For a new member of staff to be paid through the IPSA payroll system the MP must ensure that they have:

- an IPSA employment contract²¹ (either permanent, fixed-term, casual, permanent non-IPSA, term-time, or employed intern);
- one of the job titles approved by IPSA;
- a salary that sits within the corresponding pay range for the job title.

Connected parties

Changes to the way that connected parties are employed has been one of the main changes to regulations around staffing for MPs, who prior to the creation of IPSA were able to employ connected parties without restrictions. Connected parties are staff who have a prior connection to the MP. This is defined by IPSA as being a close family member (a spouse, civil partner or cohabiting partner of the MP, or a parent, child, grandparent, grandchild, sibling, uncle, aunt, nephew, or niece of the MP or of their spouse, civil partner or cohabiting partner), or a close business associate.

The freedom MPs had to employ their family members was unpopular among the public with various newspaper articles regularly listing MPs who employed their wives, husbands, or children even though it was within the rules at the time. As there was no day-to-day oversight from the House authorities to assess the work of these staff, it was theoretically possible for an MP to employ a family member in their office who did very little but was paid for by the staffing allowance (and indeed not just theoretically – see box 1 in chapter 2).

When IPSA took over MPs' expenses it did not ban this practice immediately, but in 2010 it stated that MPs could only employ one connected party (MPs could honour existing contracts if there was more than one person already employed). Restrictions were tightened further in early 2017 when IPSA announced that from the next parliament members would not be able to employ any new connected parties. Because of the snap election, this came into force in June 2017. To further aid transparency in this area IPSA publishes the names of connected parties and their salary band, but not their family relationship to the MP.

Engaging with MPs' staff

IPSA has had a tricky relationship to navigate with MPs' staff. In 2011 the House of Commons Committee on Members' Expenses looked back at the first two years of IPSA (Committee on

²¹ In 2022 there were 79 members of staff who were employed before IPSA was established and are on older, legacy, contracts.

Members' Expenses, 2011). Representatives of MPs' staff claimed that staff had had to spend 'significant amounts of time dealing with IPSA's claims system' and that 'IPSA has worsened their terms and conditions, downgrading their redundancy terms and provision for childcare' (Committee on Members' Expenses, 2011: 60). The report recommended that IPSA engage more with staff by establishing a liaison group with staff and their representatives.

In response IPSA has introduced a range of engagement activities and involves staff in its policy reviews, consultations and its annual user survey – which has been in place since 2012 and is used to collect feedback on its performance. The 2021 survey showed that just over half of MPs' staff rated IPSA's overall performance as 'good' while fewer than a third of MPs agree (IPSA, 2022a). Despite these efforts, IPSA still has more to do to engage with staff. The staff surveys and consultation elicit relatively low response rates, and other engagement activities often rely on the same relatively small group of staff.

Recent changes: policy reviews and consultations

From its inception, IPSA sought to achieve high levels of compliance from MPs. Now that it has done so, IPSA has begun taking additional steps to improve its offering to MPs, informed by a series of reviews. The IPSA Corporate Plan 2021–24 (2021) outlined plans to enable MPs to focus less on their responsibilities to IPSA and more on their other roles by 'providing an exemplary, seamless regulatory service'. The following examples of recent policy reviews are in line with this mission, reviewing the way that funding is allocated to provide support staff to members.

Pay and job description review, 2019

The IPSA pay and job description review of MPs' staff (2019) was commissioned to look at the relevance of the titles and descriptions to the work of MPs staff. As a result, some of the job titles, job descriptions, and salary bands were amended. The changes were intended to reflect 'the complex, sensitive nature of work carried out by staff members, as well as the skills (such as technological ones) that are necessary to work in a modern Parliament'. Any new staff joining from 1 April 2020 have been employed using the updated job descriptions and job titles. Changes included adding more detail to job descriptions, which were deemed too brief, putting a bigger focus on communications in some job roles, and changing some of the more 'old fashioned' job titles, such as those including the word 'secretary'.

Funding for MPs' staff policy review, 2020

IPSA's policy review into the funding of MPs' staff (IPSA, 2020b) followed a 2019 incident when the organisation proposed salary increases for MPs that were almost double those of their staff. More than 200 MPs campaigned for IPSA to review this decision. The IPSA review looked again at the funding and level of support provided to MPs through personal staff. It noted a high, and growing, demand on MPs and their staff, with MPs' offices being the 'first port of call as well as the last resort for people who have not been able to find the support they need elsewhere' (IPSA, 2020b: 18). The review also noted how staff were handling complex casework, often without the appropriate training, and were dealing with difficult and sensitive interactions with constituents. It

also found concerning levels of staff turnover, although it did not reach any conclusions about why this was.

Following this review, IPSA increased the staffing budget in the 2020–21 scheme. It also introduced the provision of £4,000 extra funding for training, health and wellbeing of staff (notably this is housed within the staffing allowance not a separate pot of money), and more funding for the Speaker's Parliamentary Placement Scheme, which offers placement opportunities for people from diverse backgrounds.

Automatic salary increases consultation, 2020

IPSA (2020a) conducted a consultation on its proposals for automatic salary increases for MPs' staff. Before this, MPs could award their staff an annual pay rise but they had to apply individually for each staff member. IPSA's analysis of its own payroll data and feedback from staff showed that there was variation across MPs' offices, with some staff being awarded pay rises, and some not.

The 2021–22 scheme introduced automatic annual salary increases for MPs' staff with an IPSA contract. The pay rise is calculated as a percentage of the salary and applied to all staff, at a rate corresponding to any increase in the overall staffing allowance determined by the IPSA board for the coming year. However, MPs do have the opportunity to opt out of this scheme for their staff if they wish.

Covid-19 and MPs' staff, 2020

Although not an official policy review, IPSA made changes at the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020 to help support MPs and their staff as they faced challenges providing the same service under new conditions. To ensure that MPs and their staff could keep doing their work effectively while moving to a homeworking environment MPs were provided with an additional £10,000 to their office costs budget. These funds could be used for example for laptops, printers or office furniture to be used at home which would usually be provided in the office, or for online conferencing subscriptions so that staff could keep in touch with each other and the public, replacing in-person surgeries. IPSA also added extra funds to the staffing allowance that MPs could use, for example to employ a temporary member of staff, to pay for overtime for existing staff, or to increase the contracted hours for a current part-time member of staff.

From April 2020 IPSA introduced a homeworking allowance of £26 per month for staff who were regularly working from home. This was processed through the payroll system and paid directly to staff from the MP's office costs budget. Connected parties employed by the MP were able to claim this allowance, with some exceptions (e.g. if they lived with the MP who was already claiming for utilities allowances). Staff were also able to opt out of the homeworking allowance and instead claim for specific bills related to working from home.

Pooled staffing services

In addition to employing their own support staff, MPs can use some of their staffing allowance to pay for pooled staff services, with IPSA subscribing on behalf of MPs. Pooled staffing services

offer specialist research, briefing and drafting services, via small teams of research staff to those MPs who subscribe. Each of the four largest political parties have their own pooled research service.

The pooled research services are:²²

- Policy Research Unit (PRU), for Conservative MPs;
- Parliamentary Research Service (PRS), for Labour MPs;
- Scottish National Party (SNP) Research Team, for SNP MPs;
- Parliamentary Support Team (PST), for Liberal Democrat MPs.

There is a new trend towards using pooled resources as partisan policy units for narrower interests linked to specific party blocs:²³

- European Research Group (ERG), for Conservative MPs, focussing on providing briefings to them relating to the UK's relationship with the European Union;
- Northern Research Group, for Conservative MPs, focussing on providing support for MPs elected to represent constituencies in northern England, Wales, and the Scottish borders in the 2019 election;
- Socialist Parliamentary Research Group (SPRG), for Labour MPs.

Since these services are claimed through the MPs' IPSA administered budget, as with MPs' personal office staff, the pooled services staff cannot carry out activities that are non-compliant with the IPSA scheme such as party-political campaigns. Each group will have its own agenda and approach, overseen by a board – in most cases, but not all, comprising MPs and the chief whip for the party.

As outlined by IPSA (2017), these organisations can offer a range of services, including:

- detailed background research and briefings on political, economic, and governmental affairs;
- template correspondence that can be used by MPs to respond to constituents who have contacted their MP with the same or similar queries;
- materials (such as suggested parliamentary questions) for use in debates in the House of Commons or in Westminster Hall;
- information on the passage of legislation through parliament.

The pooled research services are popular among MPs; in May 2023 80% of Labour MPs subscribed to the PRS (Whittle, 2023). They are an efficient way to combine the financial resources of MPs

²²Taken from the 2022–23 individual business costs for MPs published by IPSA.

from the same party to provide high-quality research and policy advice. The staff are employed directly by the heads of the pooled services, led by the party, but are funded by MPs from that party. In May 2023 the PRS for example employed 15 members of staff and was providing services to 150 Labour MPs (Whittle, 2023). The services can make use of economies of scale by pooling resources and offer training, career progression, staff policies and their own staff handbooks. They can also pool resources for recruitment and have more rigorous recruitment processes that are consistent across the workforce. Although they are currently primarily a research and drafting service, the PRS and others – including Marcial Boo former head of IPSA – are keen for them to expand to offer more services to MPs and relieve pressure on their offices (Boo, 2022, Whittle, 2023).

A 2016 assurance review of the pooled services conducted by IPSA (2017) determined that these services are ‘for the most part cost-effective and provide valuable support to MPs’ parliamentary work’. Pooled services are subscribed to by most MPs. The 2020–21 individual business costs published by IPSA show that 541 MPs claimed for at least one pooled service, with claims totalling £2.2 million. These organisations vary in terms of the subscription they charge and how many MPs are subscribed to their services.

Conclusion

As an independent regulator of MPs’ expenses IPSA administers the expenses scheme and decides the framework under which members can claim these expenses. At first, IPSA had a more limited role: its main priority was to achieve near full compliance from members with the scheme and restore trust. As time has passed, IPSA has managed to a large extent to achieve this. Its role has evolved from purely an expenses regulator to an organisation that provides support for MPs as employers, for example by providing job descriptions and contract templates for new starters and creating better and more consistent employment policy (where it has remit to do this) for MPs’ staff.

It may seem from reading this chapter that there is surprisingly low regulation and oversight of MPs’ relationship with their staff. For others who have experience of the system, this chapter may in fact reveal more regulation and oversight than you were aware of – as I was surprised to hear from some former staff. Overall, the current system provides more regulation and consistency than there was before IPSA, when MPs’ allowances, including their staffing allowance, were administrated by the House of Commons. There is now tighter regulation of bonus type payments, and MPs can no longer employ their family on new contracts. In addition, there are clearer job titles, and linked job descriptions; IPSA has invested time and resources in trying to create a clearer framework under which MPs can employ the right staff to support their needs as office holders in parliament. However, the system still retains flexibility needed by MPs who, as the legal employers of their staff, want to make their own decisions about who to employ and what they do.

While IPSA has done a good job at managing the expenses system and has improved the sense of trust and openness to the public, there are two large issues that remain. The first is the relatively poor relationship between IPSA and its customers – MPs and their staff. IPSA is working on this relationship currently and has implemented a plan to improve engagement with MPs and their staff, with the aim of improving its offer of services.

The second issue is the employment relationship of MPs' staff . IPSA is now part of a confusing triangulated relationship that results in staff being seen within the system as an expense to manage. These staff have some decisions on their employment made by the MP, some by IPSA, and some (such as grievance procedures, HR and wellbeing services) by the House of Commons. An alternative system could provide more direct support for these staff creating a more consistent experience for staff across the many offices. That IPSA is restricted in its remit is exemplified by the recent changes to annual salary increases, where it had to include an opt out clause for MPs because they have the autonomy over how they spend their staffing budget (within reason). This is an issue that IPSA cannot unilaterally solve; instead it requires a concerted effort between MPs, the House authorities and IPSA. The pieces of evidence that highlight the issues and can provide a solution need to be brought together. The Speaker's Conference which reported in July 2023 was a good example of this effort, taking evidence and consulting with all these groups, including staff themselves, the pooled services, and other stakeholders.

4 What do other legislatures do?

The House of Commons is a beacon for democracy around the world. I feel that we have in our hands the opportunity to make it also a model workplace that is at the forefront of workers' rights, with strong protections in place for all our staff, because future generations should inherit a safer and more inclusive Parliament where everyone has somewhere to turn, and where staff are able to fulfil their potential in every single team across this House.

Thangam Debbonaire MP (Labour, Bristol West), 2022²⁴

While their precise roles may vary, legislators everywhere require support to do their job effectively. The arrangements in place for the UK House of Commons are only one of a set of possibilities. To help us understand their strengths and weaknesses, and to identify potential alternatives, it is useful to look at what happens elsewhere. This chapter considers the arrangements in place in other parliaments. The first section looks at arrangements for staff working for members of the devolved legislatures of the United Kingdom: the Scottish Parliament, the Senedd Cymru (Welsh Parliament) and the Northern Ireland Assembly. Although, as in Westminster, members of all of the devolved bodies recruit, employ, and manage their own staff, the arrangements under which they do so differ slightly. The examination of each of these bodies begins with a brief description of the roles of the members and the scope of the body in question, as this will have implications for the staff they need to support them. For reference, Table 4-1 sets out the different ways that the devolved legislatures classify staff roles and their corresponding salary bands. The final sections of the chapter then briefly cover some other examples: from the UK's closest neighbour, Ireland, which inherited a large body of UK law at independence in 1921, and from Australia and New Zealand, both Commonwealth realms, each of which to some extent has drawn on the Westminster parliamentary system.

²⁴ HC Deb 22 June 2022, vol. 716, col. 928

Table 4-1 Roles and salary bands for members' staff in UK legislatures, 2022–23

Legislature	Job role	Pay scale £			London area max. £
House of Commons, UK parliament	Administrative	19,305	–	47,389	50,310
	Executive	21,529	–	41,593	43,740
	Research	23,839	–	47,261	53,630
Northern Ireland Assembly	Grade 1	23,490	–	24,960	
	Grade 2	29,400	–	30,420	
	Grade 3	36,100	–	37,180	
Senedd Cymru	Band 3	21,225	–	28,624	
	Band 2	23,440	–	34,357	
	Band 1	27,450	–	38,740	
	Senior Advisor ²⁵	36,934	–	45,116	
Scottish Parliament	Administration and Office Management	19,749	–	36,898	
	Casework	24,185	–	36,977	
	Communications	25,300	–	37,612	
	Research and Policy	26,583	–	46,652	

Source: House of Commons – New Starters information on IPSA online; Northern Ireland Assembly – Assembly Members (Salaries and Expenses) Determination (Northern Ireland) 2016 as amended by the Assembly Members (Salaries and Expenses) (Amendment) Determination (Northern Ireland) 2020. No new determination has been published since 2020; The Senedd – Determination on Members' Pay and Allowances 2022–23 March 2022; Scottish Parliament – document provided via email by the SPBC 12 October 2021.

The Scottish Parliament

The Scottish Parliament was formed following a 1997 referendum on devolution. It is a unicameral legislature. As a body with the power to enact primary legislation and to hold the executive to account, it has much in common with the House of Commons. However, there are some important differences. First, its scope is more limited. This was set out originally in the Scotland Act 1998, and subsequently expanded in Acts of 2012 and 2016. Under these Acts, certain areas are reserved to the UK parliament, such as defence and foreign affairs. The Scottish Parliament can legislate in all areas that are not explicitly reserved. The range of issues on which members of the Scottish Parliament (MSPs) work is therefore somewhat narrower than for their counterparts at Westminster.

²⁵ Unlike special advisers who support ministers in the UK government, in the Senedd they use the American spelling 'advisor'.

Another difference is the nature of the parliamentary representation. This arises because the Scottish Parliament is elected by a different voting system, the additional member system (AMS): 73 members are elected to represent a single geographical constituency (known as constituency MSPs), while a further 56 are elected from lists in eight parliamentary regions, each electing seven members (these are known as list MSPs). Hence, not all members have the direct link to a constituency that MPs in Westminster have, and staff of members elected on regional lists have less involvement in casework than those responsible for individual constituencies.

Governance structures and processes

Responsibility for the administration of the Scottish Parliament resides with the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body (SPCB), which is charged with making sure that it has what it needs to run effectively. The SPCB has a similar function to that of the House of Commons Commission at Westminster. Where it differs, and of relevance to this report, is that the SPCB administers the Members' Expenses Scheme, which covers the arrangements for support of members carrying out their parliamentary duties, including the Staff Cost Provision (SCP) to fund MSPs' staff. Although the SPCB deals with staffing it is quite different from IPSA, which is independent of parliament, instead the SPCB role in relation to members' staffing bears some similarities to the procedures before IPSA where staffing was run through the House of Commons Commission.

The SPCB is a statutory body provided for by the Scotland Act 1998. It is chaired by the Presiding Officer (equivalent to the Speaker in the House of Commons), working with four other elected members, each of whom takes the lead on a specific set of issues. These MSPs are elected as individuals not as representatives of their party groups. Despite its small membership the SPCB has a large remit, covering the property, services, and staff of the Scottish Parliament, and it has the authority to make decisions on budgetary allocations, accommodation, security, and staffing.

The Scottish Parliament has several parliamentary staff offices responsible for different areas of its running. One is the People and Culture Office, which provides guidance on recruitment, training, terms and conditions for staff, and policies on diversity, inclusion and wellbeing. Formally its remit covers those employed directly by the parliament and MSPs, but MSPs can draw on its guidance in relation to their own staff should they so wish, with a dedicated team offering this support to MSPs as employers. The Allowances Office pays members' expenses while the Pay and Pensions Office administers the salaries of members and their staff.

Funding for members' staff

The funds from which MSPs can claim salaries for their support staff is the Staff Cost Provision (SCP). After a review in 2015 the SCP was increased to cover the salaries of up to three FTE staff, in anticipation of the increased workload expected after the changes in the Scotland Act 2016. The SCP was increased again in May 2021 in recognition of a growing volume of casework, with the increase intended to cover an additional FTE caseworker, although in practice it can be used for any staff. From 2022 the SCP sits at £139,200 per member.

As at Westminster, MSPs can employ staff directly, and can also contribute some of their staffing budget to a central pool of staff. Each party has its own pool, with the Scottish National Party,

the largest, employing about 60 people. It is left largely up to the parties to decide how they structure and fund their group pools. This makes it possible to develop a critical mass of expertise in key areas that can benefit all of the party's members. In 2020 the total provision for the group pools was £1.18 million.

Characteristics of members' staff

The most recent available data on the number of staff employed by MSPs from the Scottish Parliament Information Centre (SPICe) are from March 2021. At that time, MSPs employed 560 staff. Of these, 45% were male and 55% female, figures that match exactly the distribution in staff working for the Scottish Parliament in other roles (e.g. the Committee Office, Human Relations, Communications, and Facilities Management) in the latest data from 2019 (Scottish Parliament, 2019). As the parliamentary authorities do not employ these staff they do not have a legal responsibility to monitor diversity but they are striving to improve their oversight in this respect.

Division of roles and salary bands

MSPs can choose job titles for their support staff from a pre-determined list. Each job title is located within job families that help MSPs to set the appropriate salary for the type of job being done. The four job families are administration and office management; casework; communications; and research and policy. Similar to MPs in Westminster, for a member to be reimbursed for staff expenditure that staff member must be employed in one of the existing job families, and there is flexibility to bridge the job families where an individual has more than one role. The job families include specified salary ranges, set to reflect the duties involved and designed to be comparable with staff doing similar roles in the public sector.

💡 MSPs are elected either as a constituency member or a regional member. These representatives have slightly different duties and demands on their time. They do not have different allowances, but are free to choose to staff their offices differently, and many do. For example, constituency MSPs tend to have a heavier casework load and need more casework support.

The salaries range from £19,749, for a junior administration role, to £46,652, for a senior research and policy role (while the former is an absolute floor, members can, in limited circumstances, exceed the higher level, depending on job role and responsibilities). Unlike the UK parliament, with its higher budget allocation for London MPs, there are no regional differences.

Recent changes

In 2020 the Scottish Parliament undertook a review of the SCP (Office of the Deputy Chief Executive, 2020). This drew on extensive research, including consultation of study design with members, their staff, and the MSP Staff Forum, an online questionnaire for staff, and interviews with members and staff. This was complemented by a review of pay structures, recruitment, training arrangements, and staff pooling in other legislatures. It also looked at how members' responsibilities and the nature of their work had changed over time.

The report made seven recommendations to the SPCB, which were implemented at the start of the 2021 parliament. The full list, and the justification for them, is published in the report (Office of the Deputy Chief Executive, 2020). Recommendations included increasing staffing budgets, as described above, support for writing job descriptions, assistance with recruitment, and a centrally managed budget to develop and deliver training to members' staff.

Recruitment

MSPs are not required to publicly advertise job vacancies when recruiting staff, but they are encouraged to do so. The People and Culture Office can offer support, including drafting job descriptions, writing adverts and publishing vacancies online on the Scottish Parliament website and on the @W4MSP twitter account (a dedicated account for advertising MSP staff roles). The People and Culture Office will also provide up to £500 per member per year for additional recruitment and advertising if needed. A new recruitment system has recently been introduced to streamline the process, making it easier to follow best practice and reduce the burden on members.

MSPs are not allowed to employ their own family members although they can employ relatives of other members. If they do so, either individually or through a group pool, they must declare the arrangement and relationship to the SPCB, which is then added to a public register available on the Scottish Parliament website.

Human resources and training

When the Scottish Parliament was established in 1998 there was no human resources support for members, except for help with placing staff on the payroll. This has changed considerably. The People and Culture Office now offers help with drafting contracts, develops workplace policies, arranges training, and provides general advice on MSPs' role as employers to members on request. Similar arrangements apply to support members around human resources, which is available on request.

There is growing acceptance that there is a need for measures that support all of those working on the parliamentary estate. Recent policies on mental health and sexual harassment have been developed to cover both those employed by parliament and members' staff. Until recently the code of conduct for members only covered behaviour towards other members and parliamentary staff but not their own staff. However, the Scottish Parliamentary Standards (Sexual Harassment and Complaints Process) Bill 2020 places members' staff on an equal footing to other staff. There is also an independent support service for members' staff, which is contracted to an external provider. The People and Culture Office does offer a limited service to members' staff, mainly providing signposting for where staff can find support. In general, however, the primacy of the employment contract between the member and their staff is respected.

Another change has been in the provision of training for members' staff. At the start of the 2021 parliament the People and Culture Office established a central budget for this purpose, replacing the previous system whereby members had a set budget. The office offers training in areas such as speech writing, dealing with distressed constituents, and staff and office management.

The Senedd Cymru, Welsh Parliament

Many of the factors that influence the roles and responsibilities of members of the Scottish Parliament apply equally to the Senedd. It too was created following a 1997 referendum, although initially as the National Assembly for Wales rather than as a parliament. The body has changed over time, with the addition of the power to make primary legislation in 2006, while a referendum held in 2011 paved the way for it to be able to enact legislation without consulting with the UK government. The National Assembly for Wales was renamed Senedd Cymru following the Senedd and Elections (Wales) Act 2020. As with the Scottish Parliament, it is unicameral, and it can legislate in areas that are not reserved to Westminster. However, the list of powers that are reserved is greater than in Scotland. Also, as in Scotland, Members of the Senedd (MSs) are elected using an additional member system. In this case, 40 members represent constituencies, elected by first past the post voting, and 20 represent five electoral regions.

Governance structure

The governance structure overseeing members' staffing provision can be considered to lie between that in the UK parliament and the Scottish Parliament. As at Westminster, there is a statutory independent body, the Independent Remuneration Board of the Senedd (IRB), created in 2010, that sets the framework within which MSs employ their staff. Like IPSA, the IRB has established pay scales and standardised contracts and sets certain employment requirements in order for MSs to access the funding to employ staff and related expenses. The IRB is also consulted on employment related guidance for MSs which is developed by the Members' Business Support (MBS) team, based in the Senedd. The provisions for MSs and the framework under which they can claim for staff are set out in a very detailed document: the *Determination on Members' Pay and Allowances* (the determination). The determination goes through a revision before each new Senedd, but is also subject to an annual review where recommendations for changes are made. However, like the Scottish Parliament, but unlike Westminster where the role is assumed by IPSA, the day-to-day administration of the determination is carried out in-house. This is done by the MBS team.

The Senedd Commission is the corporate body tasked with overseeing the resourcing of the Welsh Parliament, ensuring that it has the staff and resources it needs to carry out its business. The Commission was created following the Government of Wales Act 2006, and its membership consists of the Presiding Officer and four other members who are nominated by the main political parties.

As with People and Culture Office in Scotland, advice to members on staffing is offered in-house through the MBS, based on best practice, which members can request if they wish but, in most cases, as independent employers, are not obliged to follow. There are, however, some mandated requirements. Members must place their staff on a contract that includes a statement of the terms and conditions of employment as a condition of reimbursement for staff salaries. The model contract was drawn up by the Commission and agreed and mandated by the IRB.

Funding for members' staff

As in all the devolved legislatures, members of the Senedd employ their own staff and claim for this through funds provided to them within the framework of determinations, made by the IRB. In 2022 each member was entitled to claim up to £110,570 to cover staff salaries; this increased to £121,759 in 2023. The sum was previously calculated based on an estimate of the number of staff a member might be expected to need to support their work, which was most recently three FTE staff at Band 1, 2, and 3. However, this calculation is no longer used. Now, the sum is increased annually in line with the Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings (ASHE) estimate of gross median earnings for full-time employee jobs in Wales, although with the proviso that the sum cannot fall if the adjustment would be negative. For the financial years 2022–23 and 2023–24 staff received an additional one-off cost of living payment.

Additional funding comes in the form of Support for Political Parties. This is similar to the Short Money arrangements in the House of Commons, which allocates money to opposition parties. In Wales, however, the funding is provided to all parties, according to a formula set out in the determination. In this case the party leader is the employer, although as with staff of individual members, staff are employed under standardised conditions. The total sum available in 2023 is £1,089,640.


Characteristics of members' staff

As of October 2021, the 60 members employed 230 staff, with each employing between two and six. At 3.8 per member this is less than in Westminster or Scotland. Among staff, 54% are female and 46% male, essentially matching the pattern in Edinburgh. However, the gender breakdown varies by seniority, with 18 of 26 (69%) of senior advisor level positions being held by men compared with 26 of 70 (37%) at the lowest level, band 3. The pay rates are set out in Table 4-1 above.

Roles and salary bands

As in the Scottish Parliament and the House of Commons, members of the Senedd are free to decide the mix of support staff in their office, in terms of numbers and salary bands, as long as the total cost remains within their overall allowance.

The types of roles are similar to those in the House of Commons: caseworker / senior caseworker, office manager, researcher / senior researcher, communications or media officer, senior advisors, and administrators. However, unlike IPSA, the IRB does not hold a set list of job titles that members must choose from. Rather, they can choose any job title they want. This gives members considerable freedom to appoint staff for the roles they feel they require and at a salary they can afford, but it also means that there is little consistency; two people doing essentially the same job in two adjacent offices could be paid very

 In November 2021 there were 118 different job titles in use. This included more familiar ones such as Office Manager and Administrative Assistant as well as less familiar such as Sustainable Futures Coordinator and Director and Constituency Liaison Officer.

differently. This is a similar arrangement to that in Westminster before IPSA was created, when the administration of staffing and payroll was conducted internally by the House of Commons.

New MSs' staff are appointed into one of four salary bands, and at first are normally paid at the minimum point of the pay scale. Subject to satisfactory performance, individual staff will move up the pay scale one increment at a time on the anniversary of the commencement of their employment, until they reach the maximum in their band.

Recruitment

As in Holyrood and Westminster, members have considerable discretion in how they recruit staff. The MBS team has developed guidance that members can use. The guidance emphasises the principles of 'fairness, openness and appointment on merit' which should underpin the recruitment process. Unlike the other legislatures in the United Kingdom, all posts with a duration of over six months must be advertised on the Senedd website and must be visible for at least one week. However, there is an exception in that a post can be advertised internally if the member has already identified one or more suitable candidates and that candidate has previously been employed through a fair and open process. The MBS team can provide a range of advice and support for members, including bilingual template job and person specifications for standard job types.

Under the determination set by the IRB, family members are defined as partners, children or grandchildren, parents or grandparents, siblings, nephews or nieces, uncles or aunts. Since April 2019 there has been a ban on members employing family members on new contracts but those on existing contracts can currently remain in employment (this will end at the conclusion of the Sixth Senedd). As required by the Senedd's Standing Orders the name, role, and relationship of all family members employed by an MS are published on the Senedd's website. This is also the case if the staff member is family to one member but employed by another member. The register for the Fifth Senedd, up to May 2021, showed that 18 MSs employed one of their own family in their office and three others employed someone from the family of another MS.

Human resources and training

The MBS team provides guidance to members and their staff on human resource policies and practices and, as it maintains human resources and payroll systems for members, is in regular contact with both members and their staff. A Members' Learning and Engagement Team provides a wide range of training for members and their staff. This is provided centrally and at no cost to the member. Members can access a range of off-the-shelf training packages or ask the team to procure specialist training, for example training on specific software.

Recent changes

In 2019 the IRB undertook a review of staffing support similar to that in Scotland, publishing a report of the recommendations that same year (Remuneration Board, 2019). The main stimulus was the changing role of members of the Senedd following devolution of primary law-making powers from Westminster. Its remit included pay and career structures of support staff, and the needs of members to fulfil their roles. The report, along with evidence, recommendations, and

justifications for either retention of the existing system or change, was published on the Senedd's website. One of the changes adopted was to index salaries for support staff as described above.

The Northern Ireland Assembly

The Northern Ireland Assembly differs in a number of important ways from the parliaments in Edinburgh, Cardiff and London, reflecting the historical circumstances of Northern Ireland, and especially the religious divisions of the population that it serves. The 90 Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs) are elected to represent multi-member constituencies, each with five seats, by proportional representation. A further difference is that Northern Ireland is governed by an executive formed in a cross-party process. Consequently, again unlike the situation in the other devolved legislatures, there is no strict division between government and opposition. The powers of the Assembly are set out in the Northern Ireland Act 1998. This designates certain areas as excepted (power over which will be retained indefinitely by Westminster), reserved (where Westminster has retained power for the time being), and transferred (which covers all other powers that are not explicitly excepted or reserved). The last of these include, for example, agriculture, education, health, and infrastructure. The executive has also had a number of periods of suspension over the past decade due to a breakdown of the political consensus. This has had consequences for continuity of certain functions.

Governance structure

The corporate body responsible for the administration of the Northern Ireland Assembly is the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission. Its role and functions are broadly similar to the corresponding bodies in the other devolved parliaments, covering the estate, staff, and services necessary for the assembly to function. It is chaired by the Presiding Officer (Speaker) and includes five other MLAs, representing the largest political parties. Unlike in Westminster, but like in Holyrood and the Senedd, the Commission is responsible for paying the salaries and expenses of MLAs' staff.

As in the Senedd and Westminster, salaries, pensions, and allowances of MLAs are set by a fully independent body, the Independent Financial Review Panel. The first panel operated between 2011 and 2016. A successor panel is being created by the Assembly Commission but is not yet in place. The panel sets out the arrangements under which the Commission works, in a document called the determination, as in Wales. However, in the absence of a functioning panel since the executive collapse in 2016, the 2016 determination has been updated by an amendment made by MLAs.

Characteristics of members' staff

As at October 2021, 89 of the 90 members employed at least one member of staff. The total number of staff employed was 277, or three per member, even lower than in Wales. On average, Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) MLAs employ one more member of staff than Sinn Féin MLAs. There is no difference in the average number of staff employed by MLAs representing Belfast constituencies and those representing constituencies outside Belfast. In total, 51% of the staff are

female and 49% are male. As elsewhere, this varies by seniority: 54% of grade 1 positions, the most junior, are held by female staff, compared with 44% of grade 3 positions, the most senior. The pay rates are set out in Table 4-1 above.

Roles and salary bands

The determination includes pay bands for staff employed at three different grades, each grade having two points on a scale. All newly appointed staff must be employed at the first point of the scale. However, unlike in the Scottish and UK parliaments these grades are not defined and do not correspond with any particular job title or role. It is left up to each individual member, as the employer, to decide which grade applies to each of their staff members. Across the three grades, 19% (54 staff) are employed at grade 1 (the lowest), 51% (140 staff) at grade 2 and 31% (85 staff) at grade 3. Most MLAs employ staff at grade 2 (92% of all MLAs) or grade 3 (83% of all MLAs), but less than half employ anyone at grade 1 (43% of all MLAs).

Expenditure on staff falls into four categories. Members' expenses are published on the Northern Ireland Assembly website but only headline sums for each category. Category 1 covers the core salary plus other costs, for example maternity, paternity and adoption pay, shared parental pay, and sick pay. Category 2 covers staff training, recruitment, and staff travel costs. Category 3 covers ancillary staff costs for example employer national insurance contributions, pension contributions, and redundancy pay. Category 4 covers replacement staff costs, including the costs of temporarily employing someone to cover long term absence of a staff member.

In 2020 the Assembly Commission increased the cap for category 1 costs by £30,000 to a maximum of £80,000 per MLA. The Commission also determined that MLA staff salaries should be amended to bring them in line with those who work elsewhere in the assembly. Consequently, the salary cap is now index linked, in line with salaries of Commission staff.

Recruitment

Members are provided with a recruitment guidance document which is intended to support them by providing a general outline of the rules and best practice guidance. It states that employees 'must be employed on merit after having been identified by fair and open competition' and that positions must be advertised publicly, although there is no provision to do so on the assembly's website. The Independent Financial Review Panel provides sample job descriptions for typical support staff roles and the standard contract for support staff set out in the determination must be used.

MLAs cannot employ more than one connected person. This status covers anyone who is a family member or has a business or financial relationship with the MLA, as set out in certain sections of the 2006 Companies Act. If they do employ a connected person they must report their name, details of the connection and the nature of their employment to the Commission. They must also report employing anyone who is a family member of another MLA. There are also provisions for reporting employment of what are termed associated persons. This category encompasses a very broad range of relationships, including through a political party, religious or cultural links, or business or political connections.

Human resources and training

The Northern Ireland Assembly does not provide HR support for members' staff but can provide some guidance, where requested by members, on best practice as an employer. As noted above, each MLA is allocated budgets for staff training and recruitment budget, from which expenditure incurred by the MLA can be reimbursed. The former is up to £1,500 per year, the latter up to £500 per year. However, in 2019–20, more than three quarters of MLAs claimed nothing under these headings.

Examples from elsewhere

The UK's three devolved legislatures have much in common, in terms of their structures and processes, although there are also some specific differences, such as whether the rules are set and the processes administered by an independent body. To explore whether there are other ways in which things can be done, this final section of the chapter draws on examples from outside the United Kingdom. Alternative ways of working include the use of competency tests as part of the formal process of recruiting staff in Ireland, the choice of different staffing combinations rather than an overall budget in Australia, and employment of staff by the parliament itself, rather than by its members, in New Zealand.

Recruitment assessments for staff – the Dáil Éireann in the Republic of Ireland

The Oireachtas is the bicameral legislature of the Republic of Ireland. It consists of the President of Ireland and two chambers, Dáil Éireann, the lower house, and Seanad Éireann, the upper house. The Dáil consists of 160 Teachtaí Dála (TDs) who are elected by proportional representation with a single transferable vote to represent 39 multi-member constituencies.

In 2004 the Dáil brought in a range of reforms designed to give it more independence from the executive and ability to manage its own business. Reforms included transferring responsibility for determining numbers of and expenditure on staff from the Minister of Finance to the Houses of the Oireachtas Commission, a body established by statute in 2003. Staffing regulations and expenditure are laid out by the Commission in the Scheme for Secretarial Assistance ('the scheme'). Under the scheme staff salaries are paid through the Commission, although staff, as in all the UK legislatures discussed above, are employed directly by the members.

Allocated staffing options

Unlike the UK legislatures the Commission determines how many staff the members can employ, rather than setting an overall budget. TDs are entitled to one full-time secretarial assistant. They can also employ one full-time parliamentary assistant. However, if they choose not to employ a parliamentary assistant, they can use the corresponding sum for additional secretarial assistance. In 2020 the allowance for the additional secretarial assistance was €41,092. As of May 2022, TDs employed 187 secretarial assistants and 180 parliamentary assistants.

Recruitment assessments for research staff

The position of parliamentary assistant in the Dáil was established in 2005. It was introduced in recognition for the changing role of TDs who needed more support for their work in parliament, such as research, drafting speeches, media work and scrutinising legislation although in practice this role often includes constituency work as well. Unlike in any other parliament discussed in this chapter, to be employed as a parliamentary assistant working for a TD, staff must first demonstrate in a formal assessment that they have certain competencies, skills, and qualifications or work experience. The assessment is marked using a structured and standardised rating system, giving the candidates scores for each section with a balance between qualifications and work experience. There is a standardised application form that asks applicants to give examples of project work or research they have undertaken, examples of written work and several other example-based competency questions designed to test communication, networking and meeting customer needs.²⁶ To be employed as a parliamentary assistant staff must also possess a third level qualification or have three years relevant work experience.

A different employment model – The New Zealand parliament, Pāremata Aotearoa

The New Zealand parliament is unicameral, with 120 members of parliament (MPs) elected to the House of Representatives, although this can increase due to overhang seats.²⁷ As in the Scottish and Welsh parliaments, MPs in New Zealand are elected to the parliament in two ways: 48 MPs are elected from political party lists by all voters across the country using a proportional system and 72 MPs are chosen by voters in individual local electorates (similar to constituencies in the UK) using a first past the post system. MPs are elected for a three-year term.

A triangular employment model

The New Zealand parliament differs from all the others discussed in this chapter in that staff are not employed by the member. Instead, members' support staff are employed by the Parliamentary Service. The Parliamentary Service is a large agency that oversees and delivers administrative and support services to MPs, and as part of this role the organisation recruits and supplies support staff to MPs. The Parliamentary Service also administers MPs' expenses. Members can still choose who to employ in their office, but they pick from a smaller pool of options pre-approved by the Service.

The Service was established as an independent statutory body by the Parliamentary Service Act 1985 and continues to operate under the Parliamentary Service Act 2000. It is not a government department, instead it operates as one of New Zealand's state services and is accountable to the Speaker, who in turn is responsible for determining its remit. In 2021 the Service employed 689

²⁶ The application form can be found in Appendix of the Scheme for the Provision of Secretarial Assistance for Members of the Houses of the Oireachtas and Qualifying Parties.

²⁷ Overhang seats arise from the version of the mixed member proportional representation system used, where a party wins more constituency seats than it would expect based on its share of the vote, typically 1–2 additional seats at most.

staff, 382 (55%) of whom were employed as members' support staff (New Zealand Parliament, 2021). In accordance with the Employment Relations Act 2000, the chief executive of the Service is responsible for the employment of staff and is responsible for all legal obligations as an employer, including for members' support staff.

In practice this employment model is commonly referred to as a triangular relationship, and includes the member, the support staff, and the Parliamentary Service, with the member acting as the day-to-day manager. The employment arrangements are facilitated by the Member Support Staff Managers (MSSMs) who sit within the Parliamentary Service. The MSSMs lead on the recruitment process, including preparation and negotiation of the employment agreement, and ensure that requirements of employment law are met.

Different model, same issues

Centralising the employment of MPs' staff has been suggested before as a potential alternative in the House of Commons. However, it is not without its own problems. The conditions for political staffers has been called a 'crisis' suffering from 'unprofessional recruitment and selection, unclear expectations, ineffective feedback, confused line management, minimal orientation, opaque career progression, untrained managers, irrelevant training and poor incentives to stay' (Lees-Marshment, 2023). These are familiar issues – and clearly not ones that are solved through centralising the employment of MPs' staff.

In 2019 an independent review pointed to this employment model, with a separate boss and employer, as a risk factor for bullying and harassment in the New Zealand parliament. Staff detailed the difficulties, with one saying 'I have two employers – PS [Parliamentary Service] and my MP – and it's always up to me to negotiate that balance' (Francis, 2019). The review also mentions the precarious contracts of staff, which existed despite being employed centrally by the Service. The contracts included a breakdown clause meaning the MP could terminate their contract by alleging a breakdown of relationship between them and the staff member (Francis, 2019). This breakdown clause has since been removed. Additionally, MPs can still bypass the usual recruitment process by nominating staff. It is possible – if the MP wanted – to employ someone unsuitable for the position who the MP personally knows, ahead of better candidates. The majority of staff who gave evidence to the review did however still prefer the employment model in New Zealand over the alternative model used in the House of Commons (Francis, 2019).

Roving support staff

The Parliamentary Services have a permanent pool of support staff who can be deployed as and when necessary to support members in their offices. These roving staff can be engaged either directly in the member's office or within the Parliamentary Services. The Francis review saw this group of readily deployable support staff as an asset to the parliament and key to the further professionalisation of members' support as they were flexible and could be used when needed, and had gained and retained valuable institutional knowledge (Francis, 2019).

Constituency staff for parliamentarians – the House of Representatives in Australia

The House of Representatives in Australia is the lower of two chambers forming the Australian federal parliament. The 151 members sit for terms of up to three years and are elected to represent single member districts using the Alternative Vote electoral system.

Members of the House of Representatives are entitled to employ staff under the Members of Parliament (Staff) Act 1984 (MOP(S) Act). The name of the act is responsible for the unusual moniker given to staff, who are referred to as MOPS. These staff are employed as either electorate (constituency) or personal staff. All MPs are entitled to employ electorate staff and office holders are entitled to additional personal staff. Electorate staff are responsible for managing the MPs' office, casework and providing non-party political support. Personal staff, similar to Spads in the UK, are political or media advisers. There are around 2,000 staff of which almost three quarters are electorate staff (Australian Government, 2022).

The responsibility for staff salaries sits with the Ministerial and Parliamentary Services (MaPS) Unit, which is part of the Department of Finance within the government of Australia. MaPS provides some HR support services for members and establishes the frameworks used to employ the staff. MaPS is also responsible for payroll, placing job advertisements, providing training, maintaining personnel records, and advising members and their staff on employment matters.

The Independent Parliamentary Expenses Authority Act 2017 established IPEA, a statutory independent body with responsibilities for work expenses for members and their staff. Unlike the UK's independent parliamentary expenses body, IPEA only deals with travel expenses, not office costs or staff salaries, so there is no independent body overseeing staffing salaries or contracts.

Staffing allocation

MPs are given a set number of electorate staff rather than a budget allocation. The number of staff is allocated by the Prime Minister based on the size of the electorate. There are three levels of electorate officer (A, B and C, with C being the most senior) with commensurate salary bands. MPs must choose from one of two predetermined options for staffing their offices, comprising a combination of numbers of staff and grades. Table 4-2 shows the option for a four staff office. There is also an electoral support budget available which allows members to claim for extra short-term staff to support them if there is a particularly high workload. Some members, such as ministers, the leader of the opposition, the leader of a minority party, are entitled to personal employees.

Table 4-2 Staffing allocation options for members of the Australian parliament

Option A 2 x electorate officer A positions 1 x electorate officer B position 1 x electorate officer C position	Option B 1 x electorate officer A position 3 x electorate officer B positions
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This model places a greater emphasis on constituency work up front as, unlike the other examples in this chapter, three of the electorate officers must be based in the member's electorate office. One can be based at the parliament building in Canberra.

Review of staffing

In response to an independent review into parliamentary workspaces (the Jenkins report) the Australian government undertook a review, which reported in October 2022, of the Members of Parliamentary (Staff) Act 1984 employment framework. The scope of the review included transparency of recruitment, and pre-engagement checks, responsibilities and accountability of staff and appropriate public reporting and accountability of the administration of the Act. The report highlighted that staff were sometimes confused about who actually employed them: some thought that it was the Department of Finance rather than the MP based on the interaction they had with the department relating to administration and contracts (Australian Government, 2022). The review considered a centralised employment model like the one used in New Zealand, and the Queensland (state) Parliament but rejected it. One of the recommendations on recruitment included an amendment to the Act that requires 'parliamentarians to make recruitment decisions based on an assessment of capability' and recruit against a clear job description for the role (Australian Government, 2022).

Conclusion

Turning to staffing arrangements in other legislatures can be a useful way to reflect on the current arrangements in the House of Commons and whether they best serve members and their staff. The devolved legislatures largely mirror the staffing arrangements in Westminster, whereby staff are employed directly by the member, and there is relatively little oversight of recruitment or monitoring to ensure members get the right staffing support that they need. As in Westminster all share a similar tension between on the one hand setting rules and frameworks that make working conditions better and introduce consistency in pay and conditions, and on the other hand the autonomy of members themselves as employers to run their offices as they wish.

Looking further afield, the recruitment process in Ireland involves a standardised application for all new recruits. Standardising applications with competency-based questions makes it easier to compare across applicants and can reduce bias in the recruitment process. By asking applicants to draw on real life experience with concrete examples the person hiring can make an informed decision on demonstrated capabilities rather than assumptions. Moreover, standardising applications means the person hiring can compare candidates consistently and creates a more level playing field for applicants while also streamlining the process and making it more efficient for the hirer.

The structure of staffing allocation in Australia leans more heavily towards constituency support staff, with far less emphasis on the parliamentary assistant/ researcher role familiar in Westminster. This is coupled with extra research resources from elsewhere. What we may learn from this, rather than necessarily increasing constituency support, is that there should be a holistic look at the type

of support MPs need and whether this should be delivered by their own personal staff or through other resources.

Finally, New Zealand presents an entirely different employment model, although not without its own problems. This model offers a potential solution to the issue faced by the four legislatures in the UK: the question of who is responsible for providing employment, services and support to members' staff. However, staffing in New Zealand is not without controversy and many of the same problems exist there also. Changing the responsibility for the employment, recruitment and termination of staff to a centralised service may improve consistency in some ways, but it does not remove the complexity or guarantee a different experience for staff.

Across all these examples it's clear that there are no easy answers. Where similar arrangements to Westminster are replicated, we see the same issues arise, and where different arrangements are in place it's not clear that they offer a solution. The two tensions remain in all systems between greater consistency of support for members and conditions for staff, and the flexibility that members want and possibly need to successfully run a functional office. A solution in the UK requires a clear understanding of the work that members undertake – for example the balance of constituency and Westminster work – and the support that they need to do this. It will also require compiling evidence about what works and does not work now, what might work in the future and what MPs, their staff, and the House of Commons authorities want. The rest of this report provides some of the evidence – pulling together evidence from a survey of MPs' staff and other sources to look at who these staff are and what they do. The next chapter covers some of what we can learn by examining data from existing sources.

5 What we know already

It has always struck me that many of us – I include myself – came to the House with no experience whatever of managing staff or making sure that we have a staff complement who are available and ready to do very complex and demanding work. That work has only got more demanding over the past two years, so a service that could take account of everybody across the House would be welcome, not just for members of parliament but for staff.

Pete Wishart MP (SNP, Perth and North Perthshire), 2022²⁸

The problem with existing data

The first thing to note is that collecting data on MPs' staff is not straightforward. The nature of the employment relationship with the individual MP means that there is very limited information about who works for MPs overall and the type of work that these staff do. It is also difficult to identify and access staff who work for MPs. Unlike in some other countries (notably the United States), the names and other details of UK MPs' staff are not publicly available as a matter of course.²⁹ The Register of Interests of Members' Secretaries and Research Assistants, which is published by the parliamentary Pass Office, is a list of everyone with a parliamentary pass sponsored by an MP. But this data omits those who do not have a pass, mostly staff who work in the constituency office, while including people who are not paid staff but whom the MP sponsors for a pass, such as external researchers or extra staff working for ministers or shadow ministers.

The primary source of existing data that covers almost all MPs' staff is that collected by IPSA. Although IPSA does publish data on MPs' expenses regularly, and in a consistent format, this is not true of much of the information on their staff. Rather, this must be accessed mainly through FoI requests – various of which were submitted as part of the research for this report³⁰ – while occasionally some data is provided in relevant IPSA policy reviews or reports.

Given this, there are basic questions that the House of Commons, MPs and sometimes IPSA cannot answer given the information that they hold and the way in which data is collected. It is difficult for those outside IPSA even to answer questions such as 'how many staff work for MPs at the moment?', as IPSA publishes information on staff employed annually – which can be far higher than the number of staff employed on any given day because staff turnover is high. As

²⁸ HC Deb 22 June 2022, vol. 716, col. 928.

²⁹ The House of Representatives telephone directory lists staff, the Congress person they work for and their job title as well as contact details.

³⁰ See Appendix B for a list of FoI requests used in this report.

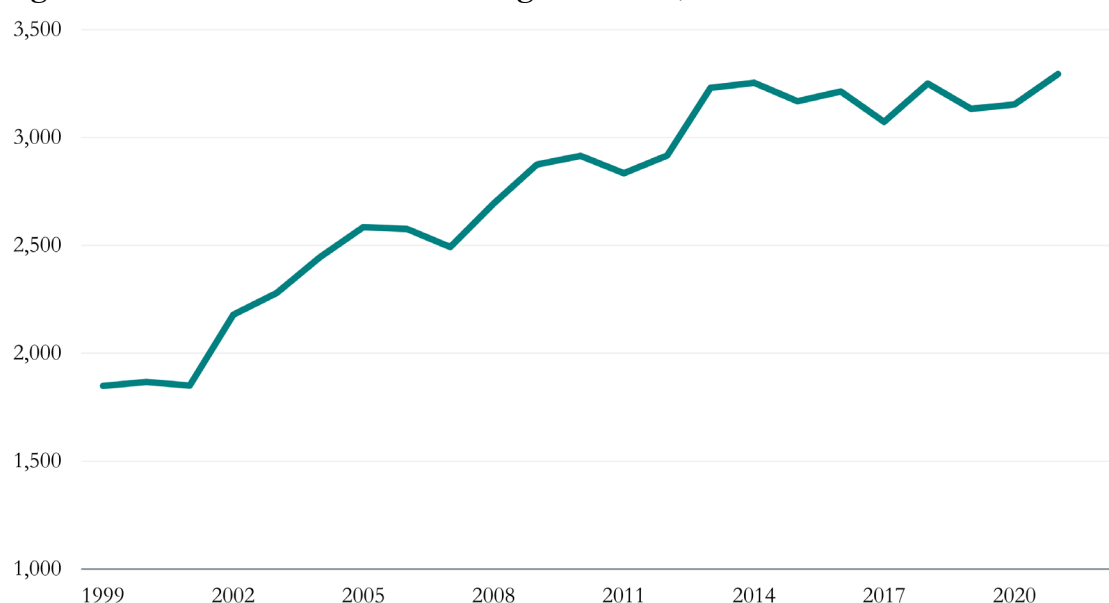
IPSA is the regulator of expenses not the employer, information of the kind collected and analysed by many other organisations for equality, diversity and inclusion purposes – including religion, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity and disabilities – is not collected or held. It is not clear that IPSA would be entitled to hold this information; meanwhile it would be very difficult for MPs to collect it individually and share it without raising concerns about data protection and privacy.

Given the limitations of the currently available data, and the important role that MPs’ staff play in supporting parliament, a survey was fielded to staff to provide the data needed to address the research questions set out in the introduction to this report. The findings from this survey are set out in subsequent chapters. More information on the survey is presented in Appendix A. The rest of this chapter summarises the limited data that was available from IPSA about MPs’ staff, including that retrieved through FoI requests.

Numbers of staff

In August 2022 there were 3,622 staff working for MPs (Speaker’s Conference, 2023).³¹ Of these, 2,229 were on full-time contracts and 1,276 part-time.³² When the survey that forms the core of this report was undertaken, at the end of 2019, there were 3,312 individuals on the IPSA payroll.³³ Some members employ staff through other methods but these staff are not recorded anywhere consistently.

Figure 5-1 The number of staff working for an MP, 1999–2021



Source: Data up to and including 2009–10 from House of Commons Commission annual reports and from 2010–21 taken from an IPSA FoI request RFI-202204-07. **Note:** Payroll at end of the financial year. As of 6 May 2010 the responsibility for MPs’ staff payroll passed from the House of Commons to IPSA.

³¹ This number includes 97 interns who have an IPSA intern contract. There were also an additional 672 volunteers who do not have employment contracts.

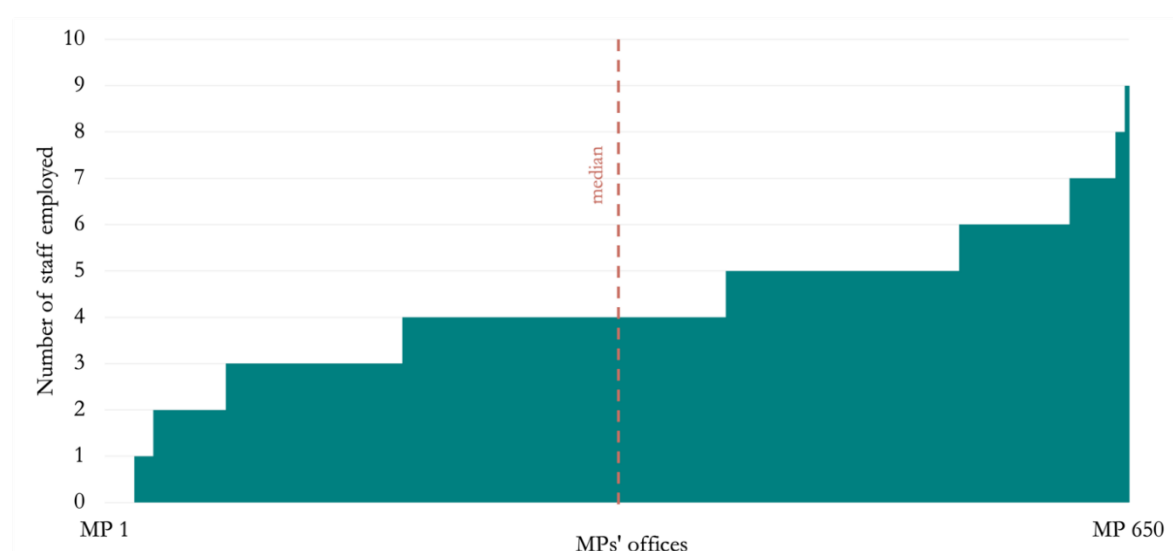
³² The remainder were a mixture of casual, apprentice and term-time contracts. The data includes interns.

³³ Does not include interns. IPSA FoI reference RFI 202005 2.

The number of staff has increased significantly in the past few decades. Figure 5-1 presents data from the period between 1999 and 2021, when the number of staff employed by MPs increased by 78%, while the number of MPs remained the same. This was accompanied by increases in staffing budgets in 2001, 2007, 2012 and 2022 which were designed to enable MPs to employ additional staff. In 1999 the budget covered 2.5 FTE staff salaries. Following a series of steps, in 2020 this was increased to five.

In 2020, an IPSA policy review on the funding of MPs' staff provided headline figures showing that all 650 MPs employed at least one member of staff, and around 75% employed between three and five FTE staff (IPSA, 2020b). The average was four FTE per office. Typically, this comprised a mix of full- and part-time staff, undertaking different roles and in a variety of salary bands. However, as a large minority of staff (around 40%) are employed on a part-time basis, in reality the number of individuals employed in an office ranged as high as 11. In May 2018 an FoI response, which provided a more detailed snapshot of MPs' staff, reported that 19 MPs employed no staff, while three employed nine staff each. The 2018 data are summarised in Figure 5-2.

Figure 5-2 The number of staff employed by each MP, May 2018



Source: IPSA FoI CAS-111885.

Staff turnover

IPSA reports a monthly turnover of around 100 staff, about 4% of the total workforce (IPSA, 2020b). Table 5-1 reports the employment and turnover data from IPSA.

Turnover is higher during an election year and is very sensitive to external factors: for example, the 2010 election saw the departure of a large number of Labour MPs and the arrival of Conservative ones. In such circumstances there will inevitably be many staff who lose their jobs overnight. It is not, however, clear why IPSA has reported a lower turnover in 2021-22 although it may be because people were reluctant to move jobs during the Covid-19 pandemic or that there were fewer jobs available elsewhere. No data is publicly available currently on turnover of staff occupying different job roles.

Table 5-1 Staff employment numbers and turnover, 2014–19

Year	Number of staff employed by an MP (year total)	Number of new staff	Number of staff leaving	Average length of time in employment (months)	Annual staff turnover
2018–19	4,077	944	892	24.6	28.8%
2019–20*	4,929	1,668	1,754	33.6	30.2%
2020–21	4,215	1,093	757	21.6	24.4%
2021–22	4,584	1,126	1,078	23.4	17.6%

Source: IPSA FoI RFI-202204-06 and Speaker’s Conference Second Report July 2023. * Election year, so staff turnover expected to be higher.

Changing jobs is a regular part of a career path so it is necessary to place these numbers in context. The annual turnover of MPs’ staff since 2018 has ranged from 18 – 30%. For comparison, a report on the civil service revealed that average staff turnover (entrants and leavers, not internal turnover) was 8.3% in 2016-17 (Dowden, 2018) and for the UK as a whole it was 16.5% (2016) (Sasse and Norris, 2019), both somewhat lower. However, these figures do not take account of differences in age distribution, and staff working for MPs are much younger than the general population (see chapter 6). There are many reasons why turnover is so high. Many staff are on fixed term contracts, elections cause large shifts in the workforce, and younger staff change jobs more often as they seek new opportunities. However, this means that recruitment takes up a relatively large proportion of the time of MPs and their office staff and places a large demand on training and administration provided by central services and IPSA. The rates of turnover also raise concerns about workplace culture – the way individuals engage and interact with their workplace and their experience in it has implications for their attitudes and behaviours which in turn impacts turnover (Ehrhart and Kuenzi, 2017).

Job roles

Job families are used as an organising framework for the many different roles undertaken by MPs’ staff (see chapter 3 for more information on job families). In 2020, data from an IPSA FoI response, presented in Figure 5-3, reveal that the executive job family was the largest (39%), followed by research (34%) and then administrative (26%). Note that the data does not include whether the staff are full- or part-time.

The relatively high proportion of staff, just over a quarter, working in the administrative job family is because each MP is, essentially, running their own mini organisation, each requiring individual administrative support. The administrative role includes diary management, correspondence, office management and collecting, submitting, and monitoring the large amount of financial data that must be reported by the MP and their office. Very little of the administrative support an MP requires is provided centrally, unlike for example the House of Commons Library offering research

support. The administrative burden on an MP running an office with the typical four staff can be very high.

Figure 5-3 Distribution of MPs’ staff across job roles, 2019



Source: IPSA FoI May 2020 RFI202005 2.

Because the staffing allowance is capped, many MPs employ a mixture of junior staff to fit within the budget. It should be noted that while administrative and executive staff pay bands start at level 1, the research staff pay bands start at level 2. This means that entry-level research staff will come into the role at a higher pay band than entry-level executive or administrative staff (Table 3-1 in chapter 3). As discussed further below and in chapter 7, this raises some questions given the demographic breakdowns of these roles.

Figure 5-3 sets out how the whole workforce are distributed across the different job roles and shows that just over half of all staff (52%) were employed at the lowest level in their job family (administrative level 1, executive level 1, research level 2). Looking at the data differently – within each job family – shows us that in the research job family, staff were almost equally split between junior (53%) and senior (47%) roles. However, in the executive job family around two thirds of staff (62%) worked in junior rather than senior (38%) roles. The executive job family includes a mix of casework and communications roles: two thirds of all junior executive staff had the job title of ‘caseworker’. In both these roles there are more staff in junior roles than senior roles, but for administrative staff we see the reverse – almost half (46%) are in the top band, slightly fewer (38%) in the junior band and a small proportion in the middle (16%).

Demographics

As IPSA is not the legal employer it does not routinely collect or publish the demographic data that one might expect for monitoring equality, diversity, and inclusion. It has, however, in past responses to FoI requests, published data on the gender of staff. From this we know that although MPs are predominantly (65%) male, their staff are mostly female. Data from IPSA, published as an FoI response in September 2019, reported 1,916 female staff, or 56% of the total, compared

with 1,518 males (44%). The gender ratio among staff was similar to that found in the other parliaments examined in chapter 4, in all of which female staff comprised the majority of the workforce.

Table 5-2 Gender profile of staff by job family and pay grade, 2019

Job family	Male	Female	Pay grade	Male	Female	Total
Administrative	28%	72%	Level 1	35%	65%	100%
			Level 2	14%	86%	100%
			Level 3	27%	73%	100%
Executive	46%	54%	Level 1	49%	51%	100%
			Level 2	41%	59%	100%
Research	55%	45%	Level 2	59%	41%	100%
			Level 3	49%	51%	100%

Source: IPSA FoI May 2020 RFI202005 2.

Breaking this down by job family shows there are different numbers of men and women working in each role. Even though there are more women overall in the workforce, men make up just over half of the research staff. The gap widens when we look at junior research staff who are in entry-level roles. That almost 60% of junior research staff are men is largely driving the difference between research staff and others. This is flipped for administrative staff, of whom almost three quarters were women. But notably, entry-level positions in research are at level 2, while those in other job families are at level 1, meaning that this predominantly male junior workforce starts on a higher pay band than the others which are predominantly female. Another peculiarity is that women made up 83% of those with the job title principal secretary but only 35% of chiefs of staff, even though these job titles fall within the same pay grade and job role. Principal secretaries were more likely to be part-time (they work on average 10 hours per week less).

While there were more women than men working in the executive job family, again this varied by job title. Most caseworkers and support staff were women, while most communications staff were men. The situation was different with research staff, who were overall more likely to be male, but here the distribution among the different job titles was relatively balanced.

What this tells us is that average figures for MPs' staff are not very helpful if we are to look at the role that recruitment and employment plays in creating a diverse workforce. In this case we are considering demographic diversity but, as we will see later, similar patterns emerge when we look at education, qualifications, and experience.

Conclusion

Existing information on MPs' staff is limited, but this chapter has summarised the data that is available. In the process, it highlights how much we do not currently know. The data indicate that MPs, collectively, employ a huge number of staff. At over 3,500 people, this is more than the 3,000 who work for the House of Commons Service, who include a diverse mix of personnel, from clerks, researchers, and administrative and logistic staff, such as catering, security and estates. MPs' staff provide a massive resource, employed across three different job families.

The existing data tell us something about the roles that these staff occupy, including that almost a quarter are engaged in administrative work as their primary role, and that there are more staff working in executive roles than any other – reflecting the high level of casework. We know that while the workforce overall has more women, there are more men working as research staff. This is driven in particular by the much higher proportion of men in junior research roles than in other job roles. These roles are entry-level and do not require specific specialisation or subject knowledge beyond basic research and analytical skills. This raises a question of why the pattern – also seen in other parliaments – of slightly more women working for MPs than men is reversed only for research staff. It also raises some equalities concerns, given that entry-level research roles are more highly paid than those in other job families.

The existing data also show that there is a very high turnover among MPs' staff, especially in election years. Staff turnover just after the 2019 general election was 30%. Given that there were only 44 days from the election being called to polling day, this left staff with very little time to prepare for their uncertain future. High turnover between elections also poses particular problems for MPs and for parliament. Recruitment, training and lost productivity have costs that are borne by MPs. The time and resources used are greater than they would be in a 'normal' organisation the size of parliament, given that each MP has to run their own recruitment process.

While IPSA can, and does, provide resources to support MPs in recruiting staff, MPs, and often their other staff, still need to spend valuable time on recruitment and training. New starters also require security clearance and to be set up on parliamentary systems, such as IT and issuance of passes. For those staff who remain when someone leaves, there is the added stress of taking on their duties while waiting for someone else to fill the post. High turnover is also a problem because people take with them valuable institutional knowledge, including networks and contacts, and knowledge of casework precedents. This is important both at Westminster and in the constituency offices. While turnover is a normal part of a healthy organisation there should be a balance. Too little turnover can create stagnation, with a lack of new ideas injected into the organisation. But too much turnover brings its own set of problems, including an exodus of institutional knowledge. Both can be inefficient.

This chapter has set out what we can learn from existing publicly available information, including that obtained through various FoI requests. But this raises many questions about what we do not know and cannot learn from such data. We do not know how staff are recruited, and whether the process might drive gender differences across roles. We do not know whether MPs' staff come with a range of education and experience providing a balanced mix of people with different knowledge and skills. We do not know what these staff do in their day-to-day roles and if this

matches the job titles given to them by MPs. We do not know the mix of roles across different MPs' offices and we do not know why people want to work for MPs or what they want to do next. The next chapters of this report use the data from the survey and elsewhere to answer these questions.

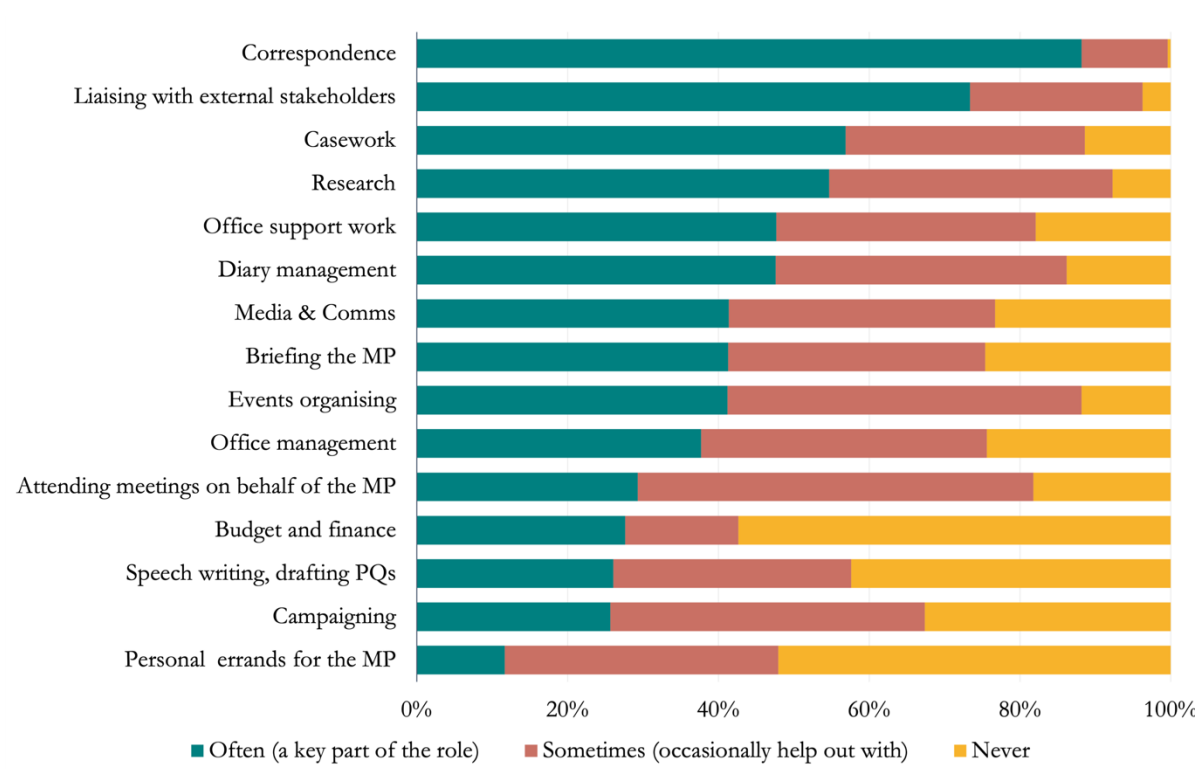
Part II: Survey results

6 Staff roles and office structure

Job roles

The job descriptions provided by IPSA give a sense of the type of activities that staff in each of the job roles should expect to undertake. However, some staff have said that their job title does not accurately reflect the job they do day-to-day. In the survey staff were given a list of 15 different tasks taken from the IPSA job descriptions and were asked to say how often they undertook each one as part of their regular work. The results in Figure 6-1 show that staff are involved in a wide range of activities.

Figure 6-1 Frequency of job tasks undertaken by MPs' staff, 2019



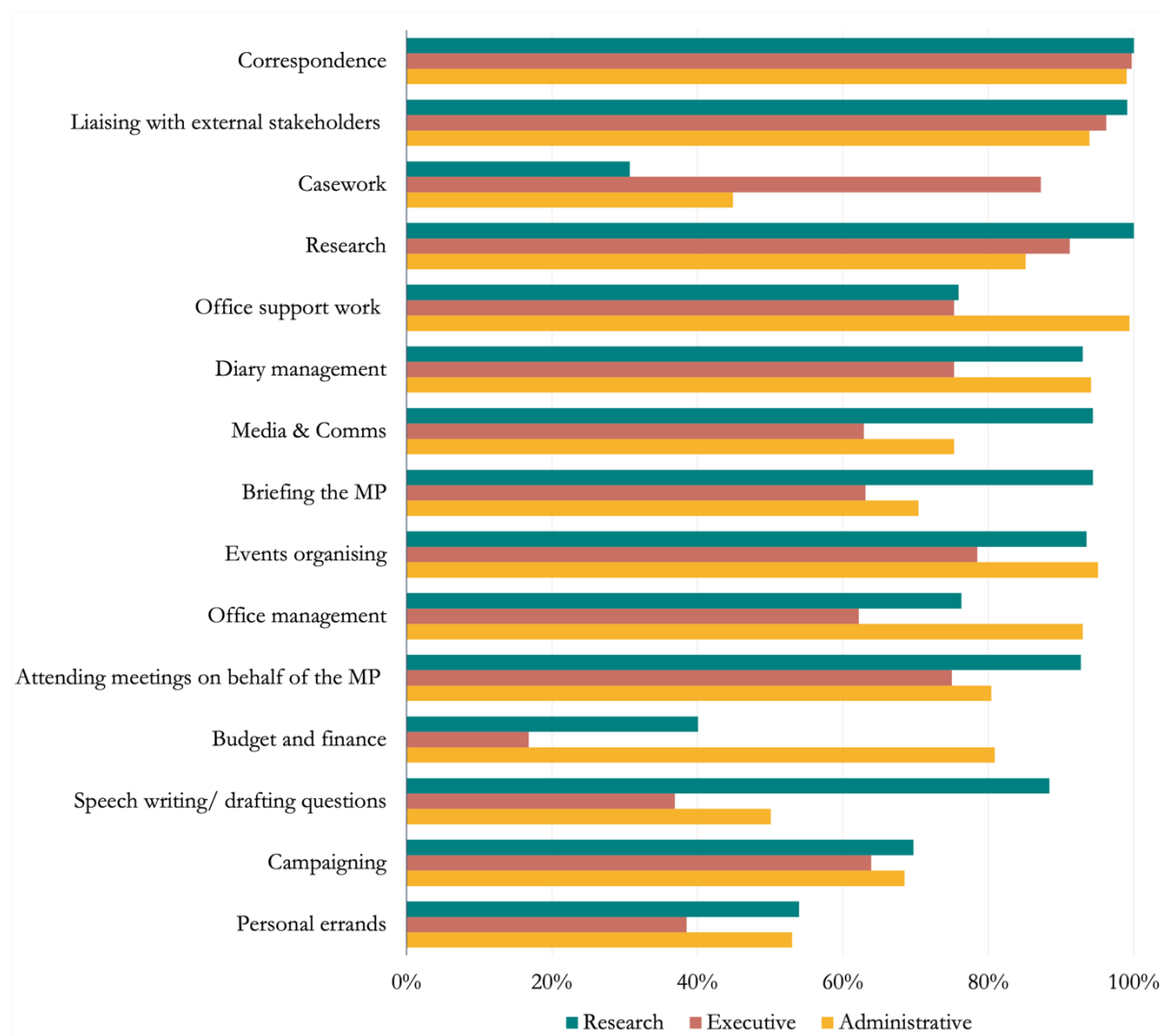
Source: MPs' staff survey 2019, Constitution Unit UCL.

Excluding running personal errands and managing budgets and finance, at least 50% of staff said that they sometimes or often undertook each of the activities listed in Figure 6-1. The four most common activities, which over 50% of staff reported doing often, were correspondence, liaising with external stakeholders, casework, and research. Surprisingly, given it is not a part of any job role, almost half of staff said they had undertaken personal errands as part of their role and 12% did this often.

Although the IPSA model of job families draws some distinction between the different types of activities staff will undertake in different roles, the reality is that their work is mixed. Figure 6-2

shows the frequency with which staff said they often or sometimes engaged in each of these activities as part of their job and breaks this down by job family.

Figure 6-2 Job tasks undertaken often or sometimes as part of the job, by job family, 2019



Source: MPs' staff survey 2019, Constitution Unit UCL.

Taking casework, 87% of executive staff (caseworkers etc.) said that this was something they did often, which is to be expected. However, we also find that 31% of research staff and 45% of administrative staff reported often doing casework. The majority (85%) of those in the research job family said that they often did research, but this was also the case for 45% of executive staff and 34% of administrative staff. It is unsurprising that most (65%) of administrative staff often worked on budgets and finances, but almost a quarter (24%) of research staff also listed this as a key part of their role. At least some staff from each job family said that they performed every activity as part of their role.

Staff were also asked to give the proportion of time that they spent on either constituency or Westminster-focussed work. On average they reported that they spent 60% of their time on

constituency work and 40% on Westminster work. Executive staff spent the highest proportion of their time on constituency-focussed work (85%) and administrative staff spent two thirds of their time (65%) on constituency work. In contrast research staff spent two thirds of their time (67%) on Westminster-focussed work and a third on work in the constituency (33%). Female staff reported spending more time on constituency work (69%) than their male colleagues (53%).

Distribution of staff and job roles

Across different MPs' offices

MPs can choose to structure their offices by the job roles they hire staff to fulfil. MPs can employ any mix of job roles (job family and level) that they feel necessary to support them in their work (within the constraints set out in chapter 3). Despite the wide range of possible job titles available, over 50% of staff in the survey reported having just one of four job titles: caseworker, parliamentary assistant, office manager, and senior caseworker.

Data from a May 2018 FoI disclosure (Table 6-1) shows the number of MPs who employ staff from each of the seven different job roles. Three quarters of MPs employed a senior administrative member of staff; a large part of this role will be office management, including the management of other staff. The salary band for this job role, for MPs outside of London, is £30,000 – £47,389 which is a large portion (14 % – 21%) of the £221,750 annual allowance. From data not shown, it is clear that MPs with fewer staff were more likely to prioritise research support. Of those with three or fewer employees, 58% employed an administrative staff member, 64% employed an executive staff member, and 72% employed a research staff member.

Table 6-1 Distribution of staff with different job roles across MPs' offices, 2018

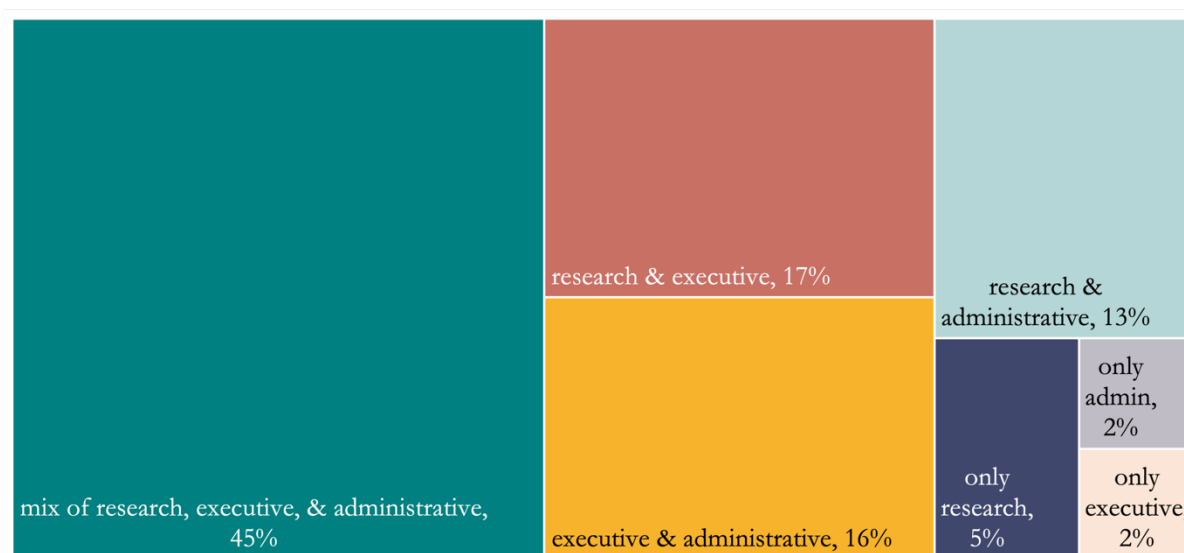
Job role	Number of MPs employing someone in this role	% of MPs employing someone in this role	Average number per MP
Administrative 1	151	24%	1.3
Administrative 2	99	16%	1.2
Administrative 3	464	74%	1.2
Executive 1	365	58%	1.6
Executive 2	324	51%	1.3
Research 2	361	57%	1.4
Research 3	342	54%	1.3

Source: IPSA FoI CAS-111885. **Note:** N= 627 MPs' offices; due to FoI restrictions not all staff are included in this disclosure.

Figure 6-3 shows the options for the mix of job families MPs chose for their offices. Over 90% of MPs employed staff from a mix of different job families. Just under 10% of MPs only had staff

from one job family, for example one MP employed six administrative staff. Almost half of MPs (45%) had a mixture of at least one member of staff in each of the three job families in their office. This is the model that IPSA has in mind when it sets the staffing allowance for MPs (IPSA, 2020b).

Figure 6-3 The mix of staff from different job families in MPs' offices, 2018



Source: IPSA FoI CAS-111885. **Note:** N= 627 MPs' offices; due to FoI restrictions not all staff are included in this disclosure.

Across Westminster and constituency offices

Each MP can have two offices, one in Westminster, and one in the constituency. In a typical week when the House of Commons is sitting, MPs will spend the first part of the week in Westminster (Monday – Thursday) and the rest in their constituency. These are not always distinct offices as MPs in Westminster often have to share an office with another MP due to lack of space, and in the constituency they may choose to pool resources and share a space with another MP, or the local party. MPs may also choose to combine their offices; this makes most sense for MPs representing London constituencies in close proximity to Westminster. There may also be overlap between the offices as staff may move between them during the week, and some may work from home.

The Westminster office of an MP is set within the parliamentary estate. These offices, and the staff within them, are at the heart of Westminster. Such Westminster roles are attractive and can be an 'instrumental' occupation for those who wish to pursue a career in politics (Cairney, 2007). Staff have direct access to political networks and an opportunity to learn first-hand about the intricate workings of parliament and the legislative process. The trajectory from staffer to a political career has been criticised, for example in the use of the term 'career politician'. This includes those elected representatives with pre-election Westminster experience who bring their own networks and insider knowledge of how the system works (Allen, 2012, Cowley, 2012). But these roles can facilitate more than a career as an elected politician. Having worked for an MP in Westminster, if they have been involved in interesting work, or the MP is well known, staff will find that they are

in demand from public affairs agencies or similar organisations for whom a good grasp of the political landscape has value. But while these posts *can* be beneficial, they are also a double-edged sword. The environment is difficult, the hours are long, and the pace is fast.

The constituency office of an MP sits within the community that the MP is elected to represent. They are spread across the UK, in cities, towns and villages. Most MPs rent their office spaces using the Office Costs Allowance provided by IPSA. Given the costs of rent, furniture, equipment, and utilities, most MPs can only afford a small office space and some share office space for example with local councillors or the local party. Given the wide variation in constituency and office types, shared or private, urban or rural, large or small, there is little consistency in the office experience of MPs' constituency staff. Constituency-based staff often have a focus on casework. While they may lack access to the networks and socialisation in Westminster they may have a close working relationship with the local police, council, health services and local stakeholders such as faith leaders and headteachers. These staff face specific security issues as they work beyond the protection of the parliamentary estate, often with vulnerable people. Unfortunately, some have been threatened or injured when dealing with the public and in one tragic case killed. Each MP decides how they want to mitigate these risks, and that will affect the environment in which the staff member works. Data is not collected by IPSA on the basis of the office in which the member of staff is primarily based. Yet as the two offices have distinct characteristics, and staff working primarily in one or the other are likely to have a different experience to each other, it is worth looking into such differences. Hence office type was included in the survey and is included in the analysis in this report.

Staff who responded to the survey were asked how many people employed by their MP were based in the constituency and how many at the Westminster office (Figure 6-4).

Figure 6-4 Distribution of staff across MPs' constituency and Westminster offices



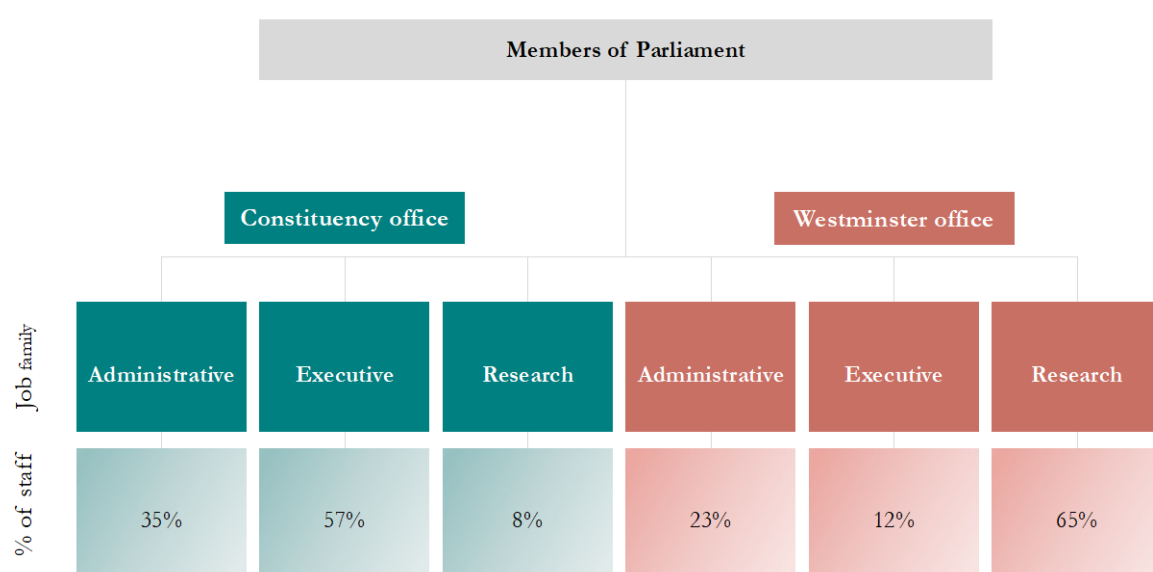
Source: MPs' staff survey 2019, Constitution Unit UCL. **Note:** Data only available for 214 offices.

Responses from 214 MPs' offices tell us that most of these MPs split their staff across more than one office; only 5% had all their staff in Westminster, and 11% had all their staff in the constituency. The majority of these MPs based most of their staff in their constituency offices (68% of MPs). Only 18% had most of their staff based in Westminster.

Job roles

Looking at the distribution of job roles across Westminster and constituency offices (Figure 6-5), the constituency office is primarily home to executive and administrative staff, with very few research staff. The Westminster office is primarily home to research staff, with relatively few administrative staff and executive staff. While research staff made up 30% of the workforce as a whole, they were 65% of the staff in Westminster making them a large presence in parliament. Meanwhile, executive staff made up 39% of the workforce as a whole, but 57% of staff were based in constituency offices. Administrative staff were split between the two offices, making up 35% of those in the constituency and 23% of those at Westminster. Looking by seniority, almost 70% of senior (level 3) administrative staff are based in the constituency and 86% of senior (level 3) research staff are based in Westminster. Given that we know the majority of research staff are men, that such a large proportion of the workforce in Westminster is research staff makes the workforce there rather unrepresentative – of both the wider workforce, and of the public.

Figure 6-5 Proportion of staff in each office by job family, 2019



Note: Some staff work from home

Source: MPs' staff survey 2019, Constitution Unit UCL.

In offices around the UK

MPs can make choices about how they go about their work as representatives. One thing they cannot choose, at least once they are elected, is where their constituency is in the UK. The types of parliamentary activities that MPs take part in are affected by the distance of their constituency

from Westminster (Willumsen, 2019) so we might expect there to be differences in the way MPs from different regions staff their offices.

Table 6-2 Average (mean) number of staff employed by MPs from different regions, 2019

Region of the MP's constituency	Average (mean) total staff	Average (mean) constituency staff	Average (mean) Westminster staff
North	5.1	3.8	1.3
Midlands	4.7	2.6	2.0
South	4.6	2.5	2.1
Wales	5.3	3.9	1.5
Scotland	5.2	4.4	0.7
Total	4.8	3.1	1.7

Source: MPs' staff survey 2019, Constitution Unit UCL. **Note:** no staff from Northern Ireland answered this part of the question.

Data from the survey show that MPs in Wales employed the most staff on average (5.3) while MPs in the South employed the fewest (4.6), although the differences are not large. However, there was a geographical difference in the split of staff between Westminster and the constituency. While on average MPs had over half of their staff in the constituency, Scottish MPs had the highest proportion based there (on average 4.4), with almost no staff (0.7 on average) based primarily in Westminster. In contrast, MPs from the South, most of whom are closer to Westminster (with the exception of those in the South West), had on average 2.1 members of staff in the Westminster office and 2.5 in the constituency.

💡 The MP for Orkney and Shetland, currently Alistair Carmichael of the Scottish Liberal Democrats, has the longest commute to Westminster. However, it is SNP MPs who hold most Scottish Westminster seats and who, collectively as a party, have the longest commute.

Across the offices of MPs from different political parties

IPSA data disclosed from an FoI submitted for this research (Table 6-3) tell us the number of staff employed by MPs from different parties. These are largely in line with the relative size of the parliamentary political party. On average DUP MPs employed the most staff per MP (6.9), followed by Labour (5.6) and SNP MPs (5.4). The data do not tell us whether these staff were full-time or part-time. However, as the funding is capped and designed to fund on average five members of staff per MP, we can assume that DUP members for example employ on average more staff on a part-time basis.

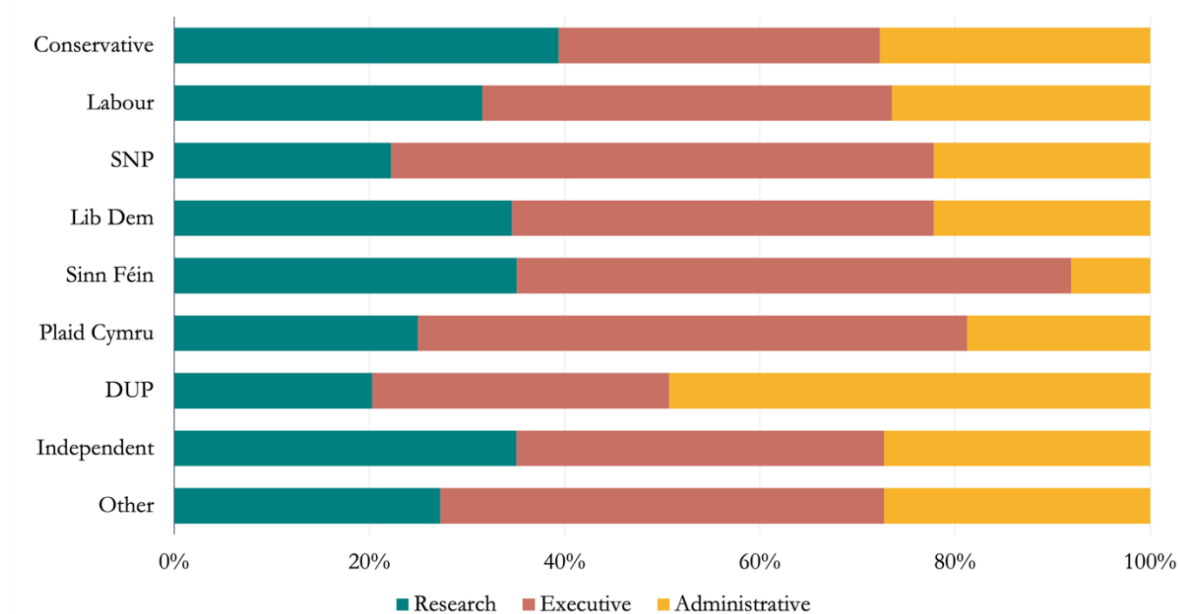
Table 6-3 Number of staff employed by MPs from each political party, 2019

Party of the MP	N	%
Conservative	1,453	43.9%
Labour	1,368	41.3%
SNP	189	5.7%
Liberal Democrats	81	2.4%
Plaid Cymru	16	0.5%
DUP	69	2.1%
Sinn Féin	37	1.1%
Independent	77	2.3%
Other	22	0.7%
Total	3,212	100%

Source: IPSA FoI RFI202005 2. **Note:** staff numbers are actual numbers not full-time equivalent numbers. The 'other' category is defined by IPSA in cases where the number of staff were so small that there was a risk of potentially identifying individuals with other data in the disclosure.

The data presented in Figure 6-6 from the same FoI request show the distribution of staff working in the three job families across the offices of MPs of different political parties, revealing a quite varied picture. Conservative MPs employed the highest proportion of research staff (39%). Plaid Cymru and SNP MPs employed the highest proportion of executive staff, (56%). DUP MPs employed by far the highest proportion of administrative staff, accounting for almost half of their employees (49%).

Figure 6-6 Percentage of staff employed in each job family by the party of the MP, 2019



Source: IPSA FoI RFI202005 2.

Conclusion

MPs who have no previous experience of parliament are unlikely to know who they need to support them doing such an unusual job and must learn by trial and error. Because MPs make their own decisions about how they want to staff their offices, there are many different patterns described in this chapter. MPs undertake a range of roles and the extent to which they prioritise them can fluctuate throughout the year or parliamentary term. For example, some MPs place a greater emphasis on constituency work while others concentrate on research supporting legislation and policy work in Westminster. Others choose to have a greater level of administrative support.

The data presented in this chapter show the flexibility of the employment structure and how it meets the needs of MPs. First, we can see that there are differences in the ways that individual MPs choose which job roles they require in their offices but there are some patterns. For example, MPs with constituencies in or near London tend to have more staff based in Westminster, while MPs whose constituencies are further away, especially SNP MPs in Scotland, retain more staff in their constituency offices. There are some other notable differences by party. The DUP in Northern Ireland, whose casework may be shared with MLAs in the Northern Ireland Assembly, employ the fewest executive staff. In contrast, in Scotland and Wales, which also have their own national legislatures, the SNP and Plaid Cymru employ the highest proportion of executive staff. There are no obvious associations with MPs' own characteristics, such as gender or ethnicity (analysis not shown).

Second, despite attempts to formalise job roles and put some activities into some job roles but not others, in practice there are no clear boundaries between some of these roles. For example, an issue raised by a constituent may then become the subject of a speech or campaign. MPs are able to make use of the flexibility of the employment model. The majority of staff focus on constituency-based work, consistent with the growing share of MPs' workload accounted for by casework. In this respect, this report offers a unique contribution to our understanding of what these staff do by virtue of the staff survey, which looks beyond official job titles and job descriptions, in some cases challenging stereotypes. Many staff across all three job families are engaged in a range of activities, with much crossover. Staff from all three are engaged to a similar degree in correspondence, work with external stakeholders, and campaigning. Research and executive staff reported similar levels of engagement with office support work. Research and administrative staff reported similar levels of engagement with diary management, events organising, and running personal errands. Given that most senior administrative staff are based in the constituency and most senior research staff are based in Westminster, this suggests that in practice these two roles are more similar than might be expected from their titles.

Flexibility is clearly important to MPs and can help the functioning of parliament as staff can pivot to deal with changing priorities. There is a balance to be struck however, as too much flexibility in a system with little oversight can cause problems. For example, in the survey almost half of all staff reported running personal errands for the MP as part of their role, something that is not envisaged in IPSA's funding framework.

Any change to how staff are employed should recognise the benefits of MPs being able to choose who supports them, but also the downsides, and in particular how the funding model creates

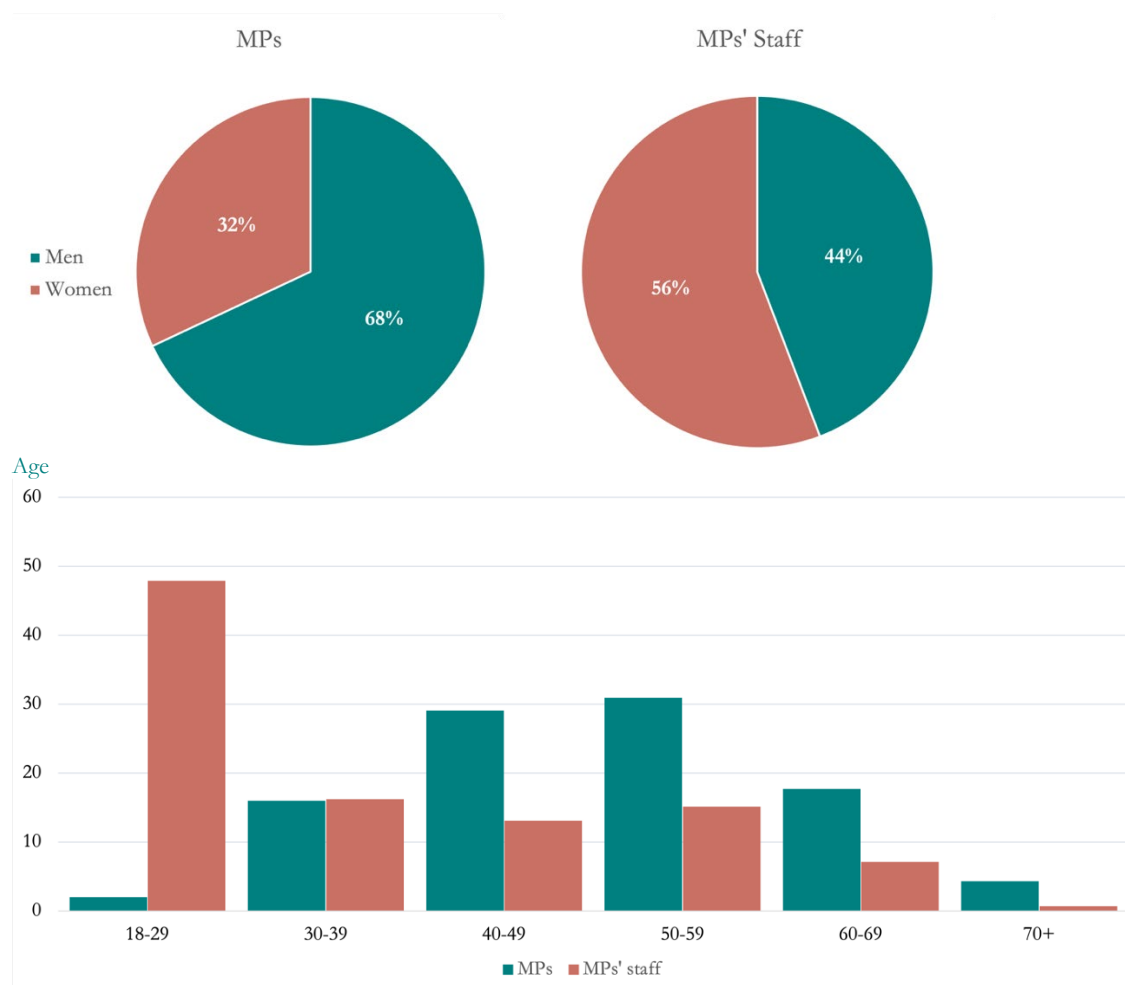
perverse incentives, challenging the intended purpose of having a job family framework. This can lead to poor decisions on the deployment of staff by MPs, who themselves have an ill-defined and varied role. This raises questions of how and when MPs are getting guidance on being a good employer and how best to staff their offices. Any change to the system must recognise that MPs may not know, especially when they first start out, what the right mix of roles and responsibilities is for their office.

7 Staff characteristics: demographics, qualifications and experience

A common stereotype of MPs' staff has developed, in part because of the confusion between ministers' special advisers and MPs' personal staff, in which they are all young, male and politically ambitious. Exemplifying this, John Crace writing in the *Guardian* characterised MPs' assistants as 'under 30, look as if they are under 20 and, if all goes well, will be MPs themselves within five years. They walk at twice the pace of everyone else and their eyes burn twice as fiercely; they have the certainty of their convictions yet none of the responsibility for the consequences.' (Crace, 2015). If this is the stereotype that has developed then what is the truth behind it? What else can we know about these staff?

Figure 7-1 Age and gender of members of parliament and their staff, 2017–19

Gender



Source: Cracknell and Tunnicliffe (2022). House of Commons Library Research Briefing; May 2020 FoI request and staff survey 2019. Note: Data for MPs is taken from the 2017 intake statistics because the 2019 survey on MPs' staff was conducted before the 2019 general election.

Comparing the data on MPs themselves and their staff we can see there are some clear differences. The proportion of women working for MPs is much higher than the proportion of women who are MPs. The staff are also much younger than the MPs – understandable given the barriers to becoming an MP.

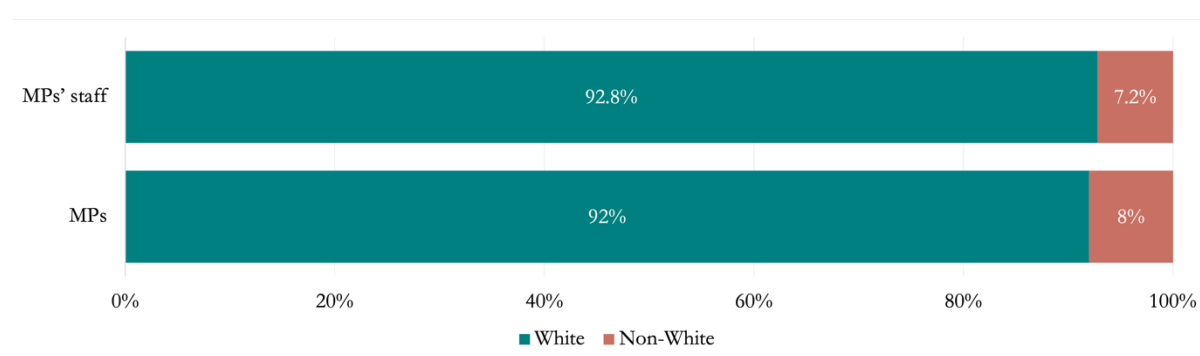
Demographic characteristics

Official data on the number of men and women who work for MPs is collected by IPSA and was presented in chapter 5. The survey included questions on gender, age and ethnicity which are explored in this section.

Ethnicity

Many workplaces now collect information on the ethnic diversity of their workforce to monitor and improve their diversity and inclusion practices. Yet as MPs are not required to do this, and as IPSA is not the legal employer and only collects minimal information, there is no available official data on the ethnic diversity of MPs' staff. However, looking at the responses to the survey, respondents described themselves as being from a Black, Asian or minority ethnic (BAME) background in 7% of cases (Figure 7-2). This is similar to the balance among MPs themselves, but compares poorly with other public sector jobs. For example in the civil service, 13.2% of staff identify as BAME (Savur, 2021). The data also compares unfavourably with the UK labour force overall, which is 14.4% non-white (UK Government, 2020). Given that the survey was answered only by a minority of all staff, and the proportion of respondents who said they were from an ethnic minority background was so low, we cannot be sure of the statistical robustness of the data. Also, the low number of staff who did self-identify as BAME opens up risks of identifying respondents. Hence ethnicity data is not used in the later analysis.

Figure 7-2 Ethnicity of MPs and their staff, 2019



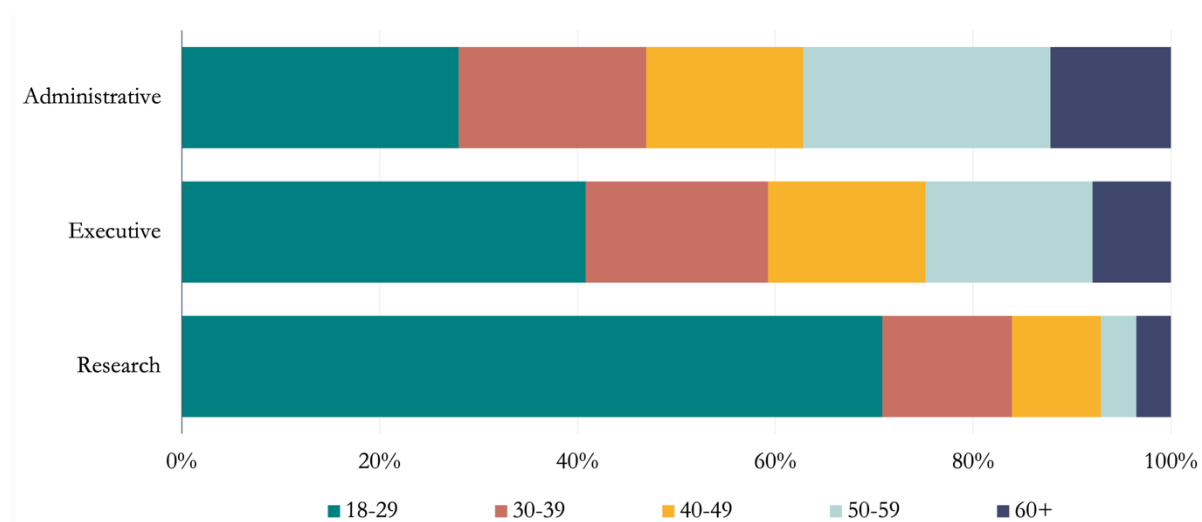
Source: MPs' staff survey 2019, Constitution Unit UCL.

Age

The workforce of MPs' staff is young: the average age of staff who responded to the survey was 37. A quarter of all staff were under the age of 25 and three quarters were under age 47. There were some people working for MPs who were past retirement age, but they were very few in

number. Considerable variation exists within the job families and types of roles as shown in Figure 7-3 and Figure 7-4. Administrative staff were, on average, older than other staff, although their distribution was relatively even across age groups. Research staff were much younger, with 71% below the age of 30. Executive staff fell roughly in the middle of the three families.

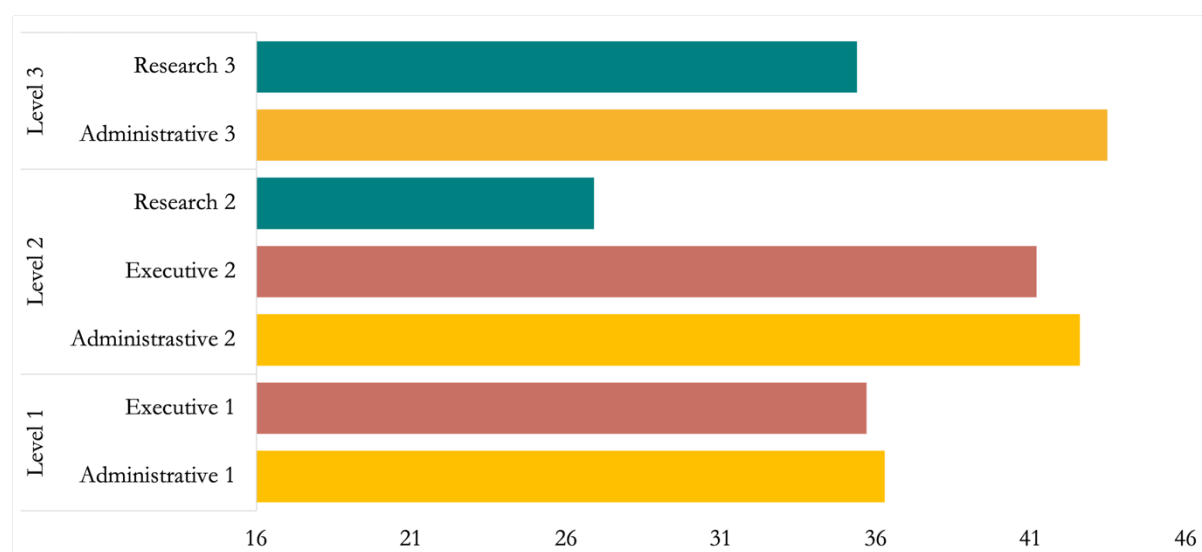
Figure 7-3 Age profile of staff by job family, 2019



Source: MPs' staff survey 2019, Constitution Unit UCL.

There were marked differences in the age of staff at different levels within these job families (Figure 7-4). As discussed in the previous chapter, there is no level 1 research pay band – which means entry-level research staff enter at level 2, while executive and administrative staff enter at a lower pay band.

Figure 7-4 Average age of staff by job family and pay level, 2019

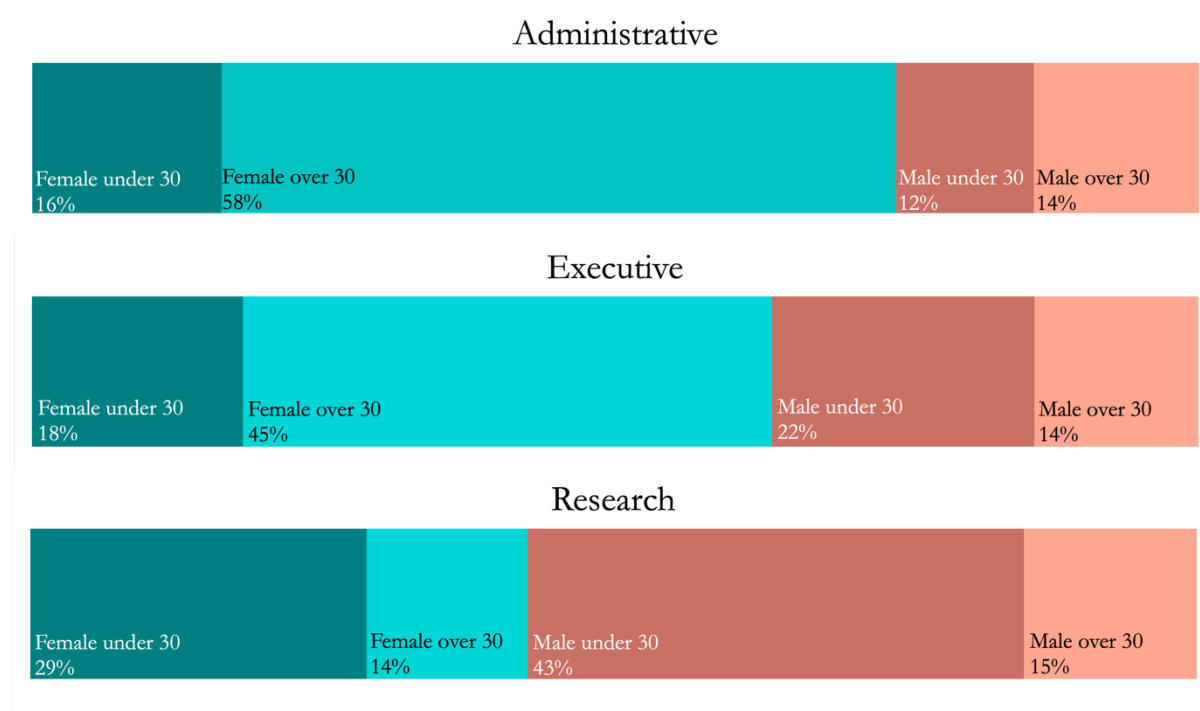


Source: MPs' staff survey 2019, Constitution Unit UCL.

Looking by pay band tells us what we might expect: staff working in more senior roles are on average older. However, it also reveals that there is a large difference between the average ages of staff working in level 2 jobs across the different job families. Research staff – for whom level 2 is an entry-level position – were significantly younger, with 87% of them under 30, compared with 41% of administrative and 28% of executive staff. Senior administrative staff in both bands 2 and 3 were on average the oldest across the workforce. Even research staff reaching level 3 were only on average around the same age as staff in the other job families at level 1. We know from chapter 5 that there are more women than men overall working for MPs but that for research staff this is reversed with more men than women. Added to the disparities with respect to age, this makes such differentials in banding seem potentially problematic.

Looking further at how gender and age interact, the survey data show that men who work for MPs are, on average, almost a decade younger than women. The average age of men in this workforce was 31 years old, compared with 40 for women. Figure 7-5 looks at the age and gender distribution across the three job families from staff in the survey. This reveals more about the differences in demographics. Over half of administrative staff were women over 30, and only 12% were men under 30. But among research staff close to the reverse was true, with over 40% being men under 30, and just 14% being women over 30. Executive staff had a marginally more even distribution by gender than administrative staff, and while most women working in this job family were over 30, most men were under 30. Overall, as already noted, the research workforce was very young, with men predominating over women. Meanwhile in the other job families women predominate, and most of them are over 30.

Figure 7-5 Staff in each job family by age and gender, 2019



Source: MPs' staff survey 2019, Constitution Unit UCL.

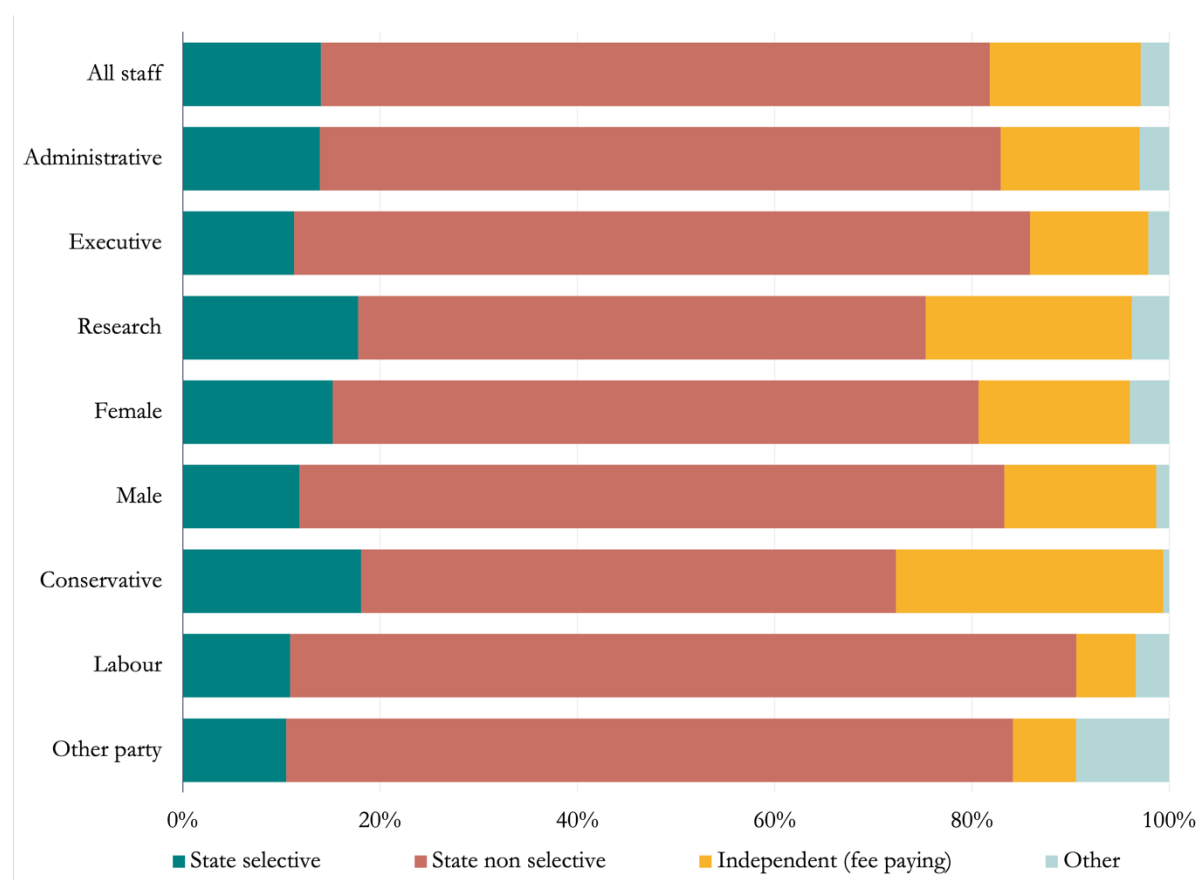
Overall, the survey reveals that staff in research roles, especially junior research roles, are quite clearly distinct from their colleagues in executive and administrative roles. This necessarily leads to distinctions between the workforce at Westminster and in the constituencies, given that the job families are not evenly distributed between them (as explored in more detail later). Hence when we talk about MPs' staff and how MPs and parliament are supported we should certainly not think of the workforce as one monolithic group of people.

Education and qualifications

School

The school background of our MPs has long attracted attention. Across parliament, Whitehall and public bodies there is a consistent overrepresentation of those who are privately educated compared to the wider population. Although 7% of the British population attended an independent (fee paying) school, for MPs it was 29% and among 2019 Cabinet ministers the figure reached 39% (The Sutton Trust, 2019). The survey of MPs' staff found that they sit somewhere in the middle, with 15% having attended an independent school – around double the population average (Figure 7-6).

Figure 7-6 Secondary school type attended, 2019



Source: MPs' staff survey 2019, Constitution Unit UCL.

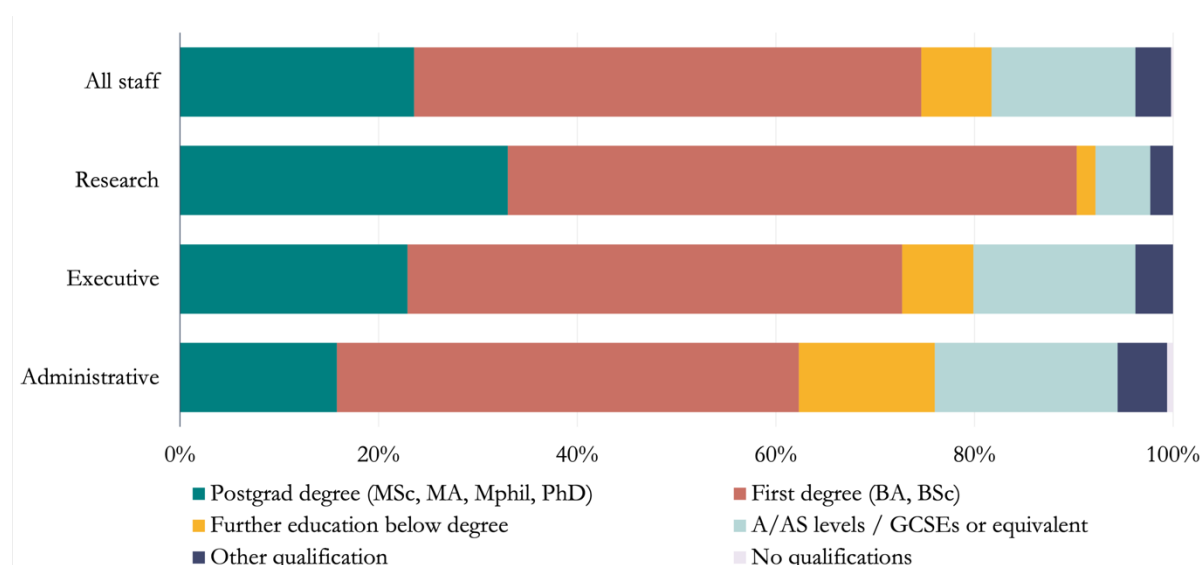
Having attended an independent school is more common among research staff (21%) compared to administrative (14%) and executive staff (12%). Comparing by the MP's party tells us that Conservative MPs were far more likely than Labour MPs to employ staff who were privately educated. Just over a quarter of staff (27%) working for a Conservative MP attended an independent school, compared with just 6% working for a Labour MP. Conservative MPs were also more likely than other MPs to employ staff who had attended state selective schools.

Qualifications

This is a workforce which requires different types of qualifications and skills, and a breadth of different experience to inform the varied and wide-ranging work that they do. The survey asked about qualifications and revealed that around three quarters of all staff had an undergraduate degree, with around a fifth having a postgraduate degree. Just under one in 10 had a further qualification below degree level – these are professional qualifications such as NVQs, which offer important skills particularly, in this context, for staff in administrative roles.

The roles within each job family require specific sets of skills. According to the job descriptions of the different job families we would expect that administrative staff may need more knowledge in how to manage budgets and databases, and skills in customer service. Those in executive roles are likely to need casework management skills and knowledge of the work of government departments. Research staff will need analytical and writing skills and knowledge of, or ability to learn about, a wide range of topics covered by legislation passing through parliament. Intuitively, given that research skills are usually acquired at university, we might expect that research staff would be most likely to be graduates. This is the case: the survey found that 90% of research staff had a university degree, compared to 72% of executive staff and 62% of administrative staff (Figure 7-7).

Figure 7-7 Highest qualification achieved, % of all staff and by job family, 2019



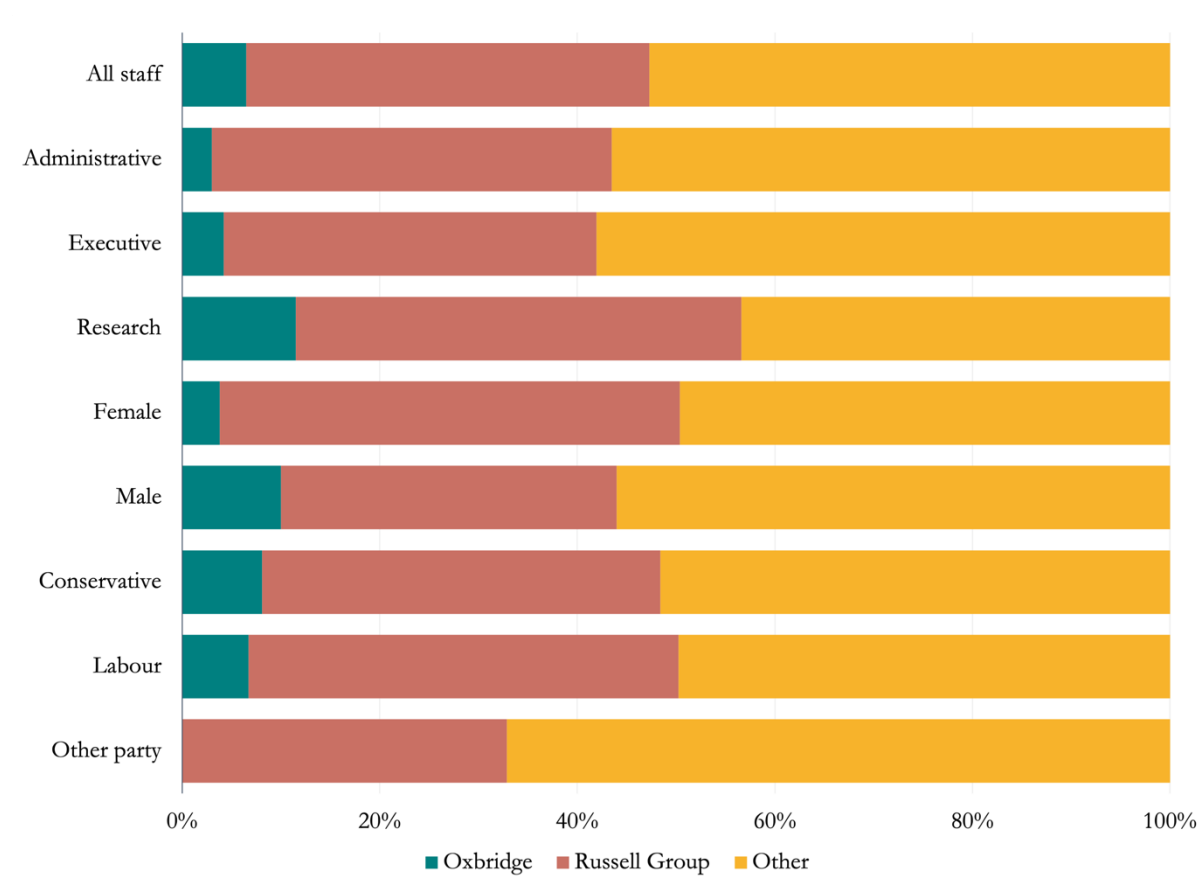
Source: MPs' staff survey 2019, Constitution Unit UCL.

Further education below degree level usually provides vocational skills, as is the case with a Higher National Diploma in Business Management, or a National Vocational Qualification in Customer Service. As we might expect given the types of skills needed in the role, administrative staff were the most likely to have this type of qualification (14%), followed by executive staff (7%), and research staff (2%).

Type of university

The survey allows us to look not just at university education but at what type of university the staff attended. Figure 7-8 sets out the proportion of staff who attended Oxbridge (Oxford and Cambridge universities), compared to other Russell group universities and all other universities. In the English school population around three times as many school leavers go on to a non-Russell Group university than a Russell Group university (The Sutton Trust, 2019). Among MPs' staff with a degree, 7% attended Oxbridge and 40% attended another Russell Group university. This is far higher than the proportion of the wider public in the same year (2019). Of the public, only 1% had attended Oxbridge; in comparison, 24% of MPs were educated in one of those two universities (The Sutton Trust, 2019).

Figure 7-8 Type of university attended, % of staff with an undergraduate degree, 2019



Source: MPs' staff survey 2019, Constitution Unit UCL. **Note:** Russell Group in this chart excludes Oxbridge.

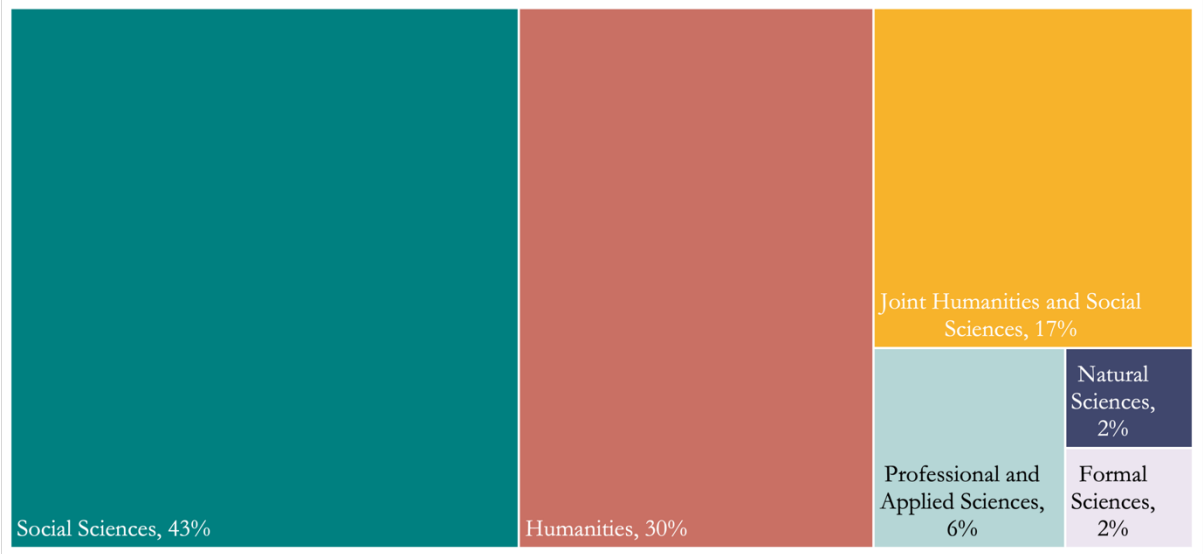
Across the three job families, executive staff and administrative staff appear very alike with similar proportions of staff with degrees having attended Russell Group universities. Research staff were

distinct, with a far higher proportion having attended Oxbridge (12%) or another Russell Group university (45%). There are more male staff than female staff who work in research roles and male staff are more likely to have attended Oxbridge than female staff, but a higher proportion of female staff attended a Russell Group university overall. Although we saw a large difference between staff who worked for Conservative and Labour MPs in terms of school type, the difference is smaller looking at university type. Slightly more staff working for Conservative MPs attended Oxbridge but slightly more staff working for Labour MPs attended Russell Group universities overall.

Degree subject

In terms of the degrees they have obtained, MPs’ staff are drawn from a distinctly narrow band of graduates. According to the survey, as many as 90% of those with an undergraduate university degree studied the humanities or social sciences. Breaking this down further (Figure 7-9), 30% had undergraduate degrees in the humanities, 43% in the social sciences and 17% in joint humanities and social science (e.g. politics and history). This subject dominance is maintained in postgraduate education, with almost 82% of staff with a postgraduate degree studying these topics. The remainder were divided among the sciences, business, education, and planning. As might be expected in a group of people who have sought employment by MPs, 49% had undergraduate degrees in politics, either on its own or with another subject.

Figure 7-9 Degree subject area studied among staff with an undergraduate degree, 2019

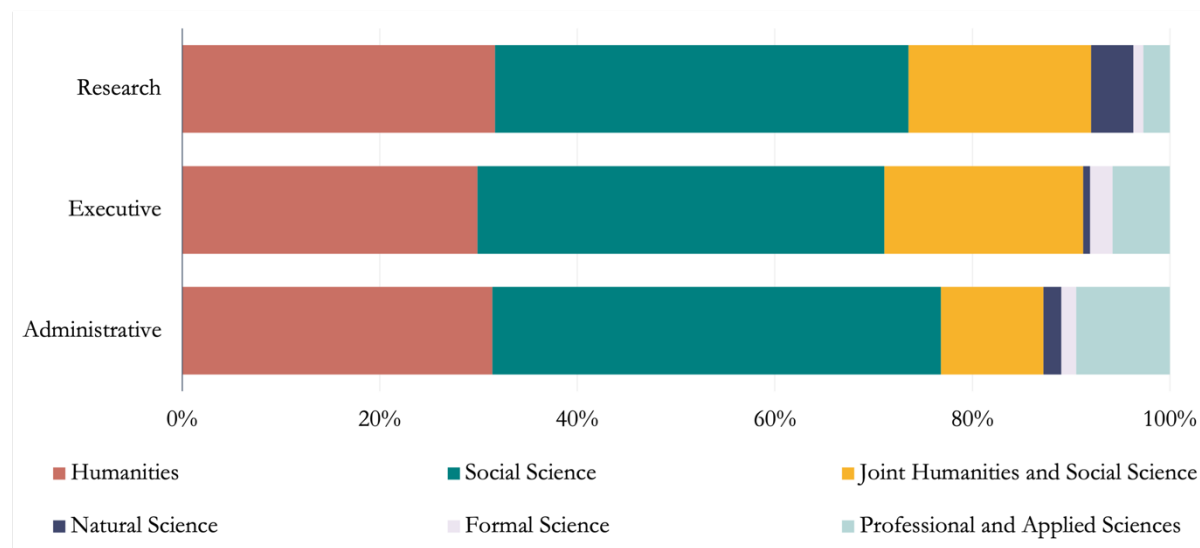


Source: MPs’ staff survey 2019, Constitution Unit UCL.

The other sciences were especially poorly represented. Only 6% had an undergraduate degree in professional and applied sciences (including business, engineering, medicine and education), and only 4% in natural sciences (including biology or chemistry) or formal sciences (including maths and computer science). This changed slightly for those who had postgraduate degrees. A higher proportion studied for a professional or applied science degree at the postgraduate level (18%) but less than 1% took a natural or formal science degree.

Exploring this further, Figure 7-10 shows the data broken down by job family. There is little variation in the proportion of staff who undertook humanities or social science degrees but we do see that 10% of administrative staff with an undergraduate degree studied a professional or applied science subject, higher than the proportion among executive (6%) and research (3%) staff. Research staff, who support MPs primarily with their Westminster-focussed work which includes analysis of policy and legislation on a wide range of topics, included the smallest proportion with experience, knowledge and skills at degree level from STEM subjects.

Figure 7-10 Degree subject area by job family, staff with an undergraduate degree, 2019



Source: MPs' staff survey 2019, Constitution Unit UCL.

Prior experience

Previous occupation

University is obviously not the only place where people gain experience and skills. If MPs are to be well supported, given the nature and range of their work, we would expect to see staff who had experience working in a range of sectors. For example, constituency casework can cover a wide array of topics from immigration support, to objections to infrastructure planning and legal disputes with companies about consumer rights.

As shown in the earlier section, MPs' staff are very young so not all will have had a previous job. According to the survey, staff who had had a previous job had worked in a broad range of sectors. These included hospitality, consulting, marketing, retail, law, finance, research and health and social care. The most common settings were the charity – or 'third' – sector (11%) and public services and administration (18%), such as local government, the civil service, government agencies or elsewhere in parliament. Around 15% had previously worked in an administrative role. This makes sense when we consider that many MPs depend on skilled administrators and office managers.

A quarter of administrative staff had previously worked in public services and administration, often in local councils or government departments, and primarily in administrative, management or project management roles. The most common previous occupations among executive staff were

in the charity and voluntary sector (15% of executive staff), involving a wide range of charities and NGOs. Research staff were most likely to have worked in public services and administration (17% of research staff). However, this job family had the highest proportion of people for whom this was their first job (11% of research staff).

Political experience

We might expect, given that working for an MP can be a stepping stone to a career in politics, that some staff would have already accumulated some formal political experience. This is borne out by the data. The survey revealed a politically active workforce, some of whom had been elected to other offices themselves.

- 32% said they had worked in another MP's office before.
- 53% had volunteered for the local party, for example canvassing for an MP.
- 21% had held party office at the local level.
- 12% had previously been elected as a local councillor.
- 4% had at one time been a candidate for the UK or European Parliament.

Although research staff, on average, work for the shortest periods of time with an MP, a high proportion, just over 40% in the survey, had worked in more than one MP's office. This is likely due to a range of factors, but primarily because, being based in Westminster, it is easier to work for more than one MP simultaneously or move from job to job. Also, as we will see later, research staff are more likely to have undertaken internships with an MP before they were employed in their current role.

Administrative staff were the most likely to be involved in local politics. Of this group, 16% had held elected office as a local councillor and 29% had held an office in a political party at constituency level. Although many may see research staff as those most likely to have ambitions for a political career as they can take advantage of parliamentary networks, in fact occupying a senior administrative role – for example as an office manager or chief of staff – either in Westminster or the constituency can offer valuable political experience. These staff will be gaining experience of running an MP's office, getting up close with the work of the MP, and building networks both in London, but importantly, at a local level.

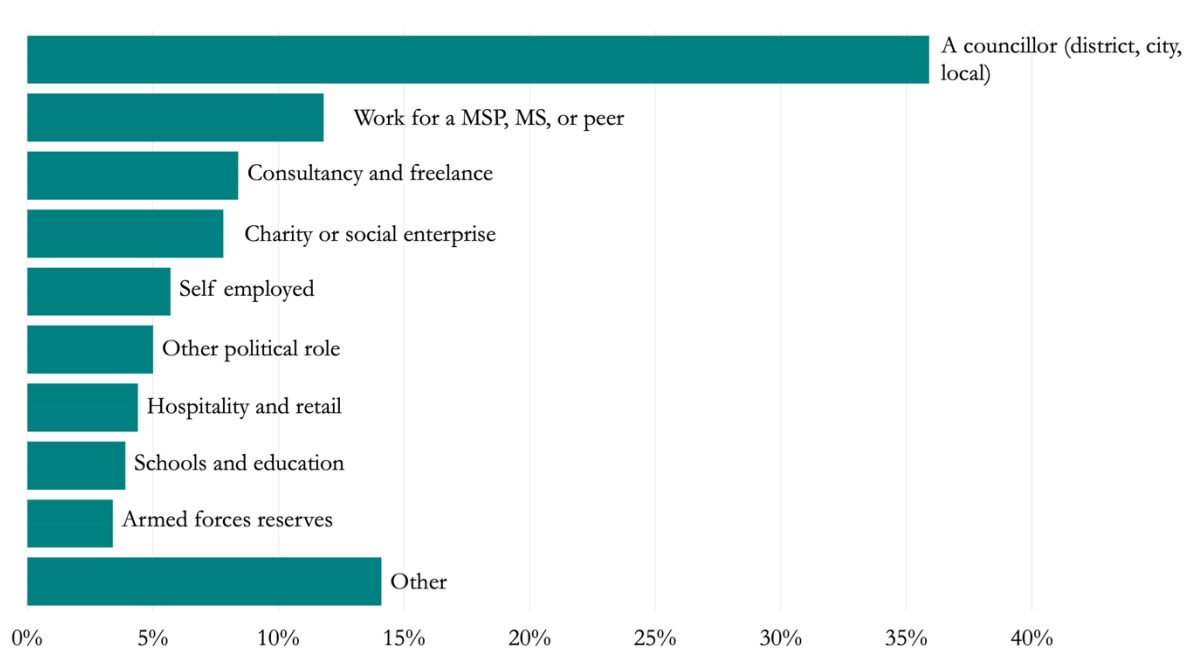
Staff across all job families were politically active in terms of campaigning for their party, with over 50% of staff in each family reporting having volunteered for their local party in some capacity, such as election canvassing.

Other roles

It is not uncommon for MPs' staff to have some other type of employment or role – other than working for an MP, or multiple MPs – either because they are employed part-time or because they have other responsibilities or interests. This was true of 17% of those responding to the survey. Some in this position were employed part-time, but almost 40% worked full-time for the MP. In the survey staff who indicated that they had another role other than working for an MP or multiple

MPs were asked what the role was. Responses have been categorised and are presented in Figure 7-11.

Figure 7-11 Other jobs or roles held by MPs' staff, 2019



Source: MPs' staff survey 2019, Constitution Unit UCL.

The most common additional responsibility was as a councillor (district, city, local).³⁴ Even though councillors sit at the local government level and MPs at the national level there is a historical link between people who have worked as councillors and have then gone on to become MPs themselves (Allen, 2013). Those who work in local government may gain an interest in national politics or pick up knowledge that they wish to explore further and either look to run as an MP, or work for an MP to improve knowledge or continue their interests. While others have no interest in doing so, and are focussed on serving locally, the role in an MPs' office can offer valuable experience. As one of the new 2019 intake of MPs put it 'Being a councillor prepares and equips you for becoming an MP more than most people will let on... Much of the set-up in local government helped me with adjusting to my new role' (Clark, 2021).

It is also common among those who have another role to work for a member of the Scottish Parliament, Welsh Parliament or the House of Lords. This is a relatively easy mix of roles because both jobs will require similar skills and can be based in the same office – an MP in Scotland or Wales may share an office or office building with an MSP or MS.³⁵ Other roles that staff reported varied widely, from those who worked for a social enterprise organisation to those in the armed forces reserves.

³⁴ Councillors are not paid a salary, but they do receive an allowance to reimburse them for their time and expenses occurred while conducting their council business.

³⁵ Around 10% of MPs who use their OCA to rent an office share an office with someone else, e.g. a non-political organisation or another political office holder (IPSA, 2018).

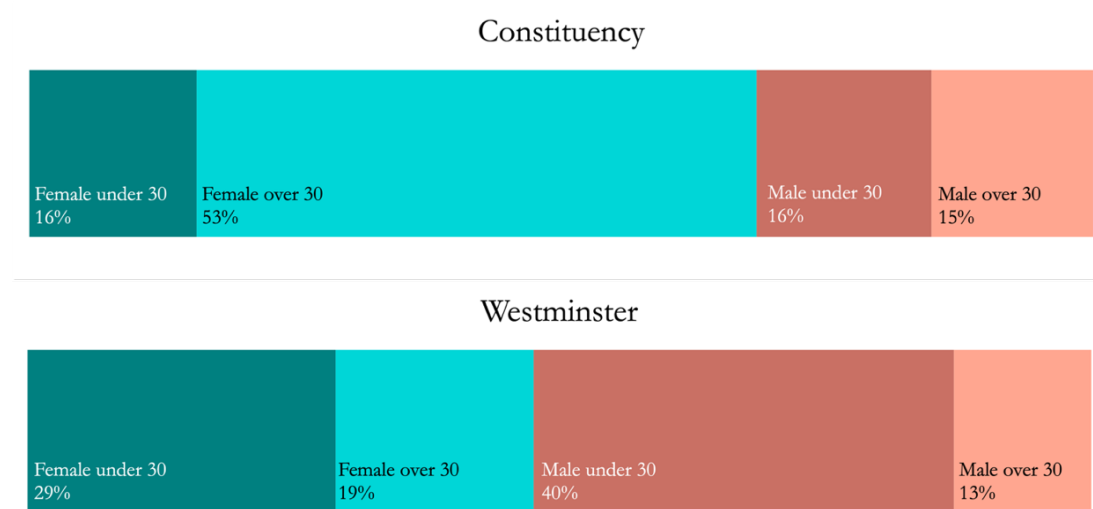
Staff in the Westminster and constituency offices

As has been stated, MPs have the freedom to decide where their staff are based. The data presented above show that research staff are somewhat distinct from executive and administrative staff – fitting more with the stereotype of MPs’ staff as young, male, politics graduates. Research staff are primarily based in Westminster, where they make up the majority of staff. Data presented in chapter 6 revealed that 65% of Westminster staff worked in the research job family. It is in Westminster where staff perhaps have more privileged access to experience and networks that are useful for a future political career. It is also these staff who assist MPs with the majority of their legislative and policy research across a huge range of topics from science and industry to culture and sports.

Overall, 40% of MPs’ staff completing the survey were men. The data collected suggests that among Westminster staff the proportion of men is higher (52%), and among constituency staff the proportion is lower (32%). Westminster staff were also on average younger than constituency staff. The average age of a Westminster staffer was just 31, around six years younger than MPs’ staff overall, and a whole decade younger than constituency staff, at 41. Almost 70% of staff working in Westminster were under the age of 30. This is not because they are junior: only 15% of level 1 staff (administrative and executive) compared to just under half (46%) of level 2 staff (a level that applies to all three job families) were based in the Westminster office. Instead, it is driven mainly by the presence of research staff, who make up a large proportion of the Westminster workforce and are on average much younger than their other colleagues – as was shown above.

Figure 7-12 shows how, as a result of Westminster and constituency offices having different proportions of staff from each job family, the age and gender profiles of staff in these offices differ significantly. In line with the data about job families seen earlier, it shows that over half of staff (53%) working in constituency offices were women over the age of 30 (and 68% were over 30 in total), while 40% of staff working in Westminster were men under the age of 30 (and 69% in total were under 30).

Figure 7-12 Age and gender of staff in Westminster and constituency offices, 2019

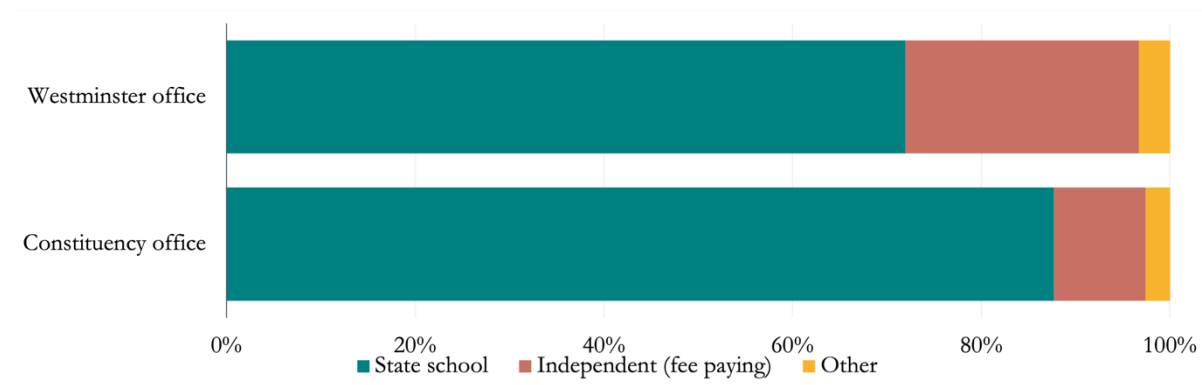


Source: MPs’ staff survey 2019, Constitution Unit UCL.

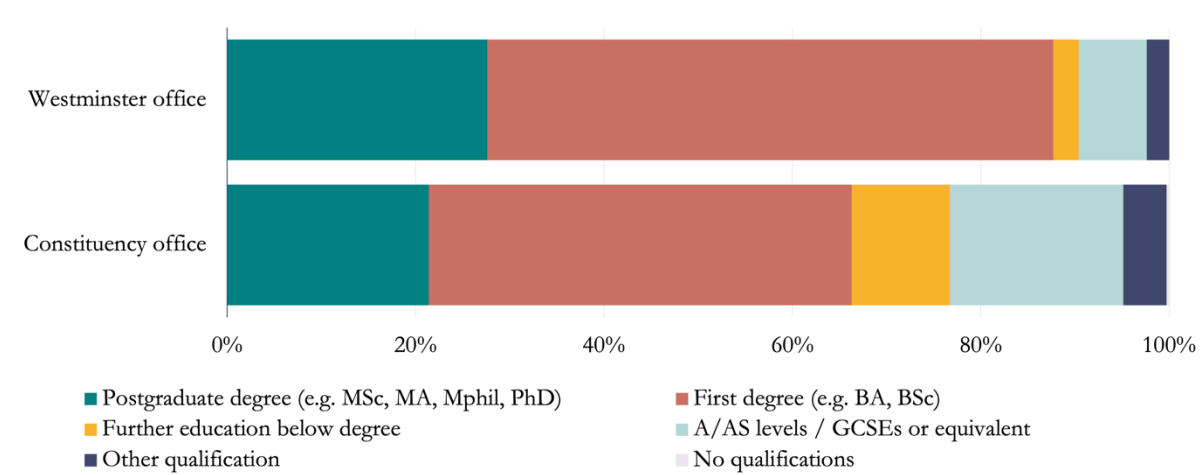
There is further distinction between Westminster and constituency staff in their educational background (Figure 7-13).

Figure 7-13 School and education characteristics by office type, 2019

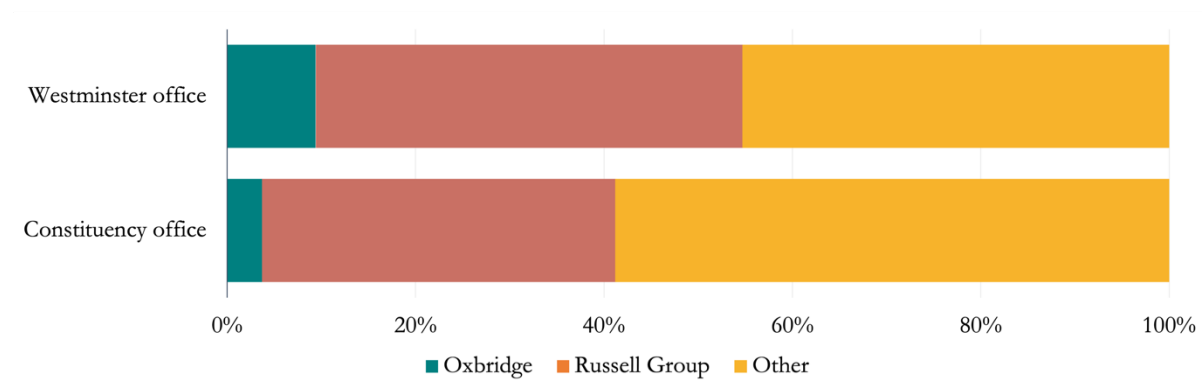
School type



Highest qualification



University type, staff with a degree



Source: MPs' staff survey 2019, Constitution Unit UCL.

The proportion of Westminster office staff that attended an independent school (25%) was more than double that of constituency office staff (10%). Westminster staff were more likely to have a

university degree than staff working in the constituency office. For research staff – who make up a larger proportion of staff in Westminster than in the constituency offices – a degree is likely to be more useful for their role, while for administrative staff and executive staff other qualifications may be more suited. A higher proportion of constituency staff than Westminster staff had a further education qualification below degree level. Of staff with a university degree, Westminster staff were also more likely to have attended Oxbridge or another Russell Group university (55%) than constituency staff (41%). Summary data from the staff survey, comparing the profiles of staff working in Westminster and constituency offices are presented in the next two text boxes.

Box 3 Profile of Westminster staff

Majority research staff (65%), followed by administrative staff (23%) and executive (12%)
Majority men 52%
Average age 31 years old, 68% under 30 years old
25% had attended an independent (fee paying) school
48% had worked in another MP's office
3% had been elected a local councillor
55% had volunteered for the local party e.g. campaigning
87% had a degree
9% had attended Oxbridge and 45% another Russell Group university
7% had studied a subject other than humanities or social sciences
10% had previously worked in public services and administration

Box 4 Profile of constituency staff

Majority executive staff (57%), followed by administrative staff (35%) and research (8%)
Majority female 68%
Average age 41 years old, 31% under 30 years old
10% had attended an independent (fee paying) school
23% had worked in another MP's office
20% had been elected a local councillor
54% had volunteered for the local party e.g. campaigning
66% had a degree
4% had attended Oxbridge and 38% another Russell Group university
13% had studied a subject other than humanities or social sciences
20% had previously worked in public services and administration

Conclusion

Understanding the demographics and characteristics of MPs' staff is crucial for promoting diversity and representation within parliamentary support staff. Without such an understanding, and seeing how demographics map onto job roles and office type, it is difficult to ensure that there are the right policies and support in place to foster inclusivity and encourage a wide range of perspectives and expertise in the political process. Understanding the educational background and experience of MPs' staff is also important. There are over 3,500 staff working across these offices,

all contributing to the broad range of work that MPs do. MPs can also seek research support from parliamentary services and pooled staffing resources. But without a good understanding of the knowledge, skills, and capabilities of MPs' staff it is difficult for parliament to know that MPs are receiving the right support in the round.

Data from the survey allows us to explore the background and experience of MPs' staff in more detail than has been possible previously. The analysis of demographics and other background characteristics reveal two broad groupings, divided by their work settings. Research staff are distinct in many ways from executive and administrative staff, with the latter two having some similarities. This appears to lead to striking differences between the staff working in Westminster and constituency offices.

There are three key contributions of this chapter. First it explores in more detail than has previously been possible the demographics and characteristics of these staff and reveals the very stark differences between Westminster and constituency staff – in terms of gender, age, education, and experience. It shows that the Westminster workforce is strikingly young – with almost 70% being under 30. In addition, the research workforce (which makes up the majority at Westminster) is disproportionately male. At least as far as Westminster is concerned, the picture drawn by John Crace at the start of this chapter therefore actually seems to be quite accurate; though the picture in the constituencies is very different. MPs' staff are less likely to have attended private school and Oxbridge than MPs themselves, but still more than the population at large.

These findings raise a number of concerns. Research staff, despite overwhelmingly being young and male, are employed and paid at a higher level than executive or administrative staff (due to the absence of a level 1 for research). In addition, if jobs at Westminster (and particularly in research) are a gateway to a career as an MP, the results show that the pool of talent is skewed in important respects.

Second, and relatedly, the chapter tells us about the range of knowledge, experience and skills of these staff. There is a marked concentration of highly educated staff in the Westminster-based research roles. However, most have degrees in humanities or social sciences, with STEM subjects much less well represented. Looking at the actual subjects studied, as might be expected, politics is particularly well represented, either as a single subject or in combination with another. This narrow range of expertise may be considered a matter for concern. While an education in politics is clearly useful for someone working inside a major political institution, MPs' work in parliament covers a huge range of subjects, both domestic and foreign, which cut across many areas. MPs do receive specialist briefings – from the House of Commons Library, Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology (POST), pooled staffing resources, and their own parties, but will also rely, as stated in some of their staff's job descriptions, on the research capabilities of their staff.

Third, this analysis also tells us about the pathways into a job working for an MP. Westminster staff were more likely to have attended an independent school and a leading university than were constituency staff. They were also more likely to have worked for another MP – it is of course much easier to move between MPs' Westminster offices, which are all on the parliamentary estate, than it is between constituency offices. Constituency staff were more likely to have worked in public services or administration, jobs which have some crossover with elements of casework in the constituency, and more likely to have studied a subject other than humanities and social sciences at university. Conservative MPs hired a much higher proportion of staff who had private

education than Labour MPs. Yet in terms of university experience, Labour and Conservative MPs had similar proportions of staff from leading universities and Labour even had slightly more.

These findings all raise questions about the recruitment process for MPs' staff. Why are there distinct differences between different types of staff, those working in different roles, and for MPs from different parties? Are MPs adequately supported when so many of their research staff are very young, and so few have studied STEM subjects? Do the demographic differences identified raise concerns not only about those people's employment, but about the representativeness of those coming through the pipeline to possible future political careers?

The results do appear to suggest that there is something going on, either in the supply (type of people applying for jobs and who want to work for an MP in different roles) or demand (the type of people MPs want to hire for different roles). Subsequent chapters look in more detail at the recruitment process (chapter 8) and motivations to want to work for an MP (chapter 10) which might explain some of these differences. It is beyond the scope of this report to fully answer why the demographic disparities found by the survey exist, but some of the stark results shown do suggest that this should be a priority for future inquiry.

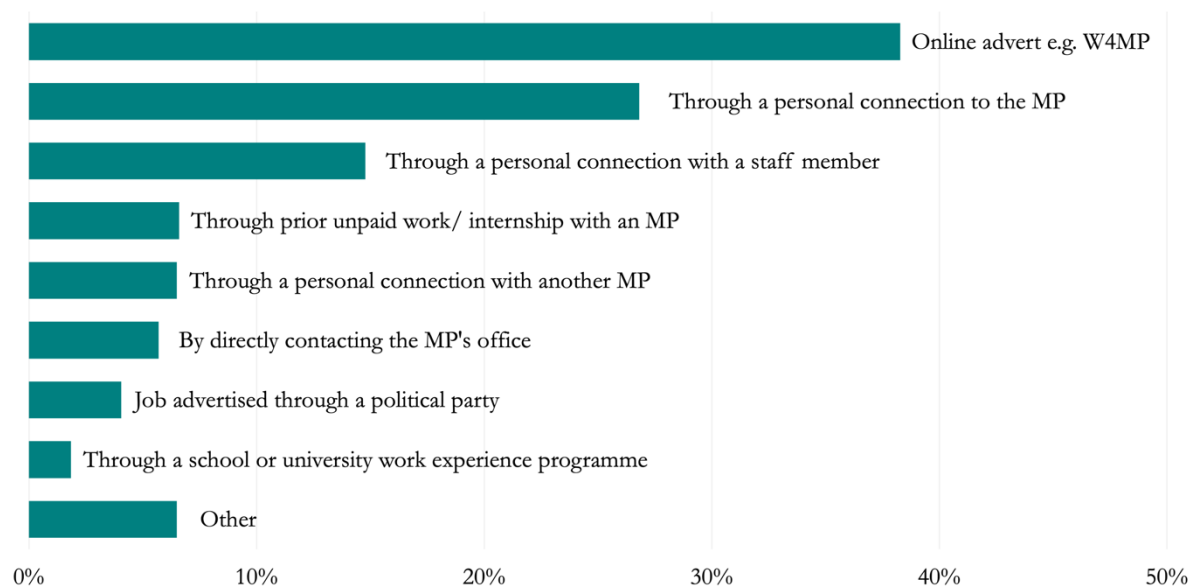
8 Internships and recruitment

Finding a job with an MP

As has been previously stated, turnover of MPs' staff is high and recruitment is an almost continuous activity across the workforce. But there are very few rules or stipulations for MPs to follow when they recruit new staff, making the recruitment process rather informal, and difficult to navigate or monitor. If one is looking to fill one of the approximately 100 vacancies a month, where does one begin? There is a variety of options, rather than one set path. These include applying to an open recruitment advert, writing to your local MP, or using personal connections such as working for an MP you've previously worked with, in the local party or on their election campaign. If you are one of the staff who find themselves on election night without a job if their MP is not re-elected, you may be snapped up by a newly elected MP who will value someone experienced in parliament or the local constituency.

In the absence of a central recruitment process, the MP, their office manager, or other staff will have to find, recruit and set up new staff members themselves. Given the various ways in which MPs might find new staff, respondents to the survey were asked about how they first heard about their job. The results are shown in Figure 8-1.

Figure 8-1 How did staff first hear about the job they currently have, 2019




Source: MPs' staff survey 2019, Constitution Unit UCL.

The most common way for someone to hear about their job was through a general recruitment website (38%), for example the W4MP website (more about this below). Personal connections were also a popular route: 27% said that they heard about the job through a personal connection with the MP, 15% through a personal connection with another staff member, and 7% through

another MP. In total 44% first heard about their job because they knew someone, an MP or other member of staff who worked in parliament. Common ‘other’ responses included an advert in a local newspaper, a job centre, or social media. The variation in recruitment once again exemplifies the flexibility of the system as a benefit for MPs. A House of Commons Commission report looking into staffing arrangements stated that although some MPs do advertise, making it compulsory would make the process ‘more expensive, slower and more time-consuming, and it would create a requirement to be demonstrably fair to all applicants’ (House of Commons Commission, 2009).

The W4MP website

There is no place on parliament’s website for MPs to post advertisements for job vacancies. However, there is a W4MP (working for an MP) jobs website which is hosted separately but is funded through the Members’ Services Team in the House of Commons.³⁶ W4MP is used by MPs to advertise posts. Between July 2018 and July 2019, just prior to the staff survey, 410 job adverts were posted by MPs looking for staff. Most adverts were for junior executive or research jobs such as caseworkers, communications officers or parliamentary assistants and researchers. Of the adverts posted, 40% were for executive roles, 38% for research roles and 17% for administrative roles. The remaining advertisements were for posts with a mixture these responsibilities. Adverts were placed by Conservative (59%), Labour (39%) and Liberal Democrat (2%) MPs. There were no adverts from other parties: SNP MPs, for example, usually advertise posts on the SNP website.

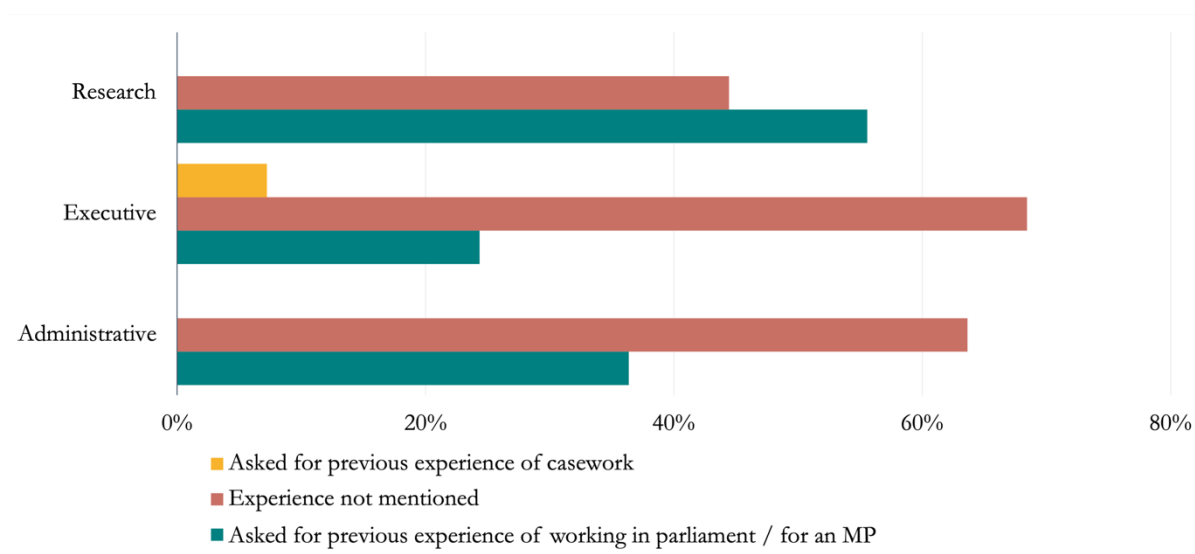
 W4MP is a helpful resource for MPs’ staff. It houses a range of guides, training and useful contact details. The website was set up in 2000 with European Union ADAPT funding to provide MPs’ staff with training and development resources. In 2012 a separate W4MP jobs website was set up, which hosts job adverts for vacancies with MPs and other relevant organisations.

In the sample of job adverts there was some variation in the previous experience required. Across all adverts 38% explicitly requested that candidates had some previous experience of working with an MP or in parliament, 3% requested that they had previous experience of conducting casework.

Figure 8-2 shows how the requests for prior experience were broken down by job family. Over half (56%) of the job adverts for research staff, despite the fact that these adverts were predominantly for junior posts, asked for previous experience of working in parliament.

³⁶ More information on the Members’ Services Team is in chapter 9.

Figure 8-2 W4MP job adverts requesting previous experience, % by job family, July 2018-19



Source: W4MP job website; data collected from job advertisements listed between July 2018 and July 2019.

A new recruit who already has experience of parliament, or currently works in parliament, is valuable for two reasons. First, because they will have some understanding of how parliament works – the first battle for new staff. Second, if they are currently in post they will already have security clearance and a parliamentary pass, which means they can start sooner and hit the ground running. The pressures of understanding a complicated organisation and the length of time it takes to get set up mean the value of experience in parliament is sometimes put over and above other relevant experience that you would want research staff to have; for example in writing or analytical skills, or experience in particular policy areas. In comparison, only 7% of executive posts asked for previous experience of casework.

Personal connections

Personal connections can act as a shortcut for time poor MPs who need to staff their offices. Recruiting someone you already know, often because you have previously worked with them (for example in the local constituency and through the local party), might be sensible for an MP who needs staff who know the party, the political system, or the constituency well. A report from the Sutton Trust found that one in four people who worked for MPs and peers in Westminster got a job through a personal connection (Montacute and Cullinane, 2018). The survey on which the current report is based found that, with a broader view of what a personal connection is (including a connection to a staff member or another MP beyond their current employer), 44% of staff first heard about the job opportunity in this way. There was almost no difference in this respect between female and male staff. Administrative staff were the most likely to say that they heard about the job through a personal connection with someone in parliament (60%), followed by executive staff (40%) and lastly research staff (34%).

Staff in the constituency office (50%) were more likely than their colleagues at Westminster (34%) to say they heard about their job through a personal connection with someone in parliament. This

makes sense when we consider that most MPs will have worked in the local constituency and with the party for a while before winning their seat. They may therefore hire someone in the constituency that they trust and who knows the area and local stakeholders well.

Interviews

The survey results found that one in five (20%) respondents did not interview for their job. Of staff who heard about their job through a personal connection, 69% had an interview for the role compared with 88% of staff who heard about their job in another way.

When looking at whether staff were interviewed for their job, there was no difference by gender of the staff member, but 83% of those who were employed by a female MP reported having had an interview, compared with 78% of those employed by a male MP. Looking by job family, administrative staff were the least likely to report having been interviewed for their role (71%), followed by executive staff (82%) and research staff (84%). Across all three job families, interviews were less common for those in senior roles. For example, only 66% of staffers working in the administrative job family at the most senior level (office managers, chiefs of staff etc.) reported having had an interview, compared with 90% in the middle band and 79% in the junior band. This may be because those in the more senior roles had been promoted internally by the MP.

Internships

Much like in other industries, internships are one possible way for people who are interested in working for an MP to get a sense of the role and get a foot in the door. There are multiple different types of internships and placements available with MPs, both formal and informal. Various different programmes are available to people at different stages of education who want to gain this experience, as listed in the next table.

Table 8-1 Summary of the different types of internships available in parliament

School or college students
<p><u>The Parliamentary Academy Scheme</u></p> <p>This is a paid 12-month apprenticeship scheme for non-graduates aged between 16 and 24. On completion, participants receive a qualification. It includes three days a week in an MPs' Westminster office and off-site college-based training. It was set up with the aim to 'broaden access to parliament and politics' by The Creative Society and Robert Halfon MP.</p>
University undergraduate students
<p>Some universities have partnered with parliament to offer placements or internships for students taking their politics courses. These are unpaid as part of the degree course.</p>
<p><u>University of Leeds</u></p> <p>Students who have completed the first year of the BA Politics degree can apply for the extended four-year course on the parliamentary studies pathway. This includes a political work placement in the third year. Placements include working for an MP in their Westminster or constituency office, at a party headquarters or other political organisation.</p>

University undergraduate students CONTINUED

University of Liverpool

Politics students can apply to take part in the university Parliamentary Placement Scheme. It runs during the second semester of the third year. The scheme pairs students with an MP for four days a week.

University of Hull

This scheme, run by Lord (Philip) Norton of Louth, is for third year students of the four-year British Politics and Legislative Studies course. Placements are in an MP or peer's office for a year, typically two days a week.

Queen Mary University of London (QMUL)

Final year students who take the Parliamentary Studies module can apply for a placement with an MP during the second semester. It is typically for two days a week in the MP's Westminster or constituency office, or across both.

University of Aberystwyth

Second year students can undertake a placement at the House of Commons or the Senedd. It takes place in the summer, outside of the university timetable, and runs for 4-6 weeks. Students can apply for bursaries to support their expenses during the placement.

University postgraduate students

The London School of Economics (LSE) Parliamentary Internship Programme

This scheme places MSc (on two-year courses) and PhD students in part-time internships with MPs, peers and elsewhere in parliament. Running from September to March, students are expected to commit 15 hours per week. Students are paid at least the National Minimum Wage. Set up by LSE alumnus Barry Sheerman MP in 1998, over 500 students have taken part.

Other formal placements

Parliament runs its own internal placement schemes, providing opportunities to gain experience working in both chambers.

Speaker's Parliamentary Placement Scheme

This is a social mobility scheme designed to improve the diversity of parliamentary staff. Set up in 2011 by Hazel Blears MP, it offers a nine-month paid internship across the Westminster and constituency office of an MP. It also includes training and workplace visits to encourage networking. The 2020–21 scheme offered 13 placements. By 2014 half of the interns across the first three years were still working in parliament.

IPSA Employed Interns & Apprentices

MPs can use their IPSA staffing allowance to claim expenses for employed interns and apprentices in their office. MPs recruit these interns directly, and posts usually last from 3–12 months. Since May 2010 IPSA has stated that employed interns must be paid the National Minimum Wage. IPSA data from the payroll in September 2019 showed that there were 72 employed interns working for MPs.

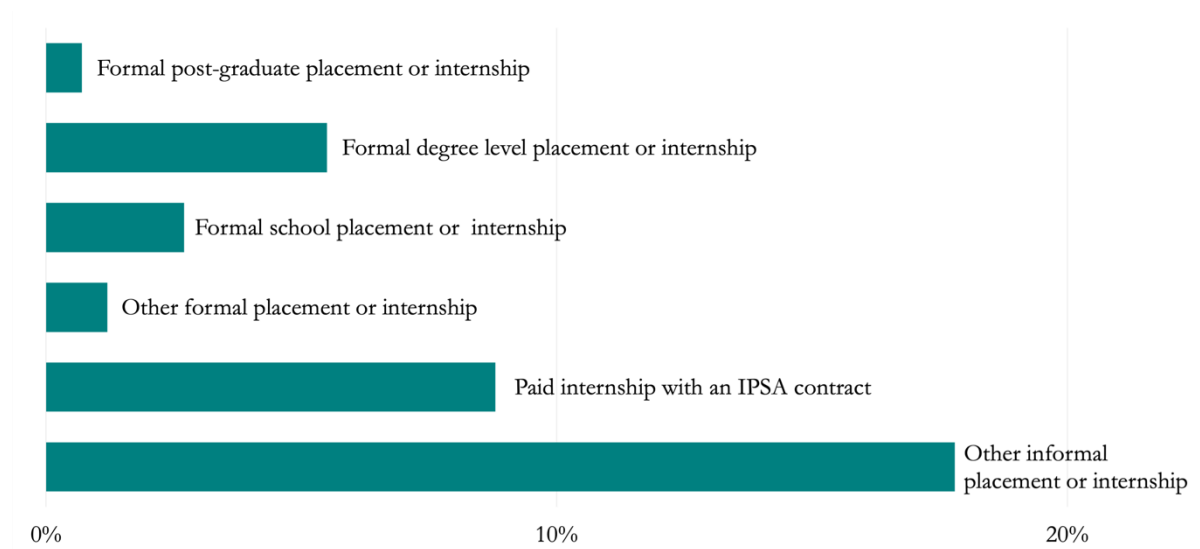
Other informal placements

MPs can take on unpaid interns, who are classed as volunteers. They do not have an IPSA salary or job description, though MPs can use their IPSA staffing allowance to cover expenses and travel for volunteers. The terms of this arrangement must be agreed to in advance using a volunteer arrangement form and be registered with IPSA.

Internship experience of staff

In the staff survey, 31% of respondents said that they had previously undertaken an internship in parliament. As Figure 8-3 shows, the most common option, almost 20% in the survey, was to have undertaken an informal placement. These are different from formal placements and may have lasted only a few days or weeks as a precursor to a paid role. In total 17% of staff reported having undertaken a formal internship or placement – some staff having done more than one.

Figure 8-3 Types of internships undertaken by MPs' staff, 2019

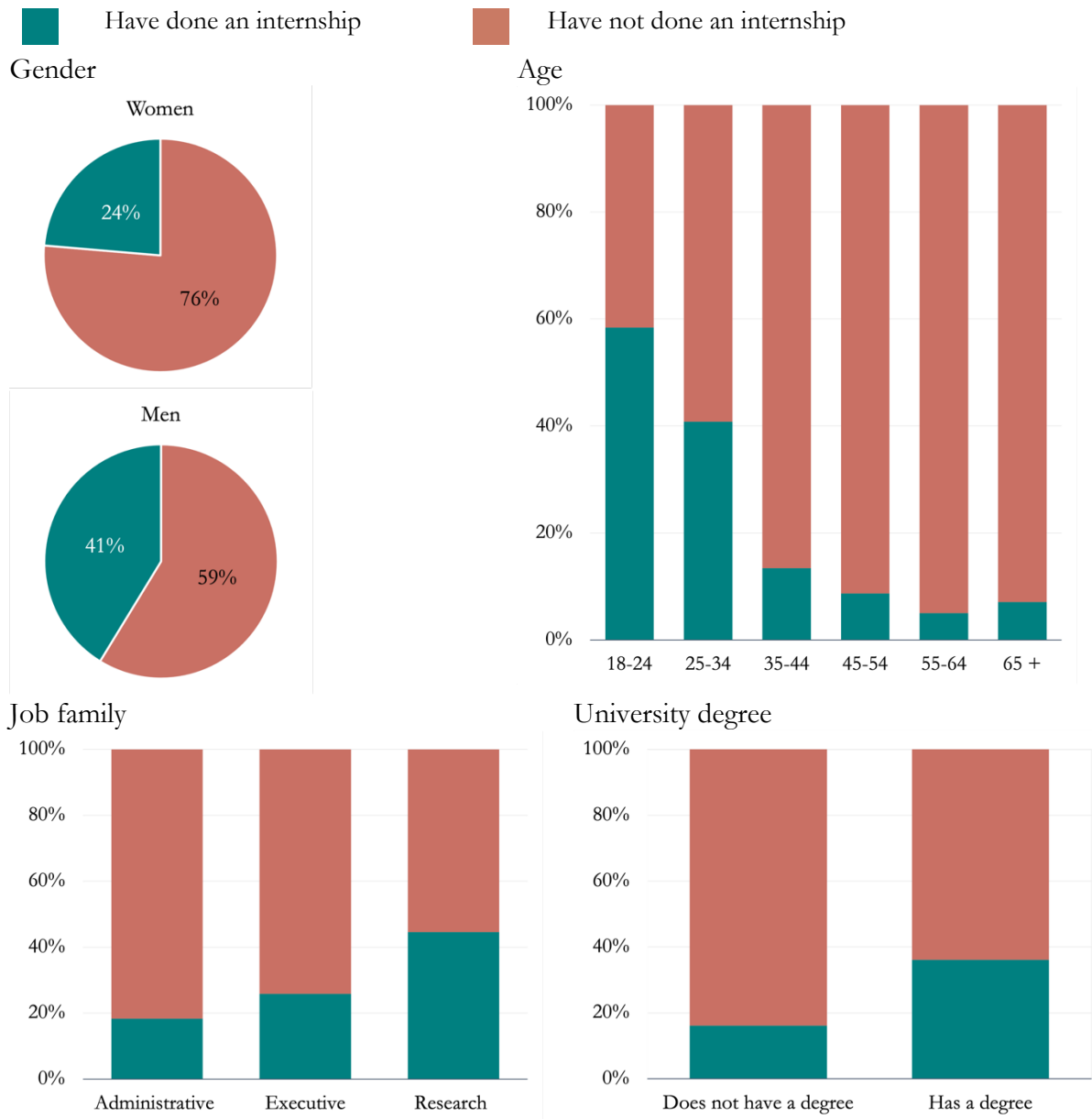


Source: MPs' staff survey 2019, Constitution Unit UCL.

Figure 8-4 reports some of the key characteristics of staff who said that they had previously undertaken internships. Internship experience was more common among male staff than female staff. It was also more common among younger staff, those working in research jobs, and those with a university degree.

There was no clear difference in the proportion of staff who had been interns working for MPs of different parties. However, the difference between Westminster and constituency staff was large. Half of staff based in Westminster reported that they had previously been an intern, while only 18% of constituency staff said that they had. Part of this difference is because Westminster staff were more likely to have been on an informal internship placement rather than through one of the formal schemes listed earlier – 27% of Westminster staff had undertaken an informal internship or placement compared to just 11% of constituency staff.

Figure 8-4 Characteristics of staff who have been interns in parliament, 2019



Source: MPs' staff survey 2019, Constitution Unit UCL.

Conclusion

The process by which MPs recruit staff is characterised by informality, with an absence of standardised rules. As discussed in chapter 5, turnover of staff is high, necessitating continuous recruitment and the responsibility for finding, recruiting, and setting up new staff members which falls on MPs and their office managers. This decentralised approach makes the recruitment process difficult to navigate and monitor.

There are two key issues highlighted in this chapter that are relevant to understanding pathways into employment by an MP. First, prior experience working in parliament is highly valued by MPs.

Four in ten job adverts on the W4MP website – of which many were junior entry-level roles – asked for prior experience. Over half of the job adverts for research roles explicitly requested previous experience in parliament, indicating the significance placed on understanding the workings of parliament and the value of having a foot in the door. In contrast, only a small percentage of executive posts required previous experience in casework systems and management. This is clearly a huge barrier for most people and narrows the recruitment pool considerably. What we do not know from this data is how this criterion is weighed against other skills or knowledge-based criteria and how much of a consideration it is at interview. However, it will likely put off many people applying without such experience. We do, however, know that the institutional systems and employment models incentivise MPs to favour prior experience in the role and encourage them to ask for it even for entry-level jobs. While there is guidance from the Members' Services Team, MPs do not have to follow it. MPs must also arrange for security passes and get their staff set up on the intranet which takes longer if someone is completely new to the system. Parliament is, in many ways, an odd place to work and valuable time is spent getting staff acquainted with the way things operate. Prior experience and having a foot in the door clearly plays a role in who is employed. We know that cognitive biases exist in hiring processes generally, and cultural similarities – organisational and personal familiarities – can play a meaningful role in hiring decisions (Rivera, 2012). Formal recruitment processes are important for reducing bias – both conscious and unconscious. We also know from the previous chapters that the recruitment decisions made by MPs lead to demographically distinct groups in different roles – junior roles in parliament are disproportionately filled by younger male staff, compared with constituency staff. We know from this chapter that experience *in* parliament is often required or expected even for junior roles, and according to the survey younger staff, male staff, those in research roles and those based in Westminster were most likely to have previously undertaken an internship. This suggests there is bias in the system and that the recruitment process is part of the problem – reproducing structural inequalities, found outside, within the workforce of MPs' staff.

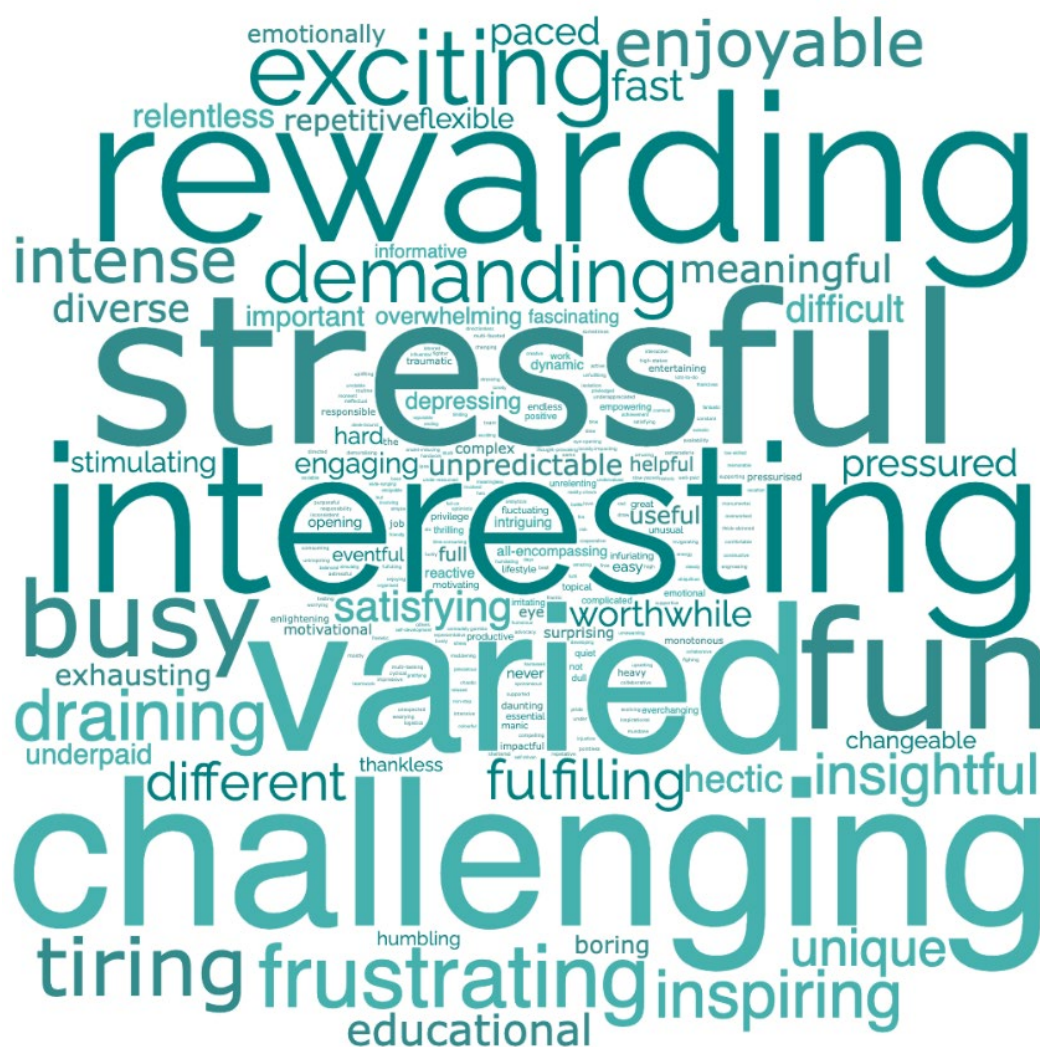
A second finding is that parliamentary internships can serve as a pathway by which individuals interested in working for an MP can gain experience and establish personal connections, both shown to help when getting a job with an MP. The availability of internships and placement schemes has increased over time, with a range of programmes catering for individuals at different stages in their education. The staff survey revealed that almost a third of respondents have previously undertaken some type of internship or placement with an MP, either informal or formal. Male staff, younger staff, those in research roles, and those with university degrees were more likely to have internship experience. Paid internships can be a good way of reaching beyond the select group who can afford to live in London unpaid. However, many of these internships were informal and not part of a specific scheme. While some of the schemes available are specifically aimed at getting underrepresented groups into parliament, informal internships do not, and there is no monitoring of how the use of them might have contributed to the differences set out in previous chapters. Even for formal placements, the consequences of these schemes for equality, diversity, and inclusion remain unclear given the lack of follow-up of interns to capture their subsequent career paths.

9 Support for staff in their role

The word cloud in Figure 9-1 displays the responses staff gave when they were asked to describe what they thought of their job. Among the most frequent words used were “challenging”, “stressful”, and “demanding”. However, on a more positive note, staff also said “interesting”, “rewarding” and “varied”. We can group the words thematically and this reveals a mix of positive and negative descriptions. The four most common themes are; stressful (pressured, hectic, intense), varied (diverse, unpredictable, flexible), interesting (informative, exciting, stimulating), and worthwhile (fulfilling, rewarding, meaningful).

These adjectives give us an insight into how staff feel about their job and reflect what we learn elsewhere from the survey (and from other evidence from staff, such as select committee evidence). The responses present a balanced view of a role that is hard, demanding, and challenging but is also rewarding, interesting and fulfilling.

Figure 9-1 How staff describe their current job in three words, all staff



Source: MPs' staff survey 2019, Constitution Unit UCL.

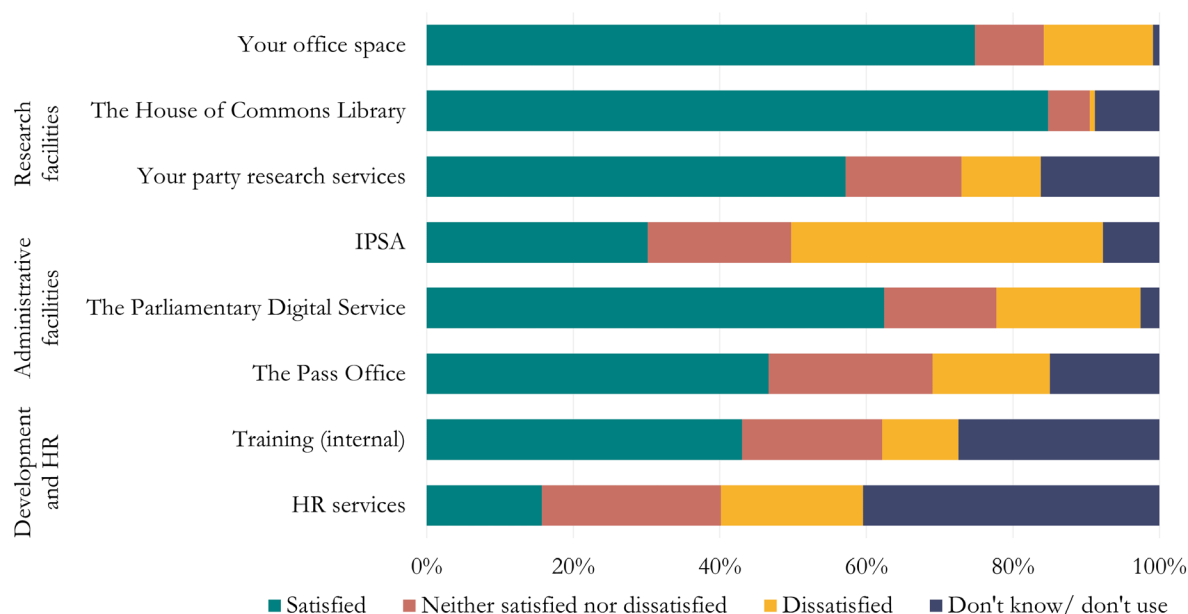
As this indicates, the experience of staff varies. This chapter looks at two key things which can impact the experience of staff: the facilities available to them to support their work for the MP, and the amount of contact they have with the MP and other staff members.

Facilities available to support staff

The role of an MP has evolved greatly over the last century; they now require more support than they did in the past to respond to their increasing workload. MPs are expected to do much more now than when a staffing allowance was first introduced, and on a wider range of topics, while meeting demands for greater transparency and accountability. Consequently, the role of the parliamentary staffer has also expanded and evolved. This chapter explores the types of facilities and support that are available to staff in their role. This includes facilities provided to them such as research resources and training, as well as the support that they might receive through contact with their MP and other colleagues.

The survey asked staffers to rate their experiences with a range of different facilities and support services available to them (Figure 9-2) and their responses are summarised in the next sections.

Figure 9-2 Staff ratings of parliamentary facilities and support services, 2019



Source: MPs' staff survey 2019, Constitution Unit UCL.

Office space

Much of the old Palace of Westminster dates from the 19th century. At the time the building was celebrated for using advanced Victorian technology and innovation (Cocks, 1977). In the subsequent years of use it has deteriorated and is in urgent need of repair. Given the growing number of staff, they have for a while been scattered across the parliamentary estate: in the palace

itself, Norman Shaw North, Norman Shaw South, and previously buildings on Millbank. In 2001 Portcullis House was opened, providing additional offices, committee rooms and other services. Westminster-based staff (presumably those housed in the older buildings) listed a range of problems including moths, mice, flies and ceiling leaks, with one staffer stating that their office ‘really isn’t fit for purpose’.

Constituency offices vary even more. MPs must claim for their constituency offices from their expenses. All have the same office costs allowance regardless of their constituency, whether it is urban, or rural, or in a more expensive location. With rental prices varying hugely across the UK the result is that the provision of constituency office space is very inconsistent. One constituency staff member suggested that it was difficult to rent adequate constituency space within the budget available; another said that they work from home because there simply is not enough room in the office for all the staff.

Despite this, almost three quarters of staff said that they were satisfied with their office space. There was no difference in the average ratings across constituency and Westminster-based staff. Staff working for a London constituency MP were less satisfied with their office space (64%) than those based outside of the capital (73%).

Box 5 Portcullis House offices

A rising number of staff over recent decades has put pressure on the office facilities in Westminster. In 1992 Portcullis House (PCH) was commissioned to provide much needed additional office space for MPs, their staff, and House of Commons staff. PCH was completed in 2001 at the cost of £235 million. The new building was designed to host 212 MPs and approximately 640 of their staff, alongside complimentary services and facilities, including a post office. A desk count in 2013 indicated that the occupancy of PCH was 830. This means that many MPs and their staff are now in adequate offices, with the corner offices in PCH being the most desirable. However, other MPs and staff are housed in older buildings, including in the Palace itself, which on the whole is inadequate for modern MPs’ staffing needs. It is difficult for the House of Commons Administration to monitor office space needs and forecast for future capacity as MPs are at liberty to hire as many staff as they wish within their budget and allocate them to Westminster if they choose.

Research facilities

Staff working for an MP can access a variety of resources through the parliamentary research facilities. The largest is the House of Commons Library, which provides an impartial research and information service as well as training, events, and other resources for MPs and their staff. Since the middle of the 20th century (see chapter 2) the Library has developed into an integrated resource hub for members, and now their staff too (Gay, 2017). This includes preparing rapid responses to members’ research queries, and drafting briefings on current policy issues. The Library also offers training and development for MPs and their staff.

The House of Commons Library was the most highly rated parliamentary facility in the survey; 85% of staff were satisfied with it. The Library is also among the services most often used, with only 9% of staff saying that they did not know or did not use its services. This high level of use

and satisfaction was reflected in the free text comments in the survey, with one staff member saying ‘The House of Commons Library is exceptional in every way’.

Staff whose MPs subscribe to them also have access to party research services or research units. These are funded from pooled sums contributed from the MPs’ staffing allowances and conduct research and provide briefings (see chapter 3). Unlike the House of Commons Library, they are not politically impartial.

The four largest political parties all have pooled research services (see chapter 3). Over half (57%) of all staff said that they were satisfied with party research services, while 16% said that they did not know or did not use them. Over 50% of staff working for a Conservative, Labour or SNP MP said they were satisfied with these services. The figure was lower among staff of Liberal Democrat MPs, at 42%.

Administrative facilities

Each MP’s office requires administrative support and the staff can draw on several resources to help. IPSA provides support with expenses and finances, the Parliamentary Digital Service (PDS) provides IT and technical support, and the Pass Office registers new starters and issues parliamentary passes.

Staff ratings of these facilities varied. IPSA had the lowest rating, with only a third of staff satisfied with its services. The remaining responses were not apathetic, however. IPSA also received by far the highest dissatisfied rating, 43% of staff saying that they were dissatisfied by their experience with IPSA. As an independent regulator of MPs’ expenses, IPSA has a complex relationship with MPs’ staff.³⁷ This is reflected in the comments provided in the free text section of the survey. Criticisms centred around two things: that IPSA was out of touch with the way MPs’ offices work, and problems with its new online system.

The Pass Office scored slightly higher, with 47% of staff reporting satisfaction with the service while 15% said they did not know or did not use it. The PDS had the highest satisfaction score of the administrative support facilities that the survey asked about, with 63% of staff saying they were satisfied and only 3% saying that they did not know or did not use it.

Training and HR support

Training is an important part of any job, but especially for MPs’ staff who are working across 650 separate offices, in varying roles, but dealing with similar issues, procedures, and technology. High quality training can be expected to support better quality of work, more consistency, and higher job satisfaction as it enables staff to feel better prepared to do their job. IPSA allows MPs to claim for staff training from the staffing allowance, but MPs’ staff can also use free training courses and workshops provided in-house by the House of Commons Library, the Members’ Services Team (see the section below) and the Commons Learning and Organisation Development team.

Despite these opportunities, a 2019 IPSA review of MPs’ staff funding noted how staff are ‘often handling complex work, in some cases without the necessary training’ (IPSA, 2020b, 5). This tallies

³⁷ See chapter 3 for a detailed examination of the role and remit of IPSA in relation to MPs’ staffing.

with the survey results, where training was the area with the second highest proportion of staff who said they did not know or did not use the services available to them. Under half of staff said that they were satisfied with the training available. Following the 2019 review, and after the survey was conducted, £4,000 was added to the staffing budget to provide extra support for training, health and wellbeing, and welfare for staff. However, this money is part of the overall staffing budget and MPs do not have to spend it on staff training.

One of the main problems is that, although training is in theory accessible to all staff, in practice it mostly happens in Westminster so constituency staff feel that they miss out. In the free text section of the survey staff told us that there needed to be local support for constituency staff outside of London. There are regional events, but several staff members commented that waiting lists are long and the courses are infrequent. Although the courses are free, the MP or Office Manager will potentially need to factor in travel and accommodation costs for constituency staff which may deter them from using the service. Staff in Westminster also noted that training sessions are rarely on Fridays, which would be more convenient as the Commons is not sitting and they are likely to be less busy.

The HR offering for MPs' staff bears little resemblance to what many people employed in a large organisation would recognise. As MPs are the employers of their staff the key legal obligations, set out for example in the Employment Rights Act 1996, fall to the MP. As such the HR support is there to support MPs in being good employers, rather than being a formal HR service for staff. At the time of the survey, the HR support on offer was the Members' HR Advisory Service, with only two staff members. This service has since become part of the Members' Services Team (see next section), so the very poor satisfaction in Figure 9-2 is in reference to the earlier iteration of the system.

Members' Services Team

The Members' Services Team (MST) has been in place since early 2020, established after a recommendation from the inquiry by Gemma White KC into bullying and harassment of MPs' staff (White, 2019). Since April 2020 the MST has included previously existing Members' HR Advice Service, which increased to four members of staff who are trained HR professionals. The team now provide support to 100–120 members per month, compared to 20 a month when the service was first incorporated (Speaker's Conference, 2023). The team publishes best practice guides covering topics such as recruitment and selection, probation and induction, fixed-term contracts, and office restructuring (Speaker's Conference, 2023). While not being an official HR service for MPs' staff, the MST offers 'engagement and pastoral support' and will direct staff to appropriate services (Kelly, 2023, 11). The team has a station in Portcullis House which most staff working in Westminster will often walk past and has become a highly valued asset. Conservative chair of the Administration Committee Charles Walker MP has noted that the creation of a dedicated Members' Services Team was 'a significant development' which 'consolidated in one place the practical support provided' (Walker, 2023, 1).

As of 2021 the MST had a total of 10 staff. With more staff than the Members' HR Advice Service had it can engage with other House services in the sessions outlined above and can engage with MPs' staff representative groups including the staff unions, Members and Peers' Staff Association and the staff wellness group to get their views on House services. The team also has good links

with IPSA and can feedback to staff there. It is well positioned as an intermediary and port of call for MPs' staff and is generally well liked by staff.

As part of the engagement and pastoral care aspect of the service, the MST runs events with other parliamentary services specifically for MPs' staff. It took over responsibility for staff training in November 2022, and recently ran a casework forum with the House of Commons Library and a members' services fair that included representatives from support teams such as the Digital Service, security and IPSA. The team also run regular Q&A sessions on topics suggested by staff and a weekly Microsoft Teams drop in session for staff who manage MPs' offices, regularly getting about 100 MPs' offices managers in attendance (Sear, 2021).

The Speaker's Conference has recommended that the MST be renamed the Members' and Members' Staff Services Team (MMSST) to more accurately reflect its evolved role. Also, that the Director of Members' Staff Engagement should be formally located within the team to provide oversight of the delivery and implementation of other recommendations relating to MPs' staff (Speaker's Conference, 2023).

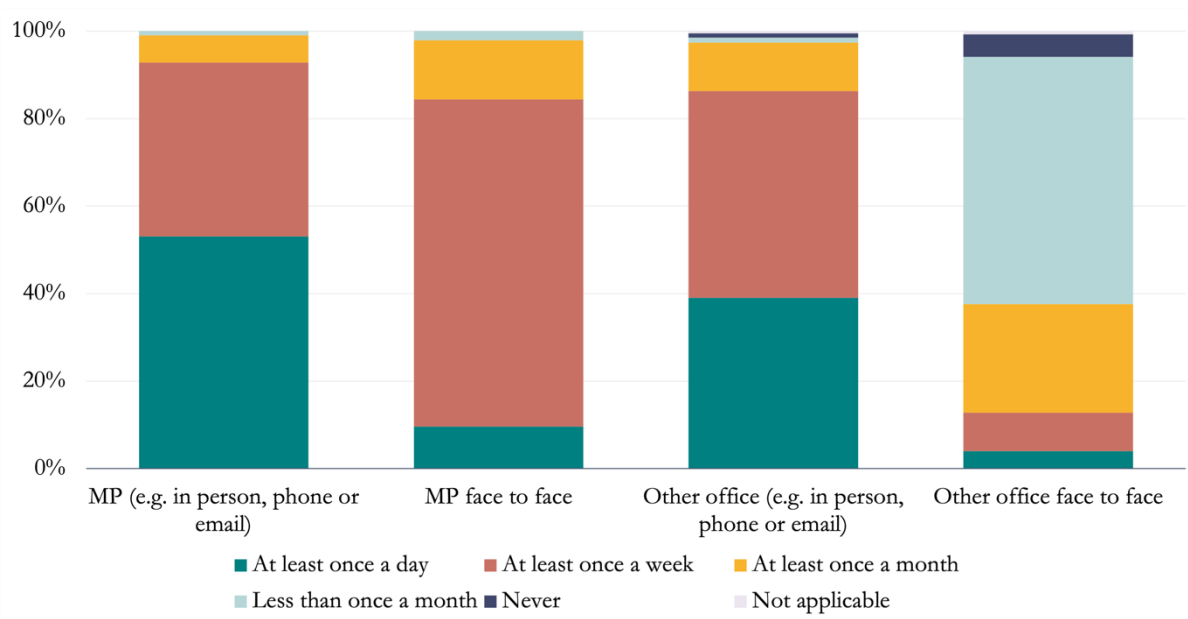
Contact with the MP and other staff

Support to do a job also comes from those that you work with closely. Many staffers experienced working in isolation, either from home or in socially distanced workplaces, during the pandemic. But even before lockdown, working for an MP could be a lonely experience. Although MPs have funds to employ on average five full-time equivalent staff each, it is unlikely that these staff will all work in the same city, let alone the same office. Gemma White's report in 2019 found that many staff who contributed to the inquiry felt isolated. MPs' offices were described as 'atomised', as there is little need for, or practice of, the staff of one MP's office working with those from another (White, 2019, 31).

The sense of isolation was true for both constituency and Westminster staff. In the report, constituency staff reported feeling removed from the parliamentary community and what was happening in Westminster. Those in Westminster felt that the term 'parliamentary community' did not include them. One Westminster staff member said 'to a new member of staff arriving in Westminster, often arriving straight from university, moving to London for the first time, and not knowing anyone else in the city, the only "community" you have is the MP you work for, and other staff in your MP's Westminster office, if there are any' (White, 2019, 31).

In the survey, conducted before the pandemic, staff were asked about the amount of interaction they had with their colleagues, including the MP and staff in the other MPs office, if applicable. The results, shown in Figure 9-3, report how often staff members saw the MP or other colleagues face to face, and how often they had contact with them, for example on the phone or via email. We see that 86% of staff had contact with their MP at least several times a week while just over half (53%) were in daily contact with their MP, though only 10% saw the MP face to face every day (this is rare because MPs split their week between their constituency and Westminster). It is striking that, despite the other claims on MPs' time, they do have face-to-face contact with their staff relatively often. Three quarters of staff reported seeing their MP face to face at least once a week.

Figure 9-3 Frequency of contact that staff have with their MP and the ‘other’ office, 2019



Source: MPs’ staff survey 2019, Constitution Unit UCL.

Staff had less interaction with colleagues in the MP’s other office. Three quarters (76%) reported having contact with them at least several times a week and 40% were in touch with them every day. But face-to-face contact is very uncommon; unlike the MP, staff are less likely to move between the offices. While 13% said that they had face-to-face contact at least once a week (most of these worked for London constituency MPs), 5% of staff said they had never had face-to-face contact with their colleagues in the other office.

Conclusion

The word cloud opening this chapter depicts a blend of positive and negative terms used by staff to describe their work, showcasing both the challenging and rewarding aspects of their roles. A key takeaway, which chimes with the data presented in earlier chapters, is that the job is varied. Even within the different job families, which have been structured to group-related roles, staff cover a range of activities. We also show that staff across the two offices – as one might expect, given they are often far apart geographically – have very little face-to-face interaction. This can make an already small team feel even smaller and feeds into the feelings of isolation among MPs’ staff that have been reported elsewhere.

The facilities that are on offer to staff, provided by the House Administration, can be part of a solution. Access to support services, including for research and training as well as HR, can provide a level of consistency to the role and help staff to feel more connected to the wider parliamentary community. But not all the facilities are working well for MPs’ staff. The survey highlighted particular problems of the accessibility of training for constituency staff located outside of London. Given that many of the services and facilities that support MPs are centralised in Westminster, constituency staff are less likely to have encountered or utilised them. Even some staff in Westminster admit to being ‘not fully aware of even a fraction of the support services available’,

citing their heavy workload as a hindrance to seeking out such resources, even though they recognise the potential time savings that they could provide.

One reason for this is that MPs have to report the expenses related to staff training with their other expenses. This creates a disincentive to send staff for training and claim associated costs, as the figures are often used in the media to decry ‘overpaid’ MPs with no nuance or accurate description of what the expenses actually pay for. While internal training is free, in-person training sessions are only offered either in Westminster or regional centres. Travel and accommodation costs for attending training must be covered through MPs’ existing expenses. Consequently, MPs with constituency offices located far from the training centres could use a significant portion of their budget to send staff for training, creating regional disparities in the provision of these services. IPSA data from 2018-19 revealed that, on average, MPs spent only £940, or 0.6% of their staffing budget, on staff training (IPSA, 2020b). This is something that the Speaker’s Conference on MPs’ staffing also looked at. It recommended that the IPSA budget for members’ staff travel and training be reported on as a whole rather than on a per-member basis – for example, in the way security costs are aggregated when published (Speaker’s Conference, 2023).

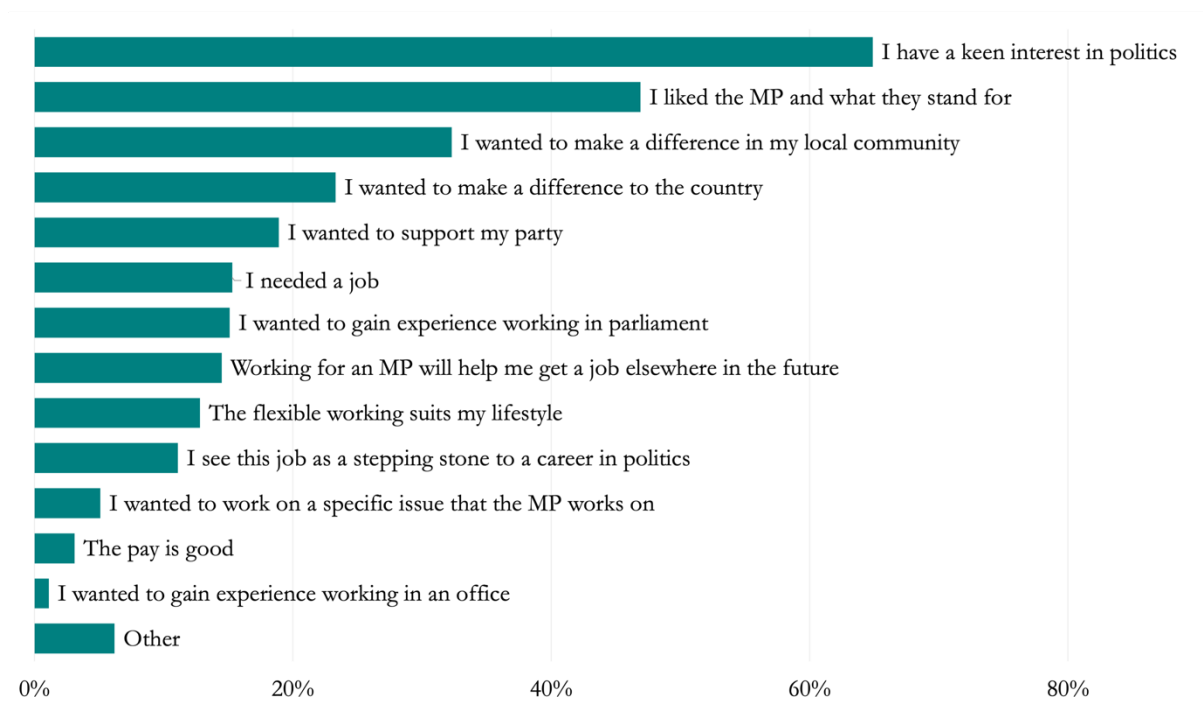
Overall, the survey reveals a mixed experience among MPs’ staff, encompassing both positive and negative aspects of their roles. While there are areas of satisfaction, there are also areas for improvement, including training accessibility and fostering a stronger sense of community among staff members. The establishment of the MST and recommendations from the Speaker’s Conference to give greater responsibility for training to that team demonstrate efforts to address these concerns.

10 Reasons given for wanting to work for an MP and future career plans

Reasons for working for an MP

Why do people want to work for an MP in the first place? The survey found that staff choose their career path for different reasons. Staff were asked for the top three reasons they wanted to work for an MP. The most common were that they had a keen interest in politics (65%), because they liked the MP and what they stood for (47%), because they wanted to make a difference in their local community (32%), and that they wanted to make a difference to the country (23%). We often think that given many staff are young and have come straight from university they choose to work for an MP to gain experience. Almost none stated they wanted to work for an MP to gain office experience, however 11% said they felt it was a stepping stone to a career in politics and 15% that working for an MP would help them get a job elsewhere in the future. The full responses from all staff are shown in Figure 10-1.

Figure 10-1 Why staff wanted to work for an MP, 2019

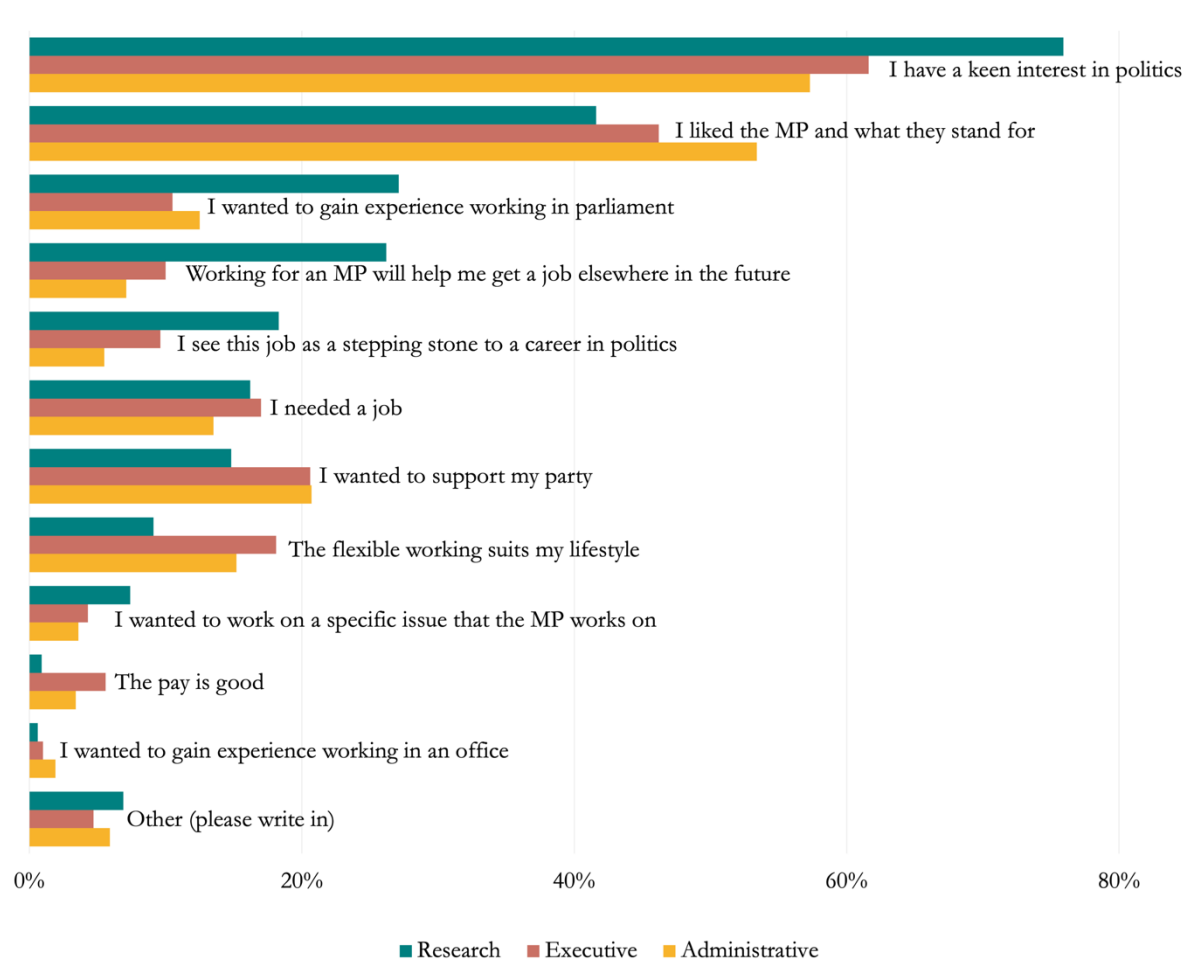


Source: MPs' staff survey 2019, Constitution Unit UCL.

Breaking these responses down by job family, Figure 10-2 reveals some strikingly different results. Three quarters of research staff stated that their interest in politics was why they wanted to work for an MP, reducing to 62% for executive staff and 57% for administrative staff. Research staff were also the most likely to choose responses relating to gaining experience for future work, 27% wanting to gain experience working in parliament, 26% saying they believed it would help them

get a job elsewhere in the future and 18% seeing the job as a stepping stone to a political career. Executive and administrative staff were not so swayed by the benefits of gaining experience for a future career. Some of the other key motivations for administrative staff were that they liked the MP and what they stood for (53%), that they wanted to support their party (21%) and that the flexible working suited their lifestyle (15%). Executive staff reported along similar lines, almost half also saying that they wanted to work for the MP because they liked them and what they stood for (46%), 20% saying they wanted to support their party and 18% stating that the flexible working was a motivation.

Figure 10-2 Why staff wanted to work for an MP by job family, 2019



Source: MPs' staff survey 2019, Constitution Unit UCL.

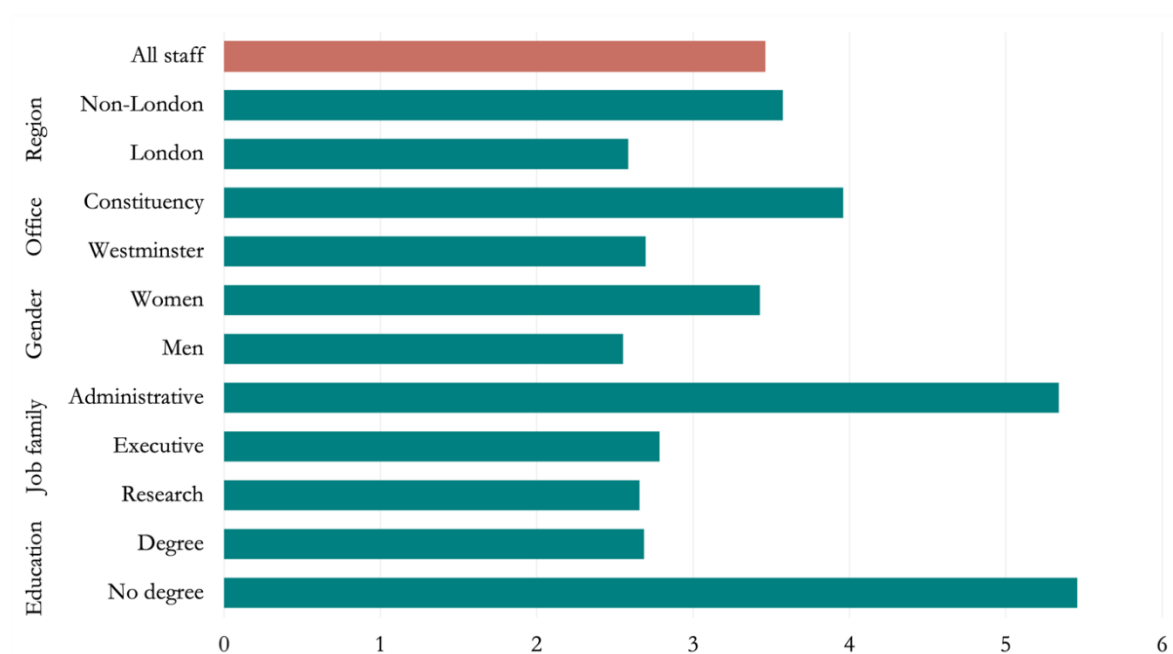
The differences in the motivations for wanting to work for an MP instinctively map on what we know about the demographics of these staff, the jobs they have and the office they are based in. Considering where they are based it's unsurprising that half of constituency office staff said a motivation was wanting to make a difference in their local community, and only 6% of Westminster-based staff said the same. Conversely 34% of Westminster staff said they wanted to make a difference to the country, compared with 16% of constituency staff – reflecting the slightly different focus of some of these roles. Westminster-based staff were twice as likely to say they saw their job as a stepping stone to a career in politics (16%) than constituency staff (8%).

Constituency-based staff whose roles are likely to have fewer unpredictable hours were more likely to say flexible working was a motivation. This also maps on to the demographics of these staff – family responsibilities are most often borne by women in the workplace, and most constituency staff are female while the majority of Westminster staff are male.

Length of time in post

The patterns and variation across the workforce as explored so far in this report are mirrored when we look at the length of time for which staff had been employed. From the survey we can say that the average length of time a staff member had been employed by their current MP was 3 years 6 months. Some staff had worked for multiple MPs, being employed in total on average 4 years and 10 months. While many were relatively new – almost a quarter had worked for their current MP for less than a year – there were also some very long-standing staff who had worked for MPs for many years. The length of time staff were employed varied depending on who they were, their job role and where they were based (Figure 10-3).

Figure 10-3 Total average number of years staff are employed by their MP, 2019

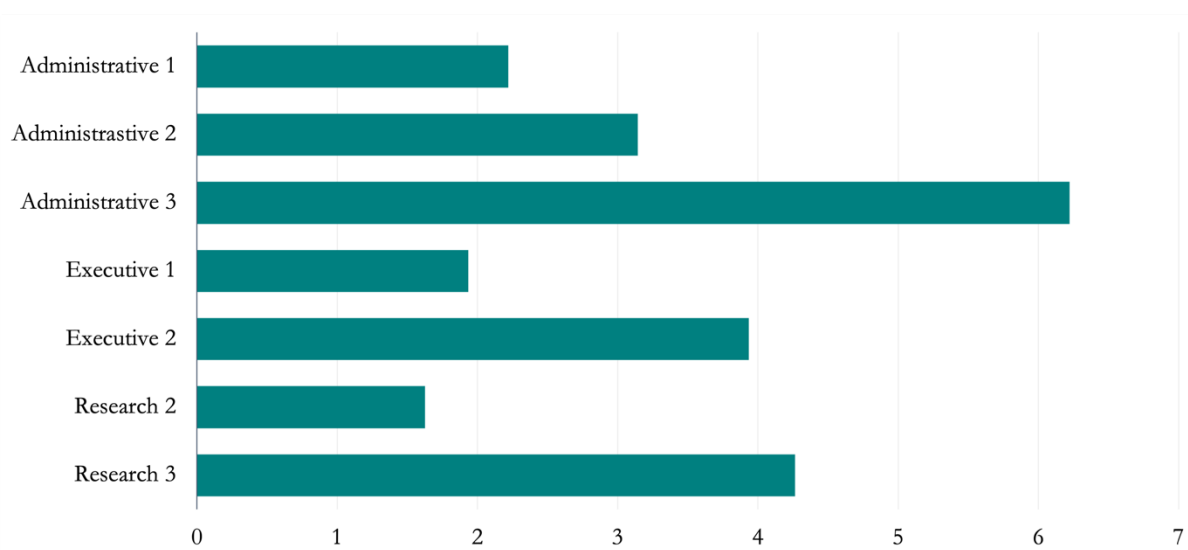


Source: MPs' staff survey 2019, Constitution Unit UCL.

Taking job type, the average length of employment for administrative staff (5 years 4 months) was almost double that of research staff (2 years 8 months) and executive staff (2 years 10 months). As expected, because women make up a larger proportion of those in administrative roles, the average length of employment for female staff was longer, at 3 years 5 months, than for male staff, 2 years 7 months. The average for staff who were primarily based in Westminster was less than that for their colleagues in the constituency, by 8 months. Those staff working for London MPs had been employed for around a year less than those working for non-London MPs. The largest difference was between staff who had a university degree and those who did not. Staff without a degree had worked for their MP for around 3 years longer than those with a degree.

A lot of this variation was explained by the link between these characteristics and job type (see chapter 7). Figure 10-4 shows that more senior staff across the three job families had worked for an MP longer than those in junior roles. For example, junior research staff had been employed, on average, for just 1 year 7 months. Their senior research colleagues had been employed for more than double this, on average 4 years 4 months. Although we do not have data on career paths for these staff, this suggests that many of those in more senior roles, particularly in the administrative job family, had worked their way up through the ranks to their current position.

Figure 10-4 Length of time employed by job role (years), 2019



Source: MPs' staff survey 2019, Constitution Unit UCL.

There is limited information on why staff leave their jobs. A recent written evidence submission by IPSA to the Speaker's Conference included data that it held. The latest data available, for the year 2022 revealed that 65% of staff departing had resigned, 26% had come to the end of their contract, 4% were made redundant and small number of others had been dismissed (10), retired (17) or died in service (4).

Although there is little detailed information on why staff resign from their jobs, IPSA has suggested that it could be a mixture of stress, poor treatment by MPs, limited options for pay progression or the natural migration of ambitious staff working in politics. Some staff in the survey cited the restricted staffing allowance as the problem, leading to a combination of low salaries and understaffing. One staff member said there was high turnover 'because MPs cannot offer a salary which is a fair reflection of the job being done'. It is likely that all of these factors, and more, play some role, but without systematic data tracking leavers we cannot know why staff leave at the rate that they do. We do however know that characteristics of staff, the MP, and the role are linked to how long staff stay in their role.

Among the many reasons people choose to stay or leave their employment, MPs' staff have the added dimension that they only have a job as long as the MP that they work for is in office.

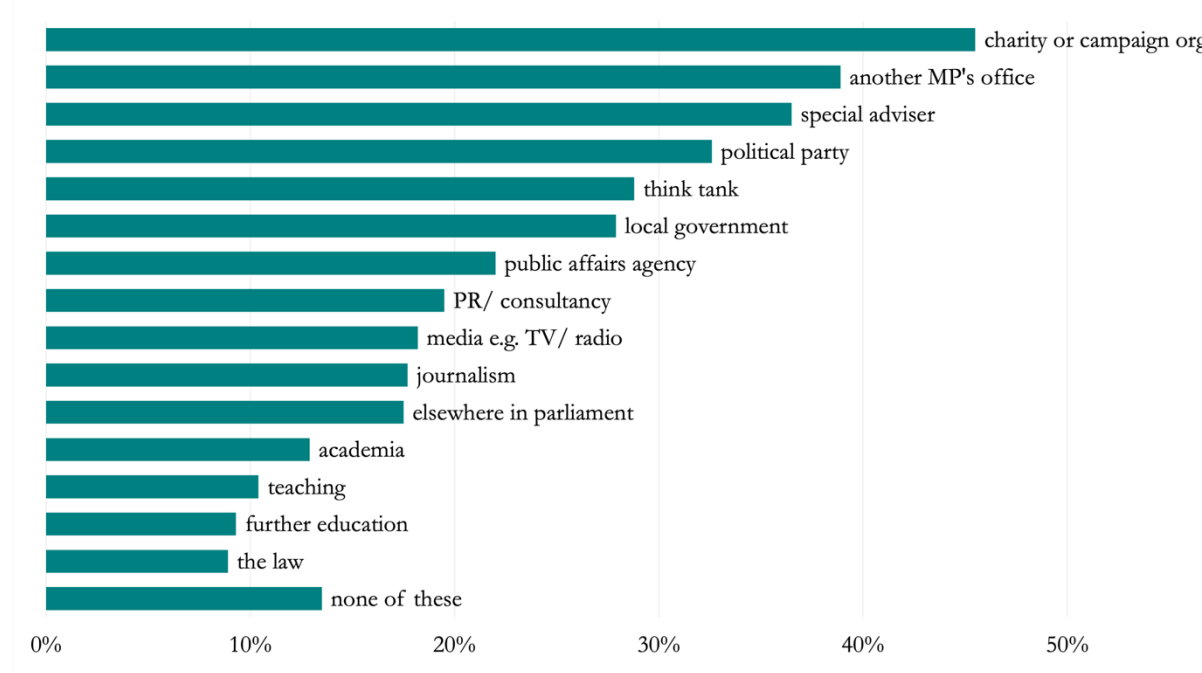
Traditionally general elections are held every 4–5 years, but more tumultuous recent politics means that MPs elected as recently as 2010 have already had to defend their seats three times. By the 2019 general election over 60 MPs (around 10%) had announced they would step down. Multiple elections, and a high number of MPs standing down, results in many staff losing their jobs.

Moving on, what next?

While some staff see the role of a parliamentary staffer as a stepping stone to a career in politics, many others do not. Depending on the role and type of experience, after working for an MP staff may find themselves eligible for a range of jobs. As Robert Dale, a former staffer, explains, ‘[parliamentary researcher] is a great job that sets them up for a long and successful career in politics, either in Parliament, public affairs, communications or policy work’ (Dale, 2015b). Without systematic data on where staff go on to work, which neither IPSA nor the House of Commons hold, we cannot know definitively what staff go on to do. However, the survey asked current staff where they thought they would like to work in the future.

Staff were asked to pick as many items as they wanted from a range of career options and offered a free text box for any other suggestions. Over 90% of respondents provided an indication of where they would like to go next (using one or both of these routes).

Figure 10-5 Future career ambitions, 2019



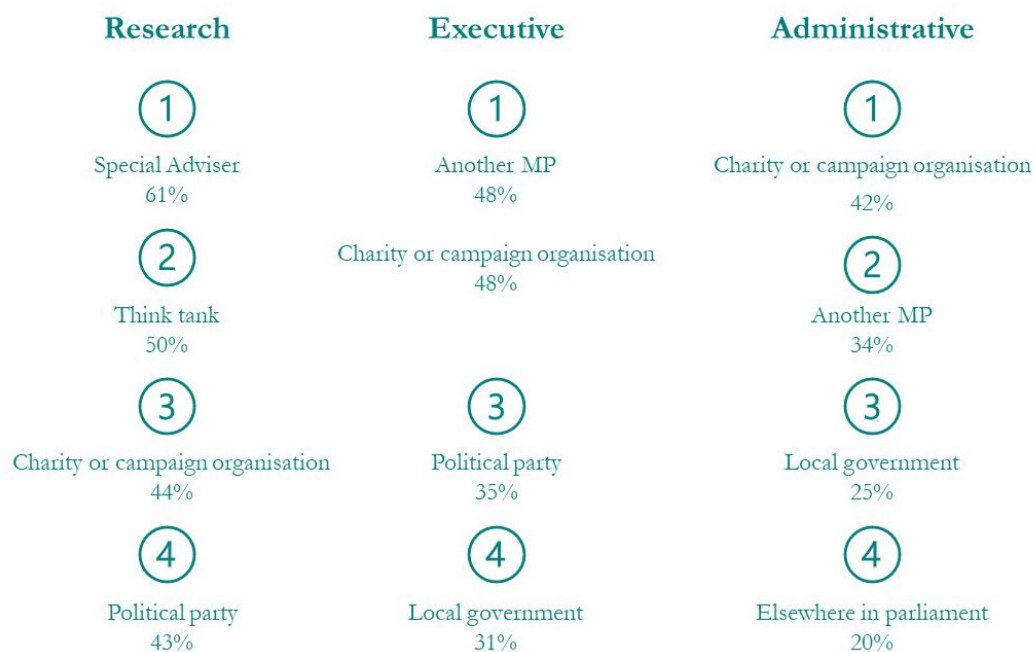
Source: MPs' staff survey 2019, Constitution Unit UCL.

Working for a charity or campaign organisation was the most popular option and was found across all job types. Over 40% of staff in each job family selected charity or campaign organisation as a possible next step, which partly reflects the broad range of roles available in the sector. The most popular options from the free text suggestions were the civil service, health and social care, being an MP, or simply retiring.

Male staff were far more likely to pick one of the options available: 20% of female staff said they did not want to work in any of the roles listed above, compared with only 5% of male staff. For options such as teaching, the law, working in a similar role for another MP, and working for a charity or campaign organisation, the responses by male and female staff were similar. But male staff, who were also more likely to be researchers, were more than twice as likely to say they would like to work for a political party, a think tank, public affairs agency, or as a special adviser, and three times more likely to say they would like to work in PR or consultancy – indicating that this is linked to job family as well as gender. These are all jobs that have the potential to be financially lucrative.

There were marked differences across the three job families (Figure 10-6). In general, there were more answers from research staff to these questions, suggesting either that they had a better idea of where they wanted to go next and were building it into a career plan, or that they were open to a wider range of possible careers.

Figure 10-6 Top future career ambitions, by job family, 2019

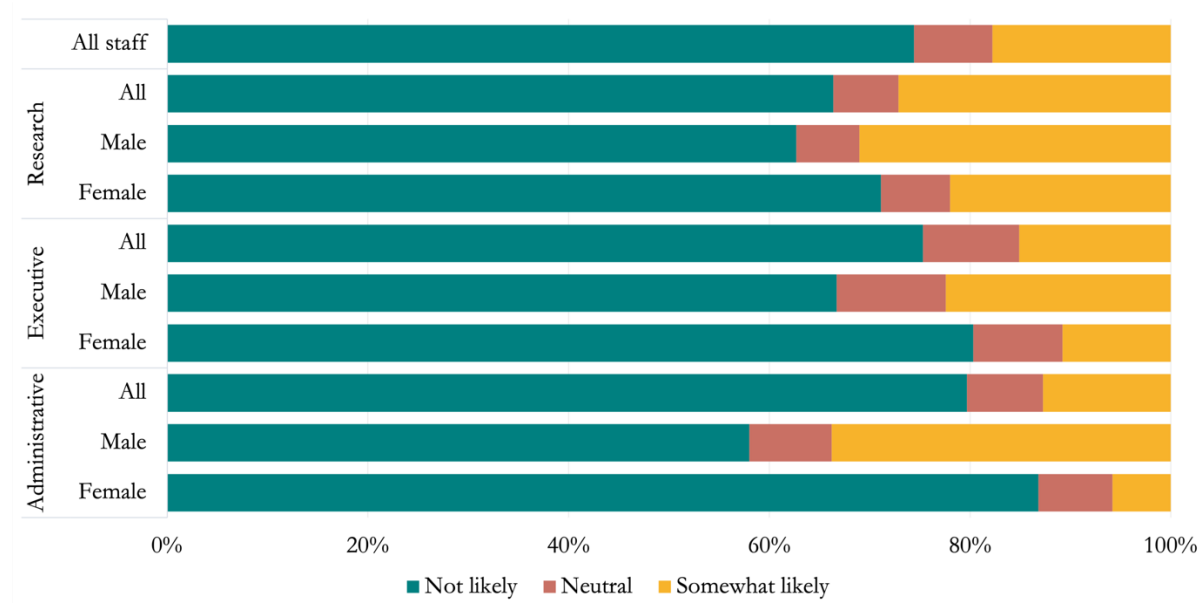


Source: MPs' staff survey 2019, Constitution Unit UCL. **Note:** respondents could pick multiple options.

In some ways these choices are not surprising given that they match quite well with the skills, knowledge, and experience staff will gain in their roles. Looking by office type, 44% of Westminster staff said they would like to work for a think tank and 26% for a PR or consultancy firm while only 19% and 15% of constituency staff said the same. Rather strikingly, 59% of Westminster staff said they would be interested in becoming a special adviser, compared with 21% of constituency staff. Both of these figures are high, but this suggests a huge, and much higher proportion of Westminster staff are interested in a political career.

Given that working for an MP gives staff first-hand experience that would be useful if they were interested in a political career later down the line, staff were separately asked about running to be an MP themselves. Although almost half (48%) of staff wrote off the idea entirely and said that they were not at all likely to run for parliament (0 on the 1–10 scale), almost one in five (18%) marked themselves as at least somewhat likely (6–10 on the scale). Those staff working in executive and administrative roles were least interested, at only 15% and 18%. But 27% of research staff said that they would be somewhat likely to run as a candidate for parliament in the foreseeable future. Almost a quarter (24%) of staff based in Westminster, of which research staff are the majority, said they were somewhat likely to run, while only 14% of constituency staff stated this. Figure 10-7 breaks this down by job family and gender.

Figure 10-7 Likelihood of running for parliament in the foreseeable future, 2019



Source: MPs' staffer survey 2019, Constitution Unit UCL. **Note:** 11-point scale: 0–4 = not likely, 5 = neutral, 6–10 = somewhat likely.

Conclusion

The data presented in this chapter highlight how staff working for MPs are not a homogeneous group. They vary in their experiences, motivations, and aspirations across different roles. The data also presents a continuation of the theme that Westminster and constituency staff are distinct. Westminster staff are much keener on a political career, more likely to see their role as a stepping stone to such a career and had been employed for the least amount of time. We do not have data on turnover rates by job type, or office, but that these staff have been in the role the least amount of time suggests at least that they were brought into replace someone and that turnover may be higher for staff in these roles.

The motivations given varied across the job families, highlighting the influence of demographics and role-related factors. Research staff, who are typically younger and male, were more likely than others to want to work for an MP because of their own interest in politics, and to view working for an MP as a way to gain experience working in parliament, and for their future career in politics

or elsewhere. On the other hand, administrative and executive staff, often based in the constituency and with stronger local ties, were more motivated by their affinity for the MP and alignment with party values. Flexible working arrangements also played a role in the motivation for executive staff. When considering future career aspirations, working for a charity or campaign organisation emerged as the most popular option across job families.

Overall, the motivations, aspirations, and career paths of staff working for MPs are multifaceted, influenced by individual interests, demographics, and job roles. This highlights the need for a flexible recruitment system that acknowledges the many and diverse reasons why people want to work for an MP and what MPs can, in turn, do to support the legitimate aspirations and expectations of their staff. However, it also draws attention to the issue that research staff and Westminster-based staff, in particular, may view these roles as ones in which to gain experience, rather than to bring experience. It is important for the recruitment process to place sufficient emphasis on assessing the experience and capabilities of new staff. Furthermore, understanding the underlying dynamics that drive different motivations and career plans is crucial for MPs to foster a supportive working environment that promotes staff retention and career development.

11 Conclusion

The responsibilities of MPs have evolved over time. As this report highlights, a key aspect of their role now is as a manager of staff – but the current arrangements within which they employ those staff leave much to be desired. These arrangements were not developed as part of a carefully thought-out exercise but, rather, evolved incrementally in response to MPs’ demands for increased support (see chapter 2). IPSA has been able to adopt a more strategic approach in recent years, especially in relation to allowances for staffing and the framework within which these are deployed. But the limited role and remit of IPSA (see chapter 3), which functions primarily as a regulator and views staffing from the perspective of value for money and propriety, constrains what the body can do and limits its ability to provide strategic oversight. Meanwhile, the House of Commons authorities, while providing some of the support that MPs need, is also not the employer of their staff and is restricted in how it can facilitate their work. Instead, MPs make individual decisions on recruitment of their staff and the direction of the work that they do.

One important problem is that, for a long time, the work undertaken by MPs’ staff, in Westminster and in their constituency offices, has gone largely unrecognised outside parliament. MPs’ staff have been termed the ‘unsung heroes’ of Westminster, with few outsiders understanding the importance of their roles in supporting parliament (Dale, 2015). Legislative scholars, among others, have failed to include the work of these staff in research on the activities of MPs. Yet MPs’ staff have an important role to play in the representation process and in supporting the work of parliament. They serve as gatekeepers, controlling access to their MPs by constituents and interest groups; as resources, providing policy advice, research, and legislative support; as channels of communication, engaging with constituents and linking the constituency to Westminster; and as providers of essential administrative support. Yet a lack of information, inconsistent data, and limited understanding of who they are, what they do, and how they support MPs, means that they have long been missing from much of the discussion of how parliament works. This report has sought to address that gap.

The report has combined original analysis of existing available data, held in different places, with entirely new evidence from an original survey of MPs’ staff. It has taken a distinctly different approach from previous reports on aspects of MPs’ staffing that have looked, for example, specifically at bullying and harassment (White, 2019), funding for MPs’ staff (IPSA, 2020), or the broader HR provisions and facilities provided by the House authorities (Speaker’s Conference, 2023). Instead, it was designed to help us understand who works for MPs and what they do in their roles – thereby narrowing the evidence gap, and informing and stimulating potential future debate and research on MPs and their staff.

Summary of survey findings

The findings of the report provide more information than was previously available about how MPs staff their offices (see chapter 6). The picture is mixed; overall almost half of MPs employed a range of staff from across all three job families (executive, administrative and research), but some placed a greater emphasis on constituency work while others concentrated on research supporting policy work at Westminster. Others chose to have a greater level of administrative support. In

practice, the survey found few clear boundaries between some of these roles. Although the job family structure is designed to offer some consistency, many staff across all three job families were engaged in a range of activities, with much crossover between them.

The report's findings also provide more information than was previously available about who works for MPs. Previously, much of this was inferred from anecdotal accounts by people who either worked in parliament or saw it from the outside, or simply through stereotypes characterising MPs' staff as younger versions of the MPs for whom they work. In fact, the data in this report show that there is significant variation among these staff, in terms of age, gender, education, and experience (chapter 7). Yet these characteristics map onto job roles and job settings, revealing two distinct staff groupings.

The first group comprises staff who are mostly based in Westminster and work in research or certain administrative roles. They are much younger than the average of all MPs' staff, and they are more likely to be male, even though overall there are more women than men working for MPs. They are also more likely to have had a privileged education, having attended an independent school and/or having a degree from a 'top' university. Working for an MP in Westminster offers distinct benefits to these staff, though not everyone benefits to the same extent. Such roles offer an insight into the political process, as Westminster staff are at the centre of power, observing and participating in the parliamentary process and the shaping of national policy. These jobs also provide access to extensive networks, including politicians, civil servants, journalists, lobbyists, and others in the public and private sector. And they offer particular opportunities for career advancement elsewhere – as experience working for an MP in Westminster can open doors to jobs in a range of sectors. Many employers may value the detailed understanding of how the political process works, and high degree of competence, resilience, and adaptability implied by having held such a role. Such roles also have the potential to lead their occupants to future political careers of their own.

The second group of MPs' staff primarily comprises those who are based in constituency offices or work from home (a model more common since the pandemic). The constituency office is where most MPs' executive staff and some administrative staff are based. These staff have a mixture of characteristics, but are distinct from Westminster staff (see chapter 7). They include more women and are, on average, older than Westminster staff. They are less likely to have a degree but have had a variety of other experiences that are often suited to the role, such as previously working in public services. The roles that these staff undertake tend to concentrate on serving constituents directly, so the experiences and the benefits they derive are different from those acquired in Westminster. Working in a constituency office can provide a deep understanding of the vast range of local issues and challenges that constituents face. These staff can specialise in one or more specific policy issues facing local people; for example, a constituency may have a particularly high number of cases relating to immigration or healthcare. The job can also offer experience in community outreach, organising events, or public relations; some of the executive roles are also communications-focused. Finally, these roles offer opportunities to build strong relationships with community leaders and local organisations, as well as an insight into local government – constituency staff will regularly engage with local councils, agencies, and other bodies. Such staff were more likely than those at Westminster to say that they wanted to make a difference in their local area, and they were more likely to be local councillors (see chapter 10).

The analysis in chapter 7 reveals an apparent problem that, as judged by degree subjects, MPs' staff have a very narrow field of knowledge; as many as 90% of staff with an undergraduate degree studied humanities or social sciences. Very few of those working for MPs have a graduate qualification in STEM subjects. This is despite the fact that MPs are grappling with problems that need these insights, such as transport infrastructure, the future of artificial intelligence or how technology can be used to tackle climate change. While MPs will receive specialist support if they work on a committee or have a government or shadow brief, and there is some support available through the parliamentary services, many MPs also rely on their own staff for support on these topics. STEM graduates not only have an alternative knowledge base, but distinct analytical frameworks and ways of approaching research, which are largely absent among this group of staff.

Findings presented in chapter 10 further highlight that MPs' staff are not a homogenous workforce. They come to the job, and will leave the job, for different reasons, with different motivations and aspirations in those occupying different roles. Research staff had occupied their role for the least amount of time, and were more likely to report that they were motivated to work for an MP to improve their future work prospects. Executive and administrative staff were more likely to cite other motivations, including having flexible working arrangements, supporting their party and liking the MP that employed them and what they stood for. There were also marked differences across the job families in the top choices for a future career, although relatively few staff said that they would be likely to run as an MP themselves one day. Such ambitions were commonest among male staff and those working in research.

Chapter 8 offered a partial explanation of some of the other findings, exploring the recruitment process and internships – the pathway into employment with an MP. Professionalised recruitment processes exist, and good practice guidance has been developed by the Members' Services Team in the House of Commons; but in practice, many aspects of the process are lax. The lack of a centralised recruitment process poses challenges to monitoring hiring practices. Most staff who responded to the survey originally heard about their job through a personal connection, either with the MP, another MP, or another staff member. In addition, prior experience of parliament and working for an MP is highly valued in the recruitment process. It is fairly common for online job adverts to ask explicitly for this, especially for researcher roles, even when no other relevant skills or experience are listed. But getting this experience in parliament is not easy. Internships, therefore, offer a clear pathway, particularly for research staff. Informal internships, which do not have the explicit aim of broadening representation, are part of this process, particularly for these staff in Westminster. Such placements offer opportunities to get a foot in the door, and the evidence from the survey shows that MPs value this, as a high proportion of staff said that they had internship experience. But the importance ascribed to prior experience means that any existing imbalances are liable to be compounded during recruitment.

Many of the factors explored in this report – the employment model and the flexibility that MPs have in recruitment and management of staff – have an impact on the services offered to support these staff in their role and the working experiences that they have. Both are explored in chapter 9. Overall, the survey reveals a mixed experience by MPs' staff, encompassing both positive and negative aspects of their roles. Staff said that working for an MP was “challenging”, “stressful”, and “demanding”, as well as “interesting”, “rewarding” and “varied”. While the findings offer some reassurance, there are also areas needing improvement, including access to training and fostering a stronger sense of community among staff. The facilities that are on offer to staff,

provided by the House Administration, may be part of the solution – as addressed recently by the report of the Speaker’s Conference (2023).

Reflections

This report has made two significant contributions to the field of study of MPs’ staff. First it has brought together existing evidence on the subject of MPs’ staffing support. The first half of the report covered the history of MPs’ staffing, the framework within which MPs can claim funding for staff, how members’ staffing works in other legislatures, and the limited existing information available on matters such as the gender breakdown and turnover rates of current MPs’ staff. These chapters set the later survey findings in a wider context.

Second the report has presented brand new data from the 2019 survey of MPs’ staff. This has, for the first time, provided a detailed account of these staff: who they are, what they do, and how MPs are supported by them.

The report provides some important insights into MPs’ staffing that were not widely known previously. Some are intuitive. A person’s aspirations from a job will guide the role that they apply for. That Westminster-based staff are more likely to want a job in politics is not surprising; nor is the fact that these roles can be a stepping stone to a political career. What is more puzzling is the demographic skew among the holders of these roles (both in absolute terms, and compared to those working in the constituencies). Young male candidates may be more inclined towards a Westminster-based role, but these characteristics do not, on the face of it, make them better suited to one. That particularly large differences are seen among junior staff in entry-level research roles raises both questions and potential concerns.

Parliament should be a model workplace; it is where legislation on equality, diversity, and inclusion is made. MPs should be, and would benefit from being, supported by a range of people with different experiences and views. Yet both financial incentives – a capped funding allowance and reporting of expenses in a way that combines staff salaries and training with MPs’ other expenses – and resource incentives – a high workload that requires MPs’ staff to hit the ground running – risk leaving many MPs without adequate support for the work that they do. This is exacerbated by the current processes for recruitment. The current arrangements serve neither MPs nor their staff well, and they undermine parliament’s ability to serve as a model workplace. It is healthy for an organisation, in terms of effectiveness and workplace culture, to have staff who stay for a long time, build up knowledge, and who can provide inspiration, guidance, and leadership to more junior staff. But the current structures also don’t facilitate this; there are very few opportunities for career progression in these roles, with many low-paid jobs and a markedly high turnover.

This report provides unique evidence, which it is hoped can support MPs, IPSA, and the House Authorities as they decide how to address problems with the system. Any decision on reforming MPs’ staffing should be informed by data on who these staff are and what they do for MPs and for parliament more widely. The Speaker’s Conference has addressed some of these problems in its own report (Speaker’s Conference, 2023). For example, it makes recommendations on better training, a greater role for the Members’ Services Team in supporting staff, plus its renaming as the Members’ and Members’ Staff Services Team, and an improved user experience from IPSA.

But as this report has shown, there are various important wider issues that also need to be addressed.

It is hoped that this report will provide useful information for new MPs and for the new parliament when it arrives. As a general election is on the horizon, new MPs will have to navigate the system, with the blurred roles and varied options for staffing. Many long-standing MPs have stood down over recent years, and yet more have said they will do so at the next election. For many of us, Covid-19 and the resulting unusual working conditions offered an opportunity to take a step back, assess and reset the way we work. The new generation of MPs will need the right amount and type of support to ensure they have the capacity to fulfil their demanding roles. The new evidence in this report, coupled with the momentum from the Speaker's Conference and the timing before a general election, offer an opportune moment to reflect and reset. To ensure that MPs', their staff, and parliament as a whole, have the support that they deserve and need.

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Appendix A: Survey methodology

The survey of MPs' staff was fielded in the autumn of 2019 (August – November). The survey questions were designed to get at the overarching research questions set out in the introduction of this report. The questions were divided into the following sections: demographics, education, past experience, recruitment, current role, and future plans.

The survey was sent to the offices of all serving MPs. Unlike in some other countries (notably the United States) the names and other details of representatives' staff are not publicly available as a matter of course in the UK.³⁸ To access these staff, the survey was sent to the public email address of the MP's office with a request for the survey to be passed on to all members of office staff. If no survey response was received from an MP's office this was followed up with a reminder email and a telephone call. A selection of offices that had not replied were sent paper copies of the survey in the post to the Westminster and constituency offices; 233 offices were sent paper copies. In addition, some staff directly requested paper copies to be sent to them. Organisations within parliament, such as the Members and Peers' Staff Association (MAPSA), the parliamentary branch of the trade union Unite, and the Parliamentary Workplace Equality Networks, were contacted and asked to forward the survey to their networks.

Responses to the survey

The author is very grateful for the responses received, and that staff took the time to engage with this project. In total there were 520 responses (some of which were only partial as respondents did not have to answer every question). Of these, 472 responses were completed online and 48 on paper. Based on the information from an IPSA FoI disclosure around the same time the survey was fielded there were approximately 3,133 staff working for an MP.³⁹ The 520 responses implies a response rate of approximately 16.6%.

This compares well with other surveys of MPs' staff:

- IPSA's 2019 annual user survey had a response rate of 6% (243 responses, 56 of which were from MPs, 121 from MPs' proxies and 66 from other staff).
- An IPSA survey conducted as part of the review into staffing budgets in 2019 had a response rate of 5%.
- A ComRes survey of Westminster staff used in a Sutton Trust report on internships in the UK parliament in 2018 had a response rate of 8% (Montacute and Cullinane, 2018).
- An example from abroad is a 2018 survey of Canadian constituency staff which had a response rate of 18% (Cloutier, 2019).

³⁸ The House of Representatives telephone directory lists staff, the Congress person they work for and their job title as well as contact details. <https://directory.house.gov/#/>

³⁹ FoI CAS-134433. Total number of staff employed 2018–19 minus total number of new staff for the same period.

Responses to the survey are treated anonymously. Throughout this report the data are presented in a way as to not identify any individual.

Representativeness

The survey reports findings from a subset of MPs' staff and is not necessarily representative of the entire population of these staff. However, a lot of work was put in to try to ensure that the response were as representative as possible. There were no responses the offices of independent MPs or Sinn Féin MPs. Over 50% of the offices of Labour, Scottish National Party and Liberal Democrat MPs were represented. There were fewer responses from offices of Conservative MPs (37%) and other smaller parties (40%). Overall responses were received from half of all MPs' offices.

Table 12-1 Survey response rate of staff by political party of the MP

	Responses by individuals†	Responses by MP's office	Population of MPs*	Response rate (by total offices)
Conservatives	168	116	317	37%
Labour	267	167	262	64%
SNP	59	30	35	86%
Liberal Democrats	12	8	12	67%
Other	8	6	15	40%
Total	514	327	641	50%

† Not all respondents completed 100% of the survey

* There were a lot of party defections during the period leading up to the 2019 general election. For the purposes of this research, MPs are classified by the party they were originally elected to represent.

From IPSA data we know the number of staff employed by MPs according to their job role, so we can use this data to compare with responses to the survey (Table 12-2). This shows that the proportion of survey responses closely mirrored the proportion of staff employed across the job families; the responses represent a range of staff in different roles.

Table 12-2 Job titles of survey respondents

Job family	N	%	% known to be employed (IPSA)
Administrative	146	29.3	27.6
Executive	198	39.8	39.1
Research	144	28.9	33.3
Paid intern / apprentice	10	2	
Total	498	100	

Source: % employed is the percentage of staff employed in the three job categories taken from an FoI disclosure reference CAS 99866. **Note:** not all respondents to the survey gave their job title.

We can also compare the respondents with existing data on characteristics including gender of MPs' staff and the MP's party. This exercise shows that survey respondents were representative in terms of gender and job family, but less so in terms of political party of the MP that they worked for. To account for the underrepresentation of responses from Conservative offices the data is target weighted by a single variable, the political party of the MP. The weight has a small impact and makes little difference to gender and job family but it does correct for the difference by political party and so is applied to the survey data used in the analysis in this report. Table 12-3 shows the comparison of the raw survey data, the weighted survey data and the IPSA data.

Table 12-3 Raw survey data and weighted data comparison

		Survey				Population data	
		Raw survey data		Survey data with weight variable		IPSA FoI March 2019 excluding interns	
		n	%	n	%	n	%
MP's party	Conservative	168	33%	1,393	43.9%	1,393	44%
	Labour	267	52%	1,383	43.6%	1,384	44%
	SNP	59	11%	183	5.8%	183	6%
	Other	20	4%	215	7%	215	7%
	Total	514	100%	3175	100%	3175	100%
Gender	Male	208	40.9%	1,286	40.9%	1,360	43%
	Female	301	59.1%	1,858	59%	1,815	57%
	Total	509	100%	3,144	100%	3,175	100%
Job family	Administrative 1	21	4.4%	123	4.1%	289	9%
	Administrative 2	15	3.1%	99	3.3%	149	5%
	Administrative 3	108	22.4%	682	22.9%	552	17%
	Executive 1	112	23.2%	665	22.3%	772	24%
	Executive 2	85	17.6%	487	16.3%	427	13%
	Research 2	88	18.3%	558	18.7%	616	19%
	Research 3	53	11%	366	12.3%	370	12%
	Total	482	100	2980	100%	3,175	100%

Appendix B: FoI disclosures

Data from several FoI disclosures supported the analysis in this report. Several of these were requested in the course of this research; these are marked with an asterisk.

IPSA September 2022: RFI-202204-06*

The number of MPs' staff on payroll at the end of each financial year for the years 2010–11 through to 2021–22.

IPSA September 2022: RFI-202204-07*

Total number of staff employed by MPs, number of new staff working for MPs, number of members of staff leaving the employment of MPs and median length of time members of staff were employed by an MP for the seven years 2010–11, 2011–12, 2012–13, 2013–14 and 2019–20, 2020–21, 2021–22 (excluding interns).

IPSA May 2020: RFI202005 2*

All staff on the IPSA payroll in September 2019 including 3,434 staff. Variables: staff member gender, MP's gender, MP's party, job family.

IPSA May 2018: CAS-111885

MPs currently sitting in the House of Commons and staff they have employed at any time. Due to FoI restrictions the data includes 631 MPs, 5,639 staff members, 2,698 current staff. Variables include date of arrival, date of departure, length of employment, job title of each member of staff. Data were presented per MP but with no identifying information about the MP (MP1, MP2, MP3 etc.).

IPSA January 2018: CAS-99866

All staff employed by an MP at the time, including permanent, temporary, fixed-term and casual contracts. Staff employed by the Speaker or independent, Green Party, or Plaid Cymru MPs were not included in the disclosure. Variables include hours worked per week, job title, length of employment, location (London Area or non-London Area) of the MP, gender, salary, party of the MP.

Northern Ireland Assembly December 2021: FOI 51-21*

Gender breakdown of staff employed by MLAs by pay grade.

Senedd Cymru 17 February 2021*

The number of staff employed by each member of the Senedd.

A good deal is known about the 650 MPs who sit in the House of Commons, and they are frequently the focus of research. Far less is known about the over 3,500 people who work for them across their Westminster and constituency offices. Yet these people play a key role in our political system: serving as gatekeepers for MPs; providing them policy advice, research, and legislative support; engaging with constituents; and providing essential administrative assistance.

This new Unit report by Dr Rebecca McKee combines original analysis of existing available data with entirely new evidence from an original survey of MPs' staff, alongside an exploration of the history of MPs' staffing support and alternative models of staffing arrangements in other legislatures. This research provides new insights into who works for MPs, their roles and day-to-day activities, as well as their motivations, aspirations and experience in and of their jobs. It offers various reflections on areas for improvement in Westminster's staffing arrangements.

About the Constitution Unit

The Constitution Unit is a research centre based in the UCL Department of Political Science. We conduct timely, rigorous, independent research into constitutional change and the reform of political institutions. Since our foundation in 1995, the Unit's research has had significant real-world impact, informing policy-makers engaged in such changes – both in the United Kingdom and around the world.

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