Coronavirus (COVID-19) Pandemic: Guidance for MPs and staff

This is an uncertain and challenging time for the country. IPSA is committed to supporting MPs and their staff to carry on with their work as far as possible and in accordance with government guidance. This guidance sets out the immediate measures we have put in place in response to the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. The situation is changing on a daily basis, and we will review our approach on a regular basis to support you.

We will do all we can to enable MPs and their staff to continue their work by making it as straightforward as possible to deal with IPSA and receive funding for parliamentary work; and to ensure IPSA, MPs and their staff can respond to new situations that occur as a result of the coronavirus pandemic. We will continue to deliver core functions, including paying MPs’ and staff members’ salaries and business costs, paying direct suppliers, making payroll changes and registering new office and accommodation properties.

To achieve these aims, we have:

- Provided an additional £10,000 to each MP’s office costs budget to support the setting up of working from home arrangements. This will take immediate effect and this additional amount will be available until the end of the 2020-21 financial year.
- Ensured all payment cards are switched on and increased the monthly credit limit to £10,000 to help with cash flow. The single transaction limit has been increased to £5,000. Until further notice, we will not switch off payment cards as a result of late reconciliations. However, please do keep to the usual deadlines if you can, and unless you are experiencing disruption to your office as a result of the coronavirus.
- For costs incurred since the start of January 2020, suspended the 90-day rule for claims. This means that you can still claim for these costs, even if you are unable to meet the normal 90-day deadline. If you do not have access to a receipt or invoice as a direct result of the coronavirus, and cannot wait for reimbursement, we will pay a claim without evidence and ask you to send in the evidence as soon as you can.
- Provided additional funding from the staff absence budget, in case staff members are unwell or otherwise unable to work.
- Provided guidance below on the changes and the existing flexibilities within the Scheme that will allow you to respond to the pandemic.

IPSA is here to help. If you have questions about this guidance or how it affects you, please contact us at info@theipsa.org.uk or payroll@theipsa.org.uk (for payroll-related queries).

Demand for help and information is understandably high, so please understand that there may be some delays, although we are taking steps to ensure that we answer emails as quickly as possible and that we prioritise urgent requests. Like many organisations, we have staff who are unwell and we have technical and operational requirements as a result of our move to homeworking that limit our ability to provide a fully accessible service in the short term. We will update you regularly with any new information, so please read this first and before contacting us. We appreciate your patience and understanding.
Home working

▪ What happens if MPs and all staff need to work from home?

IPSA will provide financial support to enable MPs and their staff to work from home. Costs related to home working are already claimable from the office costs budget, but you may need to purchase additional equipment, such as laptops and printers, for staff who normally work from an office.

To support this, IPSA will be adding £10,000 to each MP’s office costs budget to cover additional equipment and other costs related to setting up home working. This will be available immediately and until the end of the 2020-21 financial year. This amount can be accessed by claiming from the office costs budget as normal; please enter ‘coronavirus’ in the free text field of the claim (this will help IPSA to monitor these costs, to ensure we are providing appropriate support). You can start purchasing what you need now and we will roll over any unspent amount to the next financial year.

Remember that you can also claim other costs which are additional to those that are part of the normal cost of living in the home – for example, additional electricity or heating costs or phone bills.

All claims will be published in the normal way.

▪ Do I need to register my home as a home office on IPSA Online in order to claim for costs?

We are working on a solution to automatically register all MPs home addresses on the system so that they can make claims against that address. We will issue further guidance.

Staff sickness

▪ What happens if staff members are unwell or unable to work for other reasons?

Staff members who are ill and unable to work should take sick leave using normal procedures. If staff members are not unwell, but are unable to work for other reasons (such as caring for dependants), the MP as employer can decide to grant other leave to cover the period. This could be a combination of dependant leave, special leave (paid or unpaid) and annual leave. The Members’ HR team at the House of Commons can provide advice to MPs.
Can I use the staff absence budget to pay for cover for staff who are unable to work?

If staff are absent for more than two weeks, their salaries will be paid from the staff absence budget, in order to allow the normal staffing budget to be used to pay for staff cover. If a medical note is available, please submit this to the payroll team as normal, and we will move the staff member’s salary costs into the staff absence budget. If a medical note is not available, or if staff are unable to work for other reasons (such as caring for dependants), we will accept an email from the MP confirming the period of absence in order to move costs into the staff absence budget. Please contact us at payroll@theipsa.org.uk.

What if MP or staff sickness means that we can’t submit claims?

We are reviewing how to support MPs and proxies who are unable to make and authorise claims in the usual way because of coronavirus. In urgent cases we will make CHAPS payments with reduced requirements for supporting evidence.

What if we need cover while the MP is unwell?

If the MP is unwell or unable to work for other reasons for an extended period, and additional staffing resource is needed as a result, we can approve additional funding through the contingency process. Please contact us at contingencypayments@theipsa.org.uk.

Year-end process

What if I am unable to submit my year-end paperwork by the deadline of 26 April?

Given the exceptional circumstances, we are extending the deadline for submission of year-end paperwork until 30 June. For more information on the year-end process and what you need to do, please consult the year-end guidance.

Contingency funding

What if I incur other unexpected costs as a result of the pandemic?

Many of the costs you will encounter are claimable through normal processes. If you are unsure, please consult the Scheme of MPs' Business Costs and Expenses and other guidance. We can consider other unforeseen or exceptional costs not included in the Scheme or in this guidance through the contingency process, and we will streamline the process for coronavirus related applications. You should complete a contingency application form on IPSA Online (under ‘Forms’); these will need to be approved by the MP before they are submitted. Please contact us at contingencypayments@theipsa.org.uk with any queries about this process.

We have provided immediate additional funding for any immediate changes you need to make. If you think you are likely to exceed any of your allocated budgets, please contact us as early as possible. We know that the disruption caused by the pandemic is an unforeseen and exceptional circumstance and understand that this may impact on your ability to budget effectively.
Making claims

▪ How should we make claims for additional costs that arise as a result of the pandemic?

Claims should be made as normal using IPSA Online. We have relaxed some of the normal requirements in the Scheme relating to provision of evidence and the 90-day period (see below). For costs that have arisen specifically as a result of the coronavirus pandemic, please enter ‘coronavirus’ in the free text field. This will help IPSA to monitor these costs, to ensure we are providing appropriate support.

If you are unable to access IPSA Online, please contact us at info@theipsa.org.uk, putting ‘ACCESS TO SYSTEM’ in the subject line.

▪ We cannot make claims within the normal 90-day period, due to staff sickness or other challenges. What should we do?

Unexpected circumstances as a result of the coronavirus could mean that you are unable to make claims within the normal 90-day period. We are therefore suspending the 90-day limit for costs that have been incurred since the start of January 2020. This means that claims submitted for costs incurred since 1 January will not be returned on the basis that they are outside of the 90-day period.

You should still make all reasonable efforts to make claims promptly, to ensure that you or your colleagues are not left out of pocket.

▪ What if I have already paid for something but don’t have access to the receipt or invoice?

We understand that there may be circumstances as a result of the coronavirus that make it difficult to access the documents needed to make claims; this is why we are suspending the 90-day period for making claims, to allow for the delay in claiming you may face (see above). If you do not have a receipt or invoice due to the coronavirus and you cannot wait for reimbursement, you may submit your claim. Please include an explanation of why the evidence is unavailable, and we will pay the claim, asking you to submit the evidence later.

▪ What if I don’t have access to a scanner in order to upload evidence into the online system?

Remember that you can use your mobile phone to take a photo of a receipt or invoice. Please refer to the guidance on attaching evidence.

Payment cards

▪ Can I continue to use the IPSA payment card?

We have ensured that all payment cards are now switched on to help with cashflow during the period. In addition, we have increased the monthly credit limit on all cards to £10,000 and the single transaction limit to £5,000, to enable bulk purchases of equipment where necessary.
Please remember that payment cards must not be used for any non-parliamentary or personal costs.

- I am not able to reconcile the payment card due to unforeseen circumstances. What should I do?

You should make reasonable efforts to reconcile the payment card as normal, by the 8th of the month. However, we understand that this may be difficult in some cases, for example due to staff sickness. If you haven’t reconciled by the deadline, we will contact you. For the time being we will not suspend any payment cards as a result of failure to reconcile on time.

Payroll

- Will I continue to be paid my salary?

IPSA’s payroll function remains operational. All MPs and staff members will continue to be paid their salaries during this period. Remember that you can access your payslip on IPSA Online.

- Can new staff be added to the payroll?

IPSA is able to add new staff to the payroll. We will do our best to process new starters as quickly as possible; however, please be aware that due to the IPSA office closure, there may be some delays.

Please note, due to the office closure we are unable to process paper forms which are sent in by post. Where possible, you should fill in the new starter documentation and send a scanned (or photographed) copy to payroll@theipsa.org.uk. If this is not possible, we will accept an email from the MP or payroll proxy containing the following information:

- MP name
- Personal details of the new staff member: Name, home address, date of birth
- Staff member’s NI number
- Staff member’s parliamentary email address
- Job title and location (i.e. based in London or the constituency)
- Job details: Start date, salary, hours including work schedule, annual leave entitlement, employment notice period
- Employment type: permanent or fixed term (if fixed term, the end date)
- HMRC starter checklist for tax code details or P45 attached
- Bank account details for salary payments
- If the new staff member is to be set up as a proxy, then what type

Leases

- I need to register a new office or accommodation. What if I don’t have access to the final lease document?

We are continuing to process and are prioritising new property registrations and amendments to existing leases. Please use the Property Registration Form or Property Amendment Form on IPSA Online as normal.
As always, obtaining signed documentation from a supplier is important, but we understand you may find it more difficult during this period. If you have difficulty obtaining the final signed lease document for a new property you wish to register, we may, on a case-by-case basis, accept a draft (unsigned) lease. If you do not have access to a scanner, we can process a photo version of your lease or draft lease.

Draft/unsigned leases should be accompanied by an email trail showing:
- the agreement of the landlord to the terms of the lease, with their email address shown in the email trail
- the agreement of the MP to the terms of the lease, with their email address shown in the email trail.

Please ensure you send us the signed lease as soon as possible.

When agreeing a new lease, remember that it is important to negotiate a break clause with a two-month notice period, in case of a change in circumstances.

Please contact us at info@the ipsa.org.uk with any queries and put ‘LEASE’ (and if necessary, ‘URGENT’) in the subject line.

**Travel**

- **Can I take taxis to reduce the risk of infection?**

Guidance from the government is to stop all non-essential travel. However, if you do need to travel, you can claim for taxis for parliamentary journeys. You should make claims as normal through IPSA Online and select ‘Alternatives impractical’ as the reason on the claim form. Remember to keep all receipts so that they can be attached to the claims.

**MP Accommodation**

- **Will IPSA continue to pay rent on my accommodation even if I am not using it for a period of time?**

IPSA will continue to make rental payments and reimburse claims for associated costs for MPs’ registered accommodation throughout this period. If you encounter any exceptional circumstances where additional support may be needed, please contact us at info@theipsa.org.uk.