

# **IPSA Claims Publication: The Impact**

A survey and analysis of local newspaper coverage of MPs,  
following the publication of expenses claims by IPSA

28 February 2011

Version: Final1

Published by the Office of Adam Afriyie MP

# **A survey and analysis of local newspaper coverage of MPs, following the publication of expenses claims by IPSA**

## **Introduction**

This analysis assesses local newspaper coverage of the latest bi-monthly cycle of MPs' expenses claims published by the IPSA on 3<sup>rd</sup> February 2011.

The analysis has been prepared using information gathered from:

- a. Factiva and Google News searches of regional and local newspapers for "IPSA" during the 20-day period from Thursday 3<sup>rd</sup> February to Tuesday 22<sup>nd</sup> February 2011.
- b. Responses received to an email sent by Adam Afriyie to all MPs requesting expenses coverage in regional and local newspapers.

The findings are based on a selection of 60 local and regional newspaper stories (representing approximately 5% of local and regional newspapers in the UK). The analysis does not assess coverage in national print and broadcast media, regional broadcast media, blogs, and national newspaper commentary pieces.

The analysis is by no means exhaustive and is not intended to be a scientific research study; it is intended to offer a snapshot of local media coverage of MPs' expenses claims, and goes on to make some suggestions on the way forward.

## A summary of key findings and conclusions

1. **The IPSA is bringing Parliament into disrepute by portraying honest claims as illegitimate**, and generating misleading media coverage about MPs nationwide.
2. 63% of stories made unfair and misleading comparisons between MPs and their claims.
3. 97% of local newspaper stories were negative towards MPs.
4. Negative coverage was seen by 28 million readers of local newspapers.
5. MPs and their staff are forced to spend 498 days a year rebutting misleading and inaccurate stories generated by the IPSA, at an additional cost of about £150,000 to the taxpayer (£340,000 including overheads).
6. Time spent by MPs clarifying their claims with local newspapers is time that could be spent doing the jobs for which they were elected: representing their constituents, legislating, and holding the government to account.
7. It is clear that the IPSA system of bi-monthly claims publication has resulted in an entire new intake of MPs, who had nothing at all to do with the old, discredited system, having their reputations unjustly dragged through the mud.
8. It is difficult to envisage how the IPSA's bi-monthly approach to publication of claims could in any way be expected to improve the public perception of MPs.
9. Given that the reputation of Parliament is directly linked to the integrity of the MPs' expenses system, the findings of this analysis suggest that IPSA should carry out some rigorous research into its findings and conclusions if it is to address the negative perception of MPs and Parliament with the public.

## Conclusions

The following conclusions can be drawn from local newspaper coverage of the latest bi-monthly round of published MPs' expenses claims:

### Conclusion 1

#### **The IPSA system of bi-monthly claims publication generates negative newspaper coverage of MPs.**

##### **a. A majority of coverage paints a negative picture of MPs.**

1. 88% of headlines were considered negative towards MPs.
  - i. 62% 'negative' towards MPs.
  - ii. 26% 'mildly negative' towards MPs.<sup>1</sup>
2. Only 12% of headlines can be considered 'positive'.
3. 97% of the content of stories were considered negative towards MPs
  - i. 70% 'negative' towards MPs.
  - ii. 27% 'mildly negative' towards MPs.
4. Only 3% of the content of stories considered 'positive'.

##### **b. The negative coverage of MPs is reaching a large number of readers.**

1. There are approximately 1,200 regional and local newspapers in Britain, with a readership of about 38,000,000 each week.<sup>2</sup>
2. As a crude estimation this would indicate an average readership of about 32,000 per newspaper, without making allowances for significant levels of cross-over in readers.
3. From a random selection of 30 local newspapers during the research window, 22 covered the latest cycle of published claims and 8 did not. All 22 stories can be considered 'negative' or 'mildly negative' towards MPs.<sup>3</sup>
4. Nationally this would equate to 880 regional and local newspapers (i.e. 73%) offering negative coverage of the latest cycle of published MPs' claims.
5. This would indicate that, at each bi-monthly publication date, about 28 million readers are seeing negative coverage of MPs in their regional and local newspapers.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Broadly speaking, 'negative' stories are those which directly criticise MPs or make unfavourable comparisons between MPs; 'mildly negative' stories are those which report fact, such as how much a particular MP claimed, without offering opinion; 'positive' stories are those which praise either IPSA or MPs. The judgements were made subjectively by Parliamentary researchers. The stories are in an appendix so that readers can judge for themselves.

<sup>2</sup> These figures are sourced from the Newspaper Society; <http://www.newspapersoc.org.uk/>

<sup>3</sup> The 30 newspapers were selected at random from a database of local and regional newspapers on the Newspaper Society's website; <http://www.newspapersoc.org.uk/Default.aspx?page=1228>

<sup>4</sup> This estimate does not account for the fact that there might be considerable overlap in readers between newspapers.

## Observations

- a. The new IPSA system of bi-monthly claims publication is clearly generating the negative media coverage of MPs and undermining the integrity of Parliament.
- b. It is difficult to envisage how the IPSA's bi-monthly approach to publication of claims could in any way be expected to improve the public perception of MPs.

## Conclusion 2

### **The IPSA system of bi-monthly claims publication ‘encourages’ newspapers to make largely meaningless and misleading comparisons between MPs.**

- a. **63% of the stories used in this analysis made comparisons between how much was claimed by each MP in a particular region. Such comparisons are largely meaningless and misleading because:**
1. The IPSA’s data is not comparable. The circumstances of no two MPs are exactly the same. The topography of each constituency unique. Each and every MP has different travel and family arrangements.
    - i. For MPs’ expenses to be comparable, two identical items would have to be compared over the same timescale. Clearly this is not the case with MPs’ expenses claims.
    - ii. A rail fare for an MP from Westminster to Norfolk, for example, is not comparable to a rail fare for an MP from Westminster to Scotland.
    - iii. One newspaper compared the amounts claimed by each MP in a certain county; despite the fact that only one MP in that county is eligible to claim for a second home allowance.
    - iv. The problem is compounded by the fact that expenses claims are published on a bi-monthly basis. It encourages newspapers to unknowingly compare and contrast MPs over an insufficient time frame.
    - v. The IPSA’s system of bi-monthly publication further exacerbates the problem, as a single invoice (for example, for office rent) can move a particular MP from the bottom to the top of the table over the course of two cycles of published claims.
    - vi. If the IPSA was to publish expenses claims on an annual basis, the public and media would be able to make fairer and more meaningful comparisons between MPs.
    - vii. Even then, however, there will be anomalies that an aggregated summary of claims cannot reveal. For example, new MPs will need to spend a lot more in their first year on establishing their parliamentary and constituency offices.
  
  2. The data published by the IPSA is not standardised.
    - i. In the case of shareholders paying £10 for an ordinary share in a company, the commodity purchased is the same: An ordinary share has the same attributes for every shareholder and can be readily compared.
    - ii. In the case of MPs paying £10 for a rail ticket, the commodity purchased is very different: A rail ticket will have completely different attributes such as length of journey, day or time of journey and other features (transferable, upgrade, class, inclusion of food, etc) which cannot be readily compared. Let alone the fact that it is impractical for some MPs to use the train given the location of their constituency, or that cheaper or faster modes of transport are available.

3. The IPSA's data is not disaggregated.
  - i. IPSA publishes the combined total, or aggregate, claimed by each MP.
  - ii. This makes comparisons between MPs inaccurate and misleading, as the claims are not separated into meaningful categories.

## **Observations**

- a. Attempts to compare the expenses claims of two or more MPs are largely misleading and meaningless without the provision of wider context. For example, an MP's total claim might be higher than the claim of another because they are a new MP who has claimed for setting up a new office; an expensive, but one-off, cost.
- b. The IPSA system and format of bi-monthly claims publication encourages such false comparison.
- c. The public are encouraged to think that the MP who claims the least represents the best value for money; when in fact it is the MP who claims the amount which allows them to perform their job in the most effective way for their constituents who offers the best value for money.

## Conclusion 3

**The IPSA system of bi-monthly claims publication means that constituents enjoy less of their MPs' time – at significant cost to the taxpayer.**

**a. The IPSA system forces MPs to spend many hours rectifying reputational damage caused by mistakes and misrepresentations caused by the IPSA.**

1. 12% of stories found in the Factiva and Google News searches made reference to alleged administrative mistakes by IPSA which led to negative media coverage for the MPs involved.<sup>5</sup>
2. As a result of these reported mistakes, it is striking that several MPs who offered feedback to this analysis spent 6 hours or more each trying to clear their names following negative (and inaccurate) media attention.
3. Feedback from MPs suggests that those affected by inadvertent media misrepresentation spent an average of 5 hours and 45 minutes clarifying the situation with their local newspapers

**b. MPs spend many hours on rectifying reputation damage.**

1. Judging from initial feedback it seems that about 20% of MPs (130 in total) are affected by IPSA mistakes or media misrepresentations on a particular bi-monthly publication date. If 60% of those affected MPs (78 MPs in total) are forced to respond – as initial indications suggest – this would indicate that MPs are forced to spend a total of 448 hours (56 working days) seeking to repair their reputations with their local newspapers.<sup>6</sup>
2. If 78 MPs are forced to respond to coverage at each bi-monthly publication date in a single year, this would equate to 336 working days lost.<sup>7</sup>

**c. MPs' staff spend many hours supporting their MPs in reputation management.**

1. Initial feedback suggests that, as a result of IPSA mistakes and misrepresentations, staff members spend an average of 2 hours and 45 minutes supporting their MPs in repairing reputational damage.
2. This means that MPs' staff spend about 214 hours (27 days) seeking to rectify reputational damage and clarify their MPs' claims with local newspapers.
3. This would equate to about 162 working days lost over a year.

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<sup>5</sup> Local newspaper coverage indicates that MPs' reputations are being damaged as a result of mistakes by the IPSA. The IPSA should therefore consider publishing data on the number of mistakes it has made; and the number of apologies it has subsequently offered to affected MPs.

<sup>6</sup> The 20% figure is an estimate based on responses to Mr Afriyie's email. A more careful analysis of those affected is required to draw a more accurate conclusion.

<sup>7</sup> Assuming there are 8 hours in a working day.

**d. The total time spent by MPs and their staff on reputation management.**

1. Judging from initial feedback, an affected MP's office (MP AND staff) must spend an average 8 hours and 30 minutes on reputational management at each bi-monthly publication cycle.
2. If 78 offices are affected, this equates to 83 working days per bi-monthly publication cycle.
3. There are 6 publication cycles a year, so this means that 498 days will be spent on rectifying reputational damage as a direct result of the IPSA publication cycle.

**e. Reputational management is hugely costly to the taxpayer.**

1. MPs and their staff are forced to spend 498 days a year rebutting misleading and inaccurate stories generated by the IPSA, at an additional cost of about £150,000 to the taxpayer (£340,000 including overheads).

## **Observations**

- a. Time spent by MPs clarifying their claims with local newspapers is time that could be spent doing the jobs for which they were elected: representing their constituents, legislating, and holding the government to account.
- b. This is a new burden for MPs that did not exist to the same extent in previous parliaments.

## **Conclusion 4**

**The IPSA system of bi-monthly claims publication is confusing and misleading; and encourages newspapers to inadvertently portray honest claims as illegitimate.**

**a. The IPSA system of publication is too readily open to misinterpretation by local newspapers.**

1. A number of 2010-intake MPs claimed less in the latest cycle of published claims than they did in the previous cycle. This was interpreted by some newspapers as a sign that MPs were “tightening belts”; when in reality the initial cycle of claims was bound to be higher among new MPs because it included costs associated with setting up their new offices.
2. The IPSA does not make a clear distinction between “costs” and “expenses”. Some MPs employ staff as self-employed, which is classified as an expense rather than a staff cost. This presents a distorted picture to the public when newspapers make comparisons between total amounts claimed by MPs.
3. Some MPs are able to submit their claims promptly, while others are unable to do so or intentionally hold back claims so that they can present them in batches for efficiency. Again, this presents a distorted picture to the public of the true cost of MPs over a 2-month period.
4. The system does not recognise, or acknowledge, the costs that MPs could have legitimately claimed, or the degree to which MPs subsidise their costs out of their own pockets. These sums are substantial but do not form part of the publication routine and present a wholly negative picture about what MPs claim, but not what they give.

**b. The system encourages the portrayal of genuine claims as dishonest.**

1. The fact that unpaid claims are published without any explanation from the IPSA as to why they were rejected implies wrongdoing by MPs to the public and has inadvertently led newspapers to imply the same on the part of MPs.
2. No clarification is offered when rejected claims are subsequently paid. This has encouraged newspapers to unknowingly report that MPs have had claims rejected; when they were in fact paid in full.
3. Stories about MPs’ claims are sometimes juxtaposed with stories about ongoing court cases involving MPs, thus implying a link between the new intake of MPs and the 2009 expenses scandal.

## Observations

- a. It is clear that the IPSA system of bi-monthly claims publication has resulted in an entire new intake of MPs, who had nothing at all to do with the old, discredited system, having their reputations unjustly dragged through the mud.

## Recommendations

If we are to restore the integrity of Parliament and the good public standing of MPs, a new expenses system is needed which:

- a. Ensures that the rigorous checking of receipts undertaken by the IPSA is continued in order to rule out the abuses of the past.
- b. Enables fair and accurate media coverage of MPs' expenses claims.
- c. Discourages newspapers from inadvertently making misleading comparisons between amounts claimed by MPs over insufficient time-frames.
- d. Delivers standardised, comparable and disaggregated information, enabling the public and media to make fair and informed comparisons between MPs.
- e. Publishes claims at greater intervals, so that fairer and more meaningful comparisons can be made over a sufficient time-frame.
- f. Categorises rejected claims properly and lists reasons for rejection, so that honest claims are not misinterpreted as illegitimate.
- g. Allows MPs to spend less time unnecessarily fighting to clear their names, and more time doing the jobs for which they were elected.
- h. Avoids misinterpretation and confusion, and allows newspapers to report honest and legitimate claims by MPs for what they are.
- i. Overhauls the IPSA's unworkable system and introduces a completely transparent Members' Allowance, which would be simple to administer and impossible to abuse.

**Given that the reputation of Parliament is directly linked to the integrity of the MPs' expenses system, the findings of this analysis suggest that IPSA should carry out some rigorous research into its findings and conclusions if it is to address the negative perception of MPs and Parliament with the public.**

## Data summary

### An analysis of local newspaper coverage

Description	No.	%
Newspaper stories analysed	60	
<b>Headlines</b>		
Positive	7	11.7%
Mildly negative	16	26.7%
Negative	37	61.7%
<b>Content</b>		
Positive	2	3.3%
Mildly negative	16	26.7%
Negative	42	70.0%
<b>Readers</b>		
Local newspapers in the UK	1,200	
Readers of local newspapers in the UK	38,000,000	
Average number of readers of each newspaper	32,000	
Newspapers printing negative coverage	880	73.3%
Number of readers subjected to negative coverage	28,000,000	
<b>Comparisons</b>		
Stories which compare totals claimed by MPs	38	63.3%
<b>Time and Errors</b>		
Stories which referenced IPSA administrative mistakes	7	11.7%

## MP survey - preliminary results

Preliminary results of a short survey into the time take by MPs and their offices to respond to negative media coverage following IPSA bi-monthly claims publication

### Time taken to respond to negative newspaper coverage to rectify/manage reputational damage

Description	No	%
Number of MPs	650	
Est. number of MPs affected per bi-monthly publication	130	20%
Est. number of MPs forced to respond	78	12%
Est. average time spent by MPs	5.75	
Est. average time spent by MPs' staff	2.75	
Est. average time spent by an MPs' office (i.e. MP and staff) (hrs)	8.5	
Est. time spent by MPs' offices at each bi-monthly publication (days - assuming 8 hr day)	83	
Est. time spent by MPs' offices in a year (x6 bi-monthlies) (days/yr - assuming 8 hr day)	498	

### The estimated cost of responding to negative newspaper coverage to rectify/manage reputational damage

Cost Analysis	
Total cost of MPs (based on IPSA budget 2010-11) (£)	175,000,000
Average cost of an MP and their office per year (£)	269,231
Average number of people in an MPs office (1 MP plus 2.5 staff)	3.5
Number of working days in a year	253
Average cost of a working day (£)	304
Number of working days spent on reputation management by MPs and staff in one year	498
<b>Annual cost to taxpayer of reputation management by MPs and staff (£)</b>	<b>151,292</b>
Administrative cost of the House of Commons (Main Supply Estimate 2010-11) (£)	219,000,000
<b>Crude estimation of cost to the taxpayer including overheads of the parliamentary estate (£)</b>	<b>340,624</b>

## Appendix A: Database of newspaper articles

### Key

Negative headline	N
Mildly negative headline	MN
Positive headline	P
Negative content	N
Mildly negative content	MN
Positive content	P
Comparison between MPs	C
ISPA error	E

Article	Headline	Content	Comparison	ISPA error
1	MN	MN		
2	N	N	Yes	
3	P	MN	Yes	
4	P	P		
5	P	MN	Yes	
6	N	N	Yes	
7	MN	MN	Yes	
8	N	N	Yes	
9	N	N		
10	MN	MN	Yes	
11	N	N	Yes	
12	N	N	Yes	
13	N	N		
14	N	N		
15	N	N		Yes
16	MN	MN	Yes	
17	MN	MN	Yes	
18	N	N		
19	MN	MN	Yes	
20	N	N		
21	N	N	Yes	
22	N	N	Yes	
23	N	N		
24	N	N		
25	N	N	Yes	
26	N	N	Yes	
27	N	N	Yes	
28	N	N	Yes	

Article	Headline	Content	Comparison	IPSA error
29	N	N		Yes
30	MN	MN	Yes	
31	MN	N	Yes	
32	N	N	Yes	
33	N	N	Yes	
34	N	N		Yes
35	N	N		
36	N	N	Yes	Yes
37	P	MN	Yes	
38	MN	N		Yes
39	N	N	Yes	
40	N	N	Yes	
41	N	N		
42	MN	MN	Yes	
43	N	N		
44	N	N	Yes	
45	N	N	Yes	
46	NM	N	Yes	
47	N	N	Yes	Yes
48	N	N	Yes	
49	P	N	Yes	
50	N	N		
51	MN	N	Yes	
52	MN	MN	Yes	
53	P	P		
54	P	MN		
55	N	N		
56	N	N	Yes	
57	MN	MN	Yes	
58	MN	MN	Yes	
59	N	N	Yes	Yes
60	MN	MN	Yes	

*For more information on the articles assessed in this analysis, please contact Adam Afriyie's office on 020 7219 2005.*