

REVIEW OF MPS' EXPENSES AND ALLOWANCES

Report of qualitative research into public opinion on MPs' expenses and allowances

Prepared for: Committee on Standards in Public Life

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1 Introduction

1.1 Background

The Committee on Standards in Public Life (hereafter the Committee) was set up in 1994 by the then Prime Minister, John Major MP, to consider and advise on standards in public life. Specifically, the Committee aimed to explore any concerns relating to the conduct of public office-holders and where necessary to make recommendations for change. In 1995 the Committee introduced the 'Seven Principles of Public Life' (selflessness, integrity, objectivity, accountability, openness, honesty and leadership) and the Committee's remit to examine current concerns about standards of conduct of holders of public office is underpinned by these principles.

Successive revelations about specific MPs in relation to the expenses system led to criticism regarding the way in which MPs are reimbursed for the expenses they incur in performing their public duties. The publication of MPs' expenses in the Telegraph and the media coverage and debate that ensued further focused the public's attention on the current system of expenses. Revelations about the system and perceived abuses led to a period of political disquiet, undermining the public's confidence in both politicians and the political system and importantly raised a number of questions about the current system.

As a result of concerns regarding the rules and regulation of MPs' expenses, the Committee on Standards in Public life launched a review in April 2009 which aims to develop a new system for reimbursing MPs' expenses which not only supports MPs, but also restores public confidence. The Committee has undertaken a number of activities as part of this review, including this research study which aimed to explore public perceptions in-depth.

1.2 Aims and objectives

Overall this research study aimed to gain a clear and detailed understanding of public perceptions and importantly, to consider options for reforming the system to restore public confidence.

Specifically, the research aimed to consider the following issues:

- Views on the current system of MPs' expenses;
- Views on the values that should underpin the new scheme; and
- Options for the provision of specific types of resources, such as: accommodation, staffing, offices and office equipment, travel, communications, and resettlement support.

1.3 Research methodology and sample

The research adopted a deliberative approach, in order to ensure public perceptions were considered in a meaningful way. Deliberative research aims to move people beyond knee-jerk reactions to a more considered viewpoint, by providing information and encouraging a diverse mix of participants to debate and discuss issues as part of a group discussion.

A total of eight workshops were conducted across five areas in the UK – London, Birmingham, Cardiff, Glasgow and Belfast. The sample comprised a total of 100 members of the public, with each workshop including between eight and 15 attendees. The sample was organised to include a cross-section of the population, with each workshop including a mix of the following variables:

- Social grade;
- Educational attainment for those under 40 years;
- Gender;
- Age;
- Ethnicity;
- Interest in current affairs;
- Disability; and
- Family type.

The exact sample profile is included in the appendices at the end of this report.

1.4 Conduct of the research

The recruitment of this study was undertaken by BMRB's specialist field Department, who manage a national network of specially trained freelance qualitative recruiters. All recruiters are members of the IQCS (Interviewers Quality Control Scheme). Participants were purposively selected according to an agreed set of key sampling criteria (as outlined above) to ensure the research was inclusive.

All the fieldwork for this study was undertaken by experienced qualitative researchers using non-directive interviewing techniques¹. The discussions were

¹ The interviewing style adopted is non-directive in that qualitative interviews are open in form rather than structured or direct. The approach is also flexible and responsive throughout.

exploratory and interactive in form to ensure the research considered both spontaneous and more considered viewpoints following debate and discussion of the issues. The workshops were guided by a topic guide developed by BMRB, in close liaison with the Committee.

All the workshop discussions were digitally recorded. The verbatim transcripts produced from the recordings were subject to a rigorous content analysis, which involved systematically sifting, summarising and sorting the verbatim material according to key issues and themes, within a thematic matrix. Further classificatory and interpretative analyses were then derived from the analytic charts and these formed the basis of the findings reported in subsequent sections of the report.

The findings reported have been illustrated with the use of verbatim quotations and examples. The quotations have been edited for clarity but care has been taken not to change the respondents' meaning in any way - alterations are shown using parenthesis and ellipses. Where necessary the details of the contributors or their subjects have been moderately changed to protect anonymity.

The methods used in this research are wholly qualitative in nature. The purposive nature of the sample design means that the research cannot provide any statistical information relating to the prevalence of these views, experiences or reflections in the general population. Any attempt to provide numerical evidence of this kind would require a quantitative research methodology.

1.5 Report outline

The report is divided into eleven sections: **Section one** sets out the background to the research and the methodological approach adopted. **Section two** focuses on general issues, including views on the role of MPs and the current system of expenses, views on the key principles underpinning a new system and an overview of key issues in relation to reforming the system. **Sections three to ten** outlines findings in relation to each of the main topics discussed as part of this research, including: Policing the System, Accommodation, Staffing, Offices and Office Equipment, Travel, Communications, Leaving Office and Double-Jobbing. **Section eleven** provides a brief summary of the key research findings.

2 General issues

This section of the report provides an overview of general issues identified in relation to the current system of MPs' expenses and views on reforming the system. Specifically, this section includes a cursory discussion of participants' awareness and views of the role of MPs and the current system of expenses; views on the key principles needed to underpin and reform the system; and the overarching findings identified from the research more broadly.

2.1 The role of MPs and the current system of expenses

On the whole participants were familiar with main aspects of the role and understood that MPs undertook duties in Westminster (for example, debating and passing legislation and sitting on committees), as well as within their constituency. However, participants were often less clear in relation to the role undertaken within the constituency. It was understood that MPs would also work to benefit their political party; although it was felt their main role should be representation of the people.

Information regarding the role of an MP was primarily said to have been gained through the media, such as television, news and radio, rather than through direct experience. In fact for the most part contact with MPs was said to have been limited.

'I think the media kind of tell us what they do'

(Birmingham).

As part of the discussion, participants were provided with key information on the role of the MP and the current system of expenses, including details of the average hours worked (around 70 hours) and number of days spent in Westminster. Overall, there was surprise at the number of days spent in Parliament and the average hours worked per week. This information was met with a degree of scepticism, particularly the amount of time spent working in total and how this time was actually spent, for example, whether it was spent on legitimate tasks or engaged in non-work related activities, such as socialising or *'propping up the bar'*. In part this was fuelled by watching televised debates in the House of Commons where the chamber was often said to be empty and also as a result of EU regulations which it was thought prohibited this level of working.

'10 hours a day every day, I find that hard to believe'

(Wales)

Participants were generally aware MPs were salaried; however, awareness of what this salary was varied between those who believed it to be substantially less than the £64,766 received by MPs and those who suggested they 'guessed' or 'knew' it was in this region. Views on the appropriateness of this salary level were

also mixed. For some this salary was perceived to be generous and for others it was deemed appropriate. Importantly, perceptions regarding salary levels depended on where people lived in the UK and on their own experiences and circumstances. It is essential to understand that for many people this was seen to be a very large salary, regardless of the nature of the role.

'There's a lot of jobs with the responsibility what they've got and they don't get paid nowhere near that'

(Birmingham)

Although the issue was not probed in detail, the issue of second jobs was raised spontaneously during the workshops with mixed views being expressed about the appropriateness of this. In some instance, the idea of having a second job was viewed negatively (especially in light of the hours MPs were said to work), as it was thought this would detract from their ability to effectively carryout their role as an MP in terms of both the time spent on the role and the level of focus afforded to it. It was also suggested this could result in a conflict of interest and it was seen as important that MPs remained impartial. In contrast, having a second job outside of Parliament was often deemed to be advantageous as a result of its ability to ground and foster an understanding of the 'real world' which it was felt would broaden the MPs' understanding of business and ultimately benefit the public. Notwithstanding this, the ability to undertake a second job, did undermine the idea that MPs worked long hours as part of their role.

'Another issue and you haven't raised it at all, which really disturbs me is multiple employment. I can't see how an MP can actually be employed as something else as well.'

(Glasgow)

There was very limited awareness of the current system of MPs' expenses. Participants were aware MPs were able to claim for range of expenses, for example, accommodation and travel, but they were generally surprised at the extent of the other resources available to MPs, particularly the Resettlement Grant.

'I think most people will find they are not very very familiar with the current system which is why the politicians are able to sort of go through the loopholes and take advantage of those systems that we don't really know much about. It's only when the media gets hold of it and they get exposed that we realise how cushy it is for them to take liberties with the system they've got now.'

(London)

There was a sense the expenses system has been 'hidden' from the public in part under the banner of 'security', both in terms of the details of what this entailed and how it was being used. Although participants acknowledged that lack of interest by the public would also have contributed to this reduced awareness.

There was a view expressed that the current system had been seen as a legitimate way to 'top-up' salary with expenses seen as an entitlement rather than an allowance. In addition it was felt the current system had been overly flexible, lacking in clarity and devoid of appropriate monitoring which had, in conjunction with a culture of it being acceptable to maximise expense claims, encouraged and ultimately led to the abuses recently highlighted in the media.

It should be noted, that although the ferocity with which views were expressed varied, overall much antagonism remained and it was clear that trust in both MPs and the current system had been severely undermined.

2.2 Key principles

One of the objectives of this research was to explore the public's views on what values should underpin the new system of MPs' expenses. It was clear that participants wanted a new system of expenses to be underpinned by a series of key principles and it was felt that adherence to these principles was essential to restoring public trust. Importantly, the principles highlighted as important across the workshops were consistent and included the following values:

- Honesty;
- Openness and transparency;
- Accountability and responsibility, at both individual and party level;
- Scrutiny and justice;
- Clarity;
- Simplicity;
- Proportionate, reasonable, fair and adequate;
- Integrity;
- Leadership and acting as a role model;
- Value, particularly providing value for money and
- Selflessness and a focus on public service.

These principles have not been ordered in terms of priority, as they were all viewed as important. However, although the principles were generally relevant to all resources discussed, certain principles were seen as being more relevant to particular topics or resources, for example, the principles of transparency, accountability and scrutiny were seen as key to policing the system and proportionality, clarity and simplicity were deemed key in terms of a developing a system for claiming accommodation expenses. The links made between certain principles and the reform of particular resources is highlighted in the following sections of the report where each topic is discussed in turn.

A distinction was made between the principles a new system of MPs' expenses should actually encapsulate and those MPs should adhere to when following the system. It was said that while a system of expenses should be open and transparent, clear and simple, fair and proportionate, provide value for money, be open to scrutiny and ensure MPs were accountable, while MPs needed to approach this system with honesty, integrity, leadership and be selfless in terms of how they used the system.

2.3 Overview of key issues

Prior to outlining findings in relation to each topic, it is important to note a number of overarching points that emerged from the research which are outlined below.

Importantly, the principles identified for reforming the system were consistent across the workshops, even where the detail of how these might be achieved varied. Notwithstanding this, there was much consensus in views across the sample, regardless of perceptions of the current system.

Importantly, the personal and professional experiences of the participants (which to a degree linked to Social and Economic Grade) were found to impact on participants' ability to consider issues from a range of perspectives, with their ability to sympathise found to decline in line with the perceived distance from their own experiences. The solutions proposed similarly became more stringent as their ability to understand or recognise the issue decreased. For example, people with experience of working away from home tended to be more flexible about suggestions for reforming this system of accommodation.

Geographical area and the personal and professional experiences of participants also impacted on perceptions of salary levels, with professionals being less likely to see the salary level as high. Perceptions of salary were important as they impacted on participants' views in relation to expenses more widely.

There was an overarching view it was legitimate to cover expenses, but not to enable MPs to gain personally from the system. Importantly it was felt the

expenses system should not be seen as a way to increase the attractiveness of the role or provide a 'top up' to salaries. This theme was identified throughout the discussions, particularly in relation to accommodation and staffing. It was thought the system should be 'needs' rather than 'desires' based, with expenses being seen as reimbursement of reasonable costs incurred, rather than an entitlement. In line with this view, it was felt that MPs should undertake the role of MP because they had a genuine passion to serve the public, rather than to further their career or for financial gain.

'We've now got a group of politicians, I feel, in this country that are in it for themselves. It used to be that politicians went into it for the right reasons. They were either people that made money and wanted to put a bit back, people that actually cared and wanted to make things better.'

(Glasgow)

Discussions were framed by the current economic climate, in terms of both the need to ensure value for money and cost savings and also the desire for a new system to be of wider benefit to the economy rather than simply to MPs. For example, it was suggested that payments for accommodation could benefit the economy by boosting the trade of landlords or hoteliers, or by profit from privately owned accommodation being fed back into the system rather than simply benefiting the individual MP.

'I believe the Government should pump money back into the economy to create jobs as well ... At least this way our money is going back into rebuilding the economy.'

Birmingham

Public trust in both MPs and the expenses system has been undermined and the issue of policing the system was identified as central to restoring this. The issue of policing was raised spontaneously across all the workshops and provided the context against which other issues were considered. It was found that discussing and tackling the issue of policing ahead of other topics impacted on the discussion making it more constructive overall. In addition to the call for closer scrutiny and accountability, the openness and transparency of the system was also viewed as key to re-building public confidence.

Importantly, it was felt that the system needed to be clear, simple and fair in order for MPs and the public to understand it and adhere to it. Furthermore, participants were generally keen that any new system mirrored those systems set up for the public, such as company expense systems and the tax system. It was seen as important to create parity.

'Whatever applies to us should apply to them.'

(Cardiff)

'We seem to treat them like little gods, which they are not and they are not entitled to anything we are not entitled to.'

(Birmingham)

It was clear that the higher the levels of mistrust and antagonism in the system, the less flexibility participants were prepared to tolerate in relation to suggestions for reform, with certain participants calling for a rigid system in order to avoid infringement and others proposing a degree of flexibility in order to allow for differences in circumstances and role, for example, whether the MP had a family or on the basis of where their constituency was located. Importantly, confidence in the level of monitoring and enforcement was seen as key to the acceptance of flexibility, with participants being broadly comfortable and accepting of a flexible system providing guidelines were clear and the system was closely regulated.

Findings in relation to the specific topics discussed as part of this research are outlined in turn in the following sections of this report. These sections include a discussion of the following resources: policing the system, accommodation, staffing, offices and office equipment, travel, communication, leaving office and the practice of multiple mandates known as 'double-jobbing' in Northern Ireland.

3 Policing the system

This section of the report explores participants' view on the principles underpinning a system of regulation; who should regulate the expenses system; how open and transparent the system should be; and whether and what sanctions should be applied.

3.1 Principles underpinning the system

The issue of policing the system was deemed to be extremely important and it was raised spontaneously across all the workshops undertaken. The importance placed on the policing of the system was seen as symptomatic of the current lack of trust in the system and on the perception of MPs' inability to act with honesty and integrity at all times.

In order to restore public trust in a system of expenses, it was suggested that clear rules and regulations needed to be set; the use of the system needed to be monitored and regularly reviewed and audited; and MPs needed to be held to account for their actions where they breached the rules. It was clear that participants were unaware of the current systems in place for monitoring and needed reassurance about the effectiveness of the system.

It is clear that effective policing of the system sets the context against which the reform of other topics or resources are considered and judged by the public. Essentially, if the public are happy with the overarching system for monitoring and enforcing the system, they will have greater confidence in the system as a whole.

A number of key values were raised in relation the policing the expenses system and these are outlined below:

- **Scrutiny and accountability:** It was seen as important for any system of expenses to be monitored and scrutinised and for individuals to be held to account where the rules were not adhered to. It was felt sanctions would not only service to act as a *'punishment'*, but also act as an effective *'deterrent'*. It was said that trust in the integrity of MPs to design or monitor the system had been undermined and MPs now had to prove their integrity through scrutiny.
- **Clarity:** It was felt that the rules and regulations set and the possible sanctions imposed should be unambiguous and clearly outlined to ensure MPs are aware of the rules and to enable effective monitoring and regulation of the system.
- **Transparency:** Complete transparency in terms of the expenses made by MPs was called for by participants to act as a check, to help MPs consider

their own spending and to ensure they were accountable to the public as well as to a regulatory body.

3.2 Regulating the system

The general view expressed was that the system needed to be regulated by an independent body, although there was some limited support for the idea of self-regulation alongside complete transparency.

The overwhelming view was that the system needed to be independently monitored, at least for a set period of time while the new system was set in place and bedded in and then following this subject to an audit at regular intervals. Importantly, participants had generally lost faith in MPs' ability to regulate themselves and it was thought that self-regulation of expenses left the system open to be *'tinkered with'* where MPs disliked certain rules and also open to misuse. Essentially, without independent regulation and guarantees that the system was being adhered to, it was felt the rules would continue to be infringed and importantly, public trust would not be restored.

'I think they should have an independent body but their doings and dealings should also be open to scrutiny, I think everything they do should also be open to scrutiny until we can totally trust that they are doing the job properly.'

(London)

'It is essential to have a monitoring system that is not part and parcel of Parliament, not part and parcel of MP ... that's got to be a body responsible to the people of this country and not to MPs, so that they can have an open view and when it's wrong, they need to make it clear that it's wrong.'

(Birmingham)

Without the introduction of an independent body, it was suggested that monitoring of the system would fall to the media (as it was currently thought to have been) and participants questioned the suitability of this given the nature of the media, for example, the propensity for bias. Notwithstanding this, participants were grateful to the media for exposing failings in the current system.

Mixed views were expressed in relation to who should appoint the independent body and who the independent body should be and although it was clear participants wanted this process to be undertaken in the most independent way possible (in terms of who makes the appointment and who is appointed), ultimately no conclusions were drawn on this. A number of spontaneous suggestions were made regarding the type of agency or organisation that might fulfil the role of regulator:

- Independent financial auditors, such as KPMG;
- Existing government bodies or agencies, such as HM Revenue and Customs or the National Audit Office or;
- A committee made up of a mix of representatives, including members of the public, magistrates, civil servants and ex-MPs – who it was suggested would be familiar with the processes and therefore well able to make judgements on the system. Aside from magistrates, the idea of drawing on the judiciary was generally rejected.

'And another thing is you've got to remember these people that make the laws so it is very easy for them to say right we are going to be very legitimate about how we do our budgets now and everything we do is going to be legal and stuff like that and they'll still be reaping a lot of benefits that they really shouldn't be reaping, so to bring in a body to say well we are going to make sure you do everything legitimately but all those benefits you get are actually illegal.'

(London)

There were general concerns surrounding the cost of establishing or hiring a new independent body to monitor and process MPs' expenses. However, the need to rebuild trust was overwhelmingly identified as being more important than the cost of the system. Notwithstanding this, it was felt the monitoring body should be kept as small as possible and relatively low cost. For reasons of cost, it was felt the use of an existing body would be more appropriate.

3.3 Transparency

Although transparency was not thought to be a sufficient way to regulate the system in isolation, participants did want transparency alongside independent monitoring. It was felt transparency would perform an important function by ensuring members of the public were able to access information in relation to expenses thus providing a check on both MPs and on the regulatory body overseeing the system. Ultimately, this would ensure that ultimate accountability was to the public.

Specifically, it was felt that MPs should be able to account for all claims made by producing receipts and providing these to the body overseeing the system. The production of receipts was thought to align with the rules applied to members of the public working in other organisations and therefore a legitimate request.

In addition to providing receipts, it was suggested that all expense claims submitted and paid for should be made available to the public through publication and that the medium used should be easily accessible to all, for example, the

internet. Although it was acknowledged that expense claims made by individuals to a company were not generally made available to the general public, it was felt the public had a right to this information given expense claims were funded by the taxpayer. It was thought the publication of expense claims would act as a check and an effective way to restore confidence in system.

'Why shouldn't they be made to publish their expenses? Like a business publishes it.'

(Cardiff)

'In order to ensure the public can access information and can themselves hold MPs to account should this be required. Without transparency it 'holds the door open again for things to be hidden.'

(Birmingham)

It was not generally thought necessary to publish individual receipts however, providing a full account of claims made was outlined and there was also an acceptance that certain information would need to be withheld for security reasons, although it was emphasised this should be the exception.

'Why shouldn't they be made to publish their expenses? ... All of it ... every single penny that they spend and the reasons why they spend it.'

(Cardiff)

In addition to transparency in relation to expense claims, it was also thought important to ensure complete transparency regarding the how the system is monitored in order to provide clarity to both MPs the public.

3.4 Sanctions

As part of the system of regulation, participants called for clear, firm and consistent sanctions to be put in place with real implications for those who misuse the system. There was a perception based on recent media accounts that few real sanctions were in place and that these were rarely applied, so that they did not act as a deterrent or hold people to account for contravening the rules. It was suggested that without sanctions, any system of regulation would *'lack real teeth'*. There was a sense that the current system applied sanctions less stringently than those experienced by the public both in terms of those handed out by government agencies, such as H M Revenue and Customs and private sector employers.

In addition to being open and clear in relation to the rules and regulations, it was felt an effective system also needed to be clear about what sanctions would be

applied should the rules not be followed, in order to encourage adherence to the rules and to be fair to MPs.

'And also to let them know there'll be harsher penalties if they do abuse it, like, you know I think they'd think twice about claiming for homes they haven't got and acting fraudulently, I think they'd think twice about that if they knew they were going to go to prison for it.'

(London)

Participants believed there should be a range of sanctions available and that these should differ and be proportionate to the nature of the misuse. Suggestions can be organised into 'Parliamentary sanctions' to be applied where rules are breached and 'prosecutions' in cases where the law has been broken. The Parliamentary sanctions suggested included: paying back expenses, receiving a fine, being suspended from Parliament or losing their job. It was said that the rules should be in line with employment law where people are provided with a series of warnings (verbal and written) for making mistakes before steps are taken to remove them from their post. However, where it was clear that *'blatant misconduct'* had occurred then it was said MPs should be asked to leave immediately and passed on to relevant authorities where necessary.

'Anyone steals from employer, basically they are done and they go to prison for that, so why do they get away with it.'

(London)

There were a number of suggestions put forward for who should implement the sanctions, although again no consensus was drawn. One view was that an ombudsmen system similar to other professions should be used when the Parliamentary rules are breached because it was seen to be independent, while it was thought the police should investigate a crime. Participants could see no problems arising from the sanctions process being overseen by an independent body and it was in no way felt this removed control from constituents to hold their MP to account.

4 Accommodation

MPs are expected to spend time working both in Parliament and in their local constituency. To support this, they are allowed to claim for expenditure on accommodation to cover the cost of overnight stays when working away from their main home. This can take a number of forms, including, payment for rent, hotels, mortgage interest or second homes. The maximum amount it is possible to claim to cover this cost is currently £24,222 per year, within this maximum MPs may also claim a flat-rate sum of £25 for any night spent away from his or her main home on Parliamentary business.

MPs with a constituency in inner London have not been allowed to claim the above second homes allowance. Instead they receive a taxable supplement of £7,500. Outer London MPs and MPs with constituencies within 20 miles of Westminster are also no longer entitled to claim the Additional Cost Allowance.

MPs have been allowed to claim for expenditure incurred in maintaining their second home, including decoration, repairs, insurance and service charges and basic security measures. Furthermore MPs have also been allowed to claim under PAAE for furnishings and other household items for their second home, which can include white goods, electrical equipment, household furniture and other items, such as, cutlery and crockery.

This section of the report explores perceptions surrounding accommodation as an expense. It considers participants' views on: claiming for accommodation and the principles underpinning this system; use of the accommodation allowance, including claiming for mortgage interest payments, other accommodation options and the designation of second homes; the daily accommodation allowance; and claiming for maintenance and furnishings.

4.1 Principles underpinning the system

The issue of accommodation was the most contentious of all topics discussed as part of the research. A great deal of anger was expressed on this issue, particularly in respect of funding second homes, the payment of mortgage interest, 'flipping' homes and the general standard of accommodation offered. Some participants questioned the need to provide accommodation at all. People generally felt the allowance for MPs' accommodation was excessive, poorly defined and poorly policed. As a consequence of these views and a desire to completely 'tighten-up' the system, initial suggestions regarding how to reform the system were often rather draconian.

'I just wanted to say, personally I feel accommodation is one of the biggest and most important expenses, I mean it is so expensive.'

(London)

Although following discussions participants generally accepted the need for accommodation to be provided in order for MPs to fulfil their role, participants were clear of the need to reform the system both in terms of what is made available under this allowance and how the system is policed. Participants expressed a range of key values on which they felt the system should be based and these are outlined below:

- **Proportionate and reasonable:** Although participants accepted that accommodation should be provided, it was felt this should be of a reasonable and basic standard. There was a general sense that large properties should not be paid for, although they accepted the need to include a degree of flexibility in the system to cater for the differing needs of MPs, for example, those with families. To avoid making the system too flexible and thus potentially open to abuse, it was suggested that a set tiered system might be introduced.

'I think in essence we've agreed with what everybody's said so far, that nobody disputes that they need a degree of comfort and they need somewhere to stay. But that it's modest. That there are certain things provided, but over and above that, then its got to come out of their own pocket.'

(Cardiff)

'Nobody is saying put them in a bed sit, everybody is just saying that you can't stay at the Plaza. I understand they have got to be in their own place. But nobody is saying put them into a little, you know B&B and only send £20, everybody is just saying lets be realistic on it, there's no need for a £400 room, there's no need to pay mortgage payments. You can get a lovely standard room which is liveable.'

(Birmingham)

- **Simplicity and clarity:** There was a general sense that the rules governing the accommodation allowance needed to be simplified, in order to ensure these were clear and beyond doubt to both MPs and the public. It was also felt that a less complicated system would be harder to manipulate and easier to monitor and regulate.
- **Scrutiny and accountability:** Effective policing of the system was seen as paramount in relation to accommodation. Participants wanted clear regulations to be set out in guidance, they wanted the system to be monitored by an independent body and they wanted MPs to be held to account in cases where the rules were contravened. It should be noted that confidence in the monitoring system impacted on suggestions for reforming

the system, with participants being more flexible regarding the rules providing the monitoring system was stringent.

- **Transparency:** In keeping with their concern for simplicity, clarity and accountability, people wanted the details of the system to be laid out clearly in guidance format to MPs and for them to be open with the public and those monitoring them as to how they were spending their allowances.
- **Value for Money:** The ability of the system to provide best value was important to participants as was the need for MPs to recognise and respect the fact they are spending public money. However, it was said to be more important to ensure MPs were unable to make money out of the system than designing the system to be the cheapest possible.
- **Parity:** It was seen as important to ensure parity between the rules governing MPs and those adhered to by the general public. In terms of accommodation this meant ensuring that the allowance for overnight accommodation aligned with the types of schemes operated by private organisations. In line with this, it was clear that participants were more accepting of allowances where they were able to relate personally to these, for example, being paid to stay overnight in a hotel when away on business or having rent paid when accommodation was required for an extended period.

The following section outlines participants' views in relation to the use of the accommodation allowance. These views are underpinned throughout by the key principles outlined above.

4.2 Use of the accommodation allowance

As previously mentioned, there was a general acceptance of the need to provide accommodation once it was clearly understood that MPs were not always in a position to commute on a daily basis or relocate to London given the need to work in their constituency. It should be noted this point was not always immediately obvious to participants.

This section outlines views on the use of the accommodation allowance, considering mortgage interest payments; other forms of accommodation provision; and the designation of second homes.

4.2.1 Mortgage interest payments

Views on the principle of paying mortgage interest payments were often underpinned by wider views in relation to the need for MPs to own or indeed rent a second home, as opposed to staying in a hotel or having accommodation provided as required. Although following discussion the benefits of having a second home were more widely accepted, based on the time MPs were expected

to spend in Westminster and the cost effectiveness of this option, the idea of paying mortgage interest was overwhelmingly criticised and rejected in terms of moving the system forward.

The availability of this option was criticised for many reasons, but most significantly participants were against the idea that the payment of mortgage interest to MPs might result in them purchasing a house from which they could ultimately profit or make personal gains from once the property was sold. Participants were against this in principle regardless of any other considerations, including cost effectiveness or ease. Participants questioned the need for MPs to receive this given the perception they already received a generous salary, as this option was seen as a way to bolster earnings and get the most out of the system. Furthermore, operating a system whereby MPs are able to make personal gains was thought to foster greed and open up the system to abuse, given that it was thought to be human nature to try and maximise benefits where possible.

'Why should they have extra money to pay for a mortgage when they are already earning far more than enough.'

(London)

'Selling the house, keeping the profits. It's defrauding.'

(Glasgow)

Participants were not concerned about the impact removing interest payments would have on the overall attractiveness of the role and felt strongly that the role of MP should be seen as a vocation for which sacrifices should be made. Again comparisons were drawn between this rule and those applied to members of the public, with the option of paying mortgage interest seen as out of alignment with this.

Interestingly, the principle of paying mortgage interest was viewed as being more acceptable providing the possibility of making profit was removed. In fact if the issue of profit could be remedied and it proved to be more cost effective than other options, then participants were far more prepared to accept this. It was suggested that the issue of profit could be remedied by introducing a form of taxation whereby any profit made from second homes would be fed back into the treasury, thus benefiting the public who it was felt had paid for the mortgage interest.

'That's the main thing. And they can have as good a time as they like when they're there. But they don't make any profit on it because they haven't paid for it. We've paid for it.'

(Cardiff)

'What if you could have a system whereby when the property was sold you got the appropriate percentage paid back into the public treasury?'

(Glasgow)

4.2.2 Alternatives to mortgage interest payments

Direct provision

When asked spontaneously to consider preferences for how ideally accommodation should be provided, the initial 'gut' reaction of participants was to express a preference for direct provision, that is accommodation obtained centrally and allocated to MPs. Overall this option was thought to offer the fairest and most equitable way of providing provision, while also aligning with a number of the key principles highlighted including: clarity, transparency and value for money. It was also suggested this approach removed the potential for profit and reduced the need for scrutiny.

Two main options were put forward in relation to how direct provision might be offered, including: **Halls of residence and Government owned property.** Specifically, it was suggested that accommodation could be provided by offering some form of centrally organised rental accommodation, for example, renting a hotel, apartment block or Olympic village; or the Government could invest by purchasing property across London to house MPs while they were in office.

'If I'm an MP for Glasgow south I know if I got elected I have a place in London. If I get defeated I leave it, I come back to Glasgow, I get on with my life and the person that's taken over from me or has been elected takes over that. It's the same as with the Prime Minister: he gets booted out of number ten, the next Prime Minister comes in and stays in number ten. But there's no need for them to buy...all they need is a roof over their head.'

(Glasgow)

'I think Parliament should own a block of apartments near to Westminster.'

(Belfast)

A number of perceived advantages were noted for these options, which including:

- Cost-effectiveness if favourable rates were agreed for rental and the creation of public assets through Government investment in property;

'It's also a good investment, at the moment what's going on is the money is just draining out, hence why all this council tax

and all these taxes is going up all the time, so if you invest in property then, it's not going to keep reoccurring is it. Once the properties are paid for that's it, then they have got no excuse. All you pay for then is the maintenance and the upkeep of that premises. So it's actually a good investment to buy properties.'

(London)

- Removal of profit by MPs, as well as the need for grants for maintenance or furnishings in the case of the rental option;
- Increased control and equity regarding the type of accommodation offered, while providing a comfortable place to live and enabling a degree of flexibility to take account of the differing needs of MPs; and
- Ease of monitoring and regulation and a reduction in the potential for abuse of the system.

The perceived disadvantaged included:

- The initial cost outlay of hiring accommodation in blocks or purchasing a large number of homes;
- Concerns in relation to security of MPs and other residents, especially in the case of providing 'halls of residence' style accommodation;
- Limited privacy as a result of proximity to work colleagues in the case of 'halls of residence' style accommodation; and
- Potential inability to effectively accommodate families during visits, if the accommodation offered was unsuitable.

'Because at the end of the day, we kind of had a disagreement here because we thought the halls of residence, hotel thing, was a good idea. It could be feasible but it's quite unrealistic in terms of security.'

(Cardiff)

Although subsequent discussions in relation to the advantages and disadvantages of this system did in certain instances change participants' views and lessen their resolve, for the most part participants continued to see this as an acceptable option for reform. As noted, the main concerns highlighted tended to relate to concerns over the cost of the initial outlay, the potential security risk to MPs and other residents, and the desirability of the option for MPs, for example, how comfortable they might be staying in this type of accommodation over a long period. However, these issues were not perceived to be insurmountable, with the cost ultimately translating into assets, the security and privacy issues being

resolved by spreading out the housing stock and issues of attractiveness being seen as a *'part of the job'* that should be accepted.

'Government owned They can use that accommodation; we own the property that will not be sold on. Should it be sold on for whatever reason, if we're needing bigger or better or whatever in so many years then we'll get the money for the land and for the property.'

(Glasgow)

Private rental and hotels

The option of privately renting a property and to a lesser extent using hotels was seen as being an acceptable alternative to direct provision. Reasons given included: the inability of MPs to directly profit from this form of accommodation; greater ease of regulation in terms of overseeing the system and stipulating what can be claimed for; and greater opportunity to make cost savings and benefit the economy by negotiating favourable rates and putting this money into other businesses. Furthermore, both options were said to remove the need for an allowance to cover maintenance and furnishings.

Notwithstanding this a number of problems were noted with these options and again these tended to relate to cost, privacy, security, stability and overall attractiveness of the role. In particular there was some sympathy expressed in relation to how comfortable, attractive or realistic the option of staying in a hotel would be over a long period of time and this was felt more acutely by those with experience of working away from home on business on a regular basis or for long periods of time. For example, in one instance a participant had stayed in a hotel for three months as part of their job and had found it to be an unpleasant experience toward the end of their stay. However, again there was a general view expressed that as a vocation, this type of inconvenience should be accepted, although it was acknowledged that private rental was a more suitable option.

'Would you like to live in a hotel for 165 days a day? ... It's the sacrifice you've got to make if you're going to be a public servant.'

(Cardiff)

Flat rate system

The concept of introducing a flat rate system, whereby MPs receive a set fee and spend this as they wish, received mixed reactions with some participants arguing in favour of this and others being opposed. Overall, this option received limited support.

Primarily it was thought the provision of a flat rate system to cover accommodation would work to simplify the system by effectively increasing MPs' salaries and allowing them the freedom to spend this as they wished. By providing a set amount it was thought there would be greater certainty in relation to spend and the money and resource required to monitor and regulate the system would also be saved. Moreover, it was said this approach would reduce the potential for abuse by preventing MPs from drawing for unnecessary expenses or misusing the system.

'Well basically have a set... you've got a set allowance and that's it. Now, what you do with that money is entirely up to you. Whichever way you do it, I think the limit is £24k. Give them the £24k as part of their salary... It takes out auditing, it takes out taxation, it takes out checking receipts and everything, doesn't it?'

(Cardiff)

'What's wrong with giving the extra money, the 24,000 on top of their pay, let them sort it out, you save all the accountability, costs, to manage them and micro manage them, that then puts the responsibility back on them to organise their own accommodation. For god sake, they are intelligent, they can do that ... this is only for MP's outside of London of course, those inside London, there's a standard London scale for inner and outer London. So I would definitely go for that one, it is much simpler.'

(Birmingham)

In contrast, for others this system was inherently unfair and inequitable as the system did not take any account of individual circumstance and the costs incurred as a result of these, for example, distance between constituency and Westminster and consequently the need for a second home. In addition to this, the provision of a flat rate fee was thought to remove any sense of personal accountability for how expenses provided were spent.

'If the flat rate is being paid you know, well they can do what they want.'

(Belfast)

4.2.3 Designation of a second home

When it comes to the designation of second homes the general consensus was that MPs should not be given a free choice in this matter - given this choice currently determines which house the MP can claim mortgage interest payments

on and also based on the fact it was seen as natural for any individual to choose the most financially advantageous given the choice.

It was felt strongly that the second home should be automatically selected based on agreed criteria. For the most part, participants tended to favour the constituency home as the main home and second home as the one needed only as result of their job, for example, the home in London.

'But their main home is where their constituency is. That's where everything started from.'

(Cardiff)

As an alternative there was a level of support for the main home to be decided according to where their family lived regardless of whether that was in their constituency or London. This was primarily driven by an understanding that MPs might prefer or find it more suitable to have their family live in London given the time spent away from their constituency. However, support for this was more limited as it was felt to be unfair on MPs who did not have a family and perhaps more importantly, it was not thought to effectively manage the ambiguities in the system that were currently thought to leave it open to abuse.

'And then it would be nice to think that the bigger, larger family home is their personal home and the second home, which is work-related and is needed purely for work reasons should be the smaller, more basic, if you like, accommodation, and that should be the one that they can claim the allowances on.'

(Cardiff)

Once selected, the perceptions surrounding the flipping of the designation of the family home for either tax purposes or in order to maximise personal financial advantage was universally condemned. It was seen as a means of MPs inappropriately profiting and people believed it should not be allowed.

4.3 Daily subsistence allowance

Initial perceptions of the £25 flat rate paid to MPs for nights spent away from home for work were mixed, with views ranging from those who saw it as an unacceptable extra bonus and others who saw it as an acceptable practice adopted by many companies.

The specific rules governing this payment were often found to be confusing and participants often called for clarification regarding what the payment was for and whether it was paid in addition to the accommodating allowance. Once it was established this payment was paid in addition to payments for accommodation, such as the cost of paying for a second home, it was generally deemed to be unnecessary and an unreasonable 'perk' of the job.

Even where it was suggested this payment could be seen as a meal allowance to cover costs when working away from home, participants questioned whether it was necessary to pay this alongside other allowances received for accommodation. For instance, they questioned whether it was right to pay this in cases where an MP had stayed in a hotel and already claimed for the cost of food. Importantly participants felt they would need greater clarity and explanation regarding the reasons for providing this allowance if they were to change their views and accept this as a fair allowance.

4.4 Maintenance and furnishing

Although the issue of costs paid for maintenance and furnishings were seen as important, this issue was less contentious and did not generally evoke the same level of feeling as other areas of the accommodation allowance.

The general view expressed was that MPs should be able to claim for the cost of maintenance and furnishings, especially given this type of allowance was provided to the public in cases where they were required to relocate. However, it was suggested that the rules should be reasonable and proportionate and while they accepted MPs 'deserved' a degree of comfort, it was felt they should only be allowed to claim for essential items and not for luxury goods. The issue again here was a dislike of MPs personally benefiting or profiting from expenses received.

As previously highlighted, it was felt that certain accommodation options would minimise the need for an allowance of this type, for example, rented accommodation, hotels or direct provision as maintenance was be taken care of and furnishings would wither be provided or bought centrally as a one-off.

As an alternative to the current system, it was suggested rather than paying for costs as they are incurred, 'one-off' payments might be made when MPs set up home and then reviewed following a general election, for example, once every four years.

5 Staffing

MPs are currently entitled to claim for staffing expenditure in order to cover costs incurred in the provision of staff to help perform parliamentary duties. The maximum that can be claimed for staffing is £103,812 a year and this is paid directly to the staff to cover salaries, National Insurance contributions, bonuses, overtime payment and other staff related payments, such as settlements for employment tribunals.

This chapter of the report explores the research participants' perceptions of the staffing allowance, looking specifically at the principles on which this should be based; views on how staff should be appointed; and whether MPs should be able to employ family members.

5.1 Principles underpinning the system

There was not a strong desire to overhaul or dramatically reform the system by which staff are appointed and paid to help MPs perform their parliamentary duties. However, participants wanted to ensure the system of staffing aligned with the principles of fairness, transparency and accountability and in doing so, called for the system to be 'tightened up' as opposed to 'reformed'. A number of suggestions were made for how the system might be reformed in order to adhere to the key principles noted, these are outlined below:

- **Fairness:** In order for the system to be 'fair', it was suggested positions should be made accessible to all members of the public. To achieve this it was suggested, vacancies should be openly advertised, recruitment should be operated and overseen by an independent body and all appointment should be based on merit, both in terms of the skill and interest of those employed
- **Transparency:** Achieving transparency would involve providing clear guidance on what can be claimed for, how many and what type of staff can be employed, how much an individual can be paid and the process for decided this;
- **Accountability:** To meet the principle of accountability, not only would the system need to be monitored by an independent body, but all job roles would need to be clearly defined by a job description and the performance of all employees monitored against these requirements.

The principles underpinned discussions in relation to the role MPs should take in appointing and employing staff, as well as whether or not family members should be allowed to work under an MP. These issues are discussed in the following sections.

5.2 Appointing and employing staff

The initial 'knee jerk' reaction to the topic of appointing and employing staff was for as much control to be removed from the MP as possible in order to minimise the potential for abuse. On the whole participants favoured the idea of this process being operated by a completely independent body to help guarantee fairness, transparency and accountability.

However once considered, it was felt that although this role should predominately be undertaken by an independent body, it was generally agreed the MP would need to be involved in the process in order to ensure the employee met their staffing needs - in terms of their skills and political ideas - and was ultimately someone they were able to work with effectively.

Also of importance was how far the rules and regulations associated with appointing and employing staff mirrored those applied to other forms of business and it was clear participants wanted to ensure any system could be aligned with business practices adopted outside of the Parliament. It was felt the introduction of an independent body working alongside MPs would deliver this, providing clear job descriptions outlining key responsibilities and skills were utilised.

'I think it should be run as a business whereby there are jobs that are available and people apply for those jobs and their decision is made by somebody outside, like a manager.'

(Birmingham)

Participants often queried how salary levels were agreed and how payments were made to staff and it was clear the central organisation of payments was seen as crucial to providing a fair system. It was felt that MPs should not play any part in the agreement or distribution of salaries, as it was felt this afforded them too much discretion and left the system open to abuse.

As an alternative to an independent body, it was suggested that the House of Commons could set up a central pool of administrators from which MPs' staff would be provided. This system was said to be easy to regulate, fair and would also mean support staff would not lose their job if an MP failed to be re-elected. Although, it was acknowledged that practically this might be difficult to organise and would perhaps not always provide the MP with the most suitable employee, it did receive limited support.

5.3 Hiring family members

Despite some initial negative reactions, once considered it was generally thought to be acceptable to hire family members providing they were the 'right' person for the job, that is, they met the necessary prerequisites in terms of qualifications, skills and attitude and went through the same process as any other applicant

when applying for the job and in terms of performance monitoring. Once again the arguments alluded back to the principles of fairness, transparency and accountability.

'I think it's okay if they are qualified to do that job and they actually do the job.'

(Birmingham)

'And I think as well with the family members, what we were talking about before, I think if you are working with a family member that is open to, people are going to point the finger at you ... but I don't think there's anything wrong with them if they go through the same process as everybody else and that makes it fair. And it can be regulated as well.'

(Birmingham)

A number of potential benefits and problems were identified in relation to hiring family members and these are outlined below:

Benefits:

- Hiring family members could lead to improved relationships between the MP and their staff given they are likely to have a trusting relationship and share common values and goals, particularly in relation to politics. Staff members might also be more accepting of the long hours required of this role, given their relationship.

'Yes but sometimes you employ your family...there are people round this table where all the family members are working with you, why not? Because then you trust them.'

(Birmingham)

- This approach could also enable MPs to spend time with family members, which might otherwise prove difficult given the long hours and travel required as part of the role of MP.

Problems:

- There was some concern that loyalty to family members could result in *'nepotism'* and leave the system open to abuse and cover-ups. This perception was largely fuelled by a lack of trust in MPs to approach the hiring of family members fairly and honestly. For example, it was suggested this system increased the likelihood of MPs hiring inappropriate staff in terms of their skills and them paying them more than their worth or market value as a result of the indirect personal benefit.

'You can argue the fact that by employing his wife he's just feathering his income a bit more isn't he, as a family, that his household income can be increased by £75,000 if that's what he chooses to pay her in a wage.'

(Birmingham)

- It was suggested that hiring family members could also be seen as a block to widening access to politics, as undertaking an administrative role of this kind could be seen as a way to enter or become more involved in politics for other members of the public who are otherwise unfamiliar and unconnected to the system.

6 Offices and office equipment

To assist MPs in fulfilling their parliamentary role, a maximum budget of £22,393 a year is currently set out to cover expenses for offices and office equipment. These expenses cover administrative and office expenditure which can be used to fund accommodation and equipment for constituency offices and surgeries. It can also be used for contracting secretarial support; travel for staff members and additional UK travel for MPs; and for administrative costs, such as interpretation and translation services, staff training and for commissioned work that a member of staff might otherwise have undertaken, such as research.

Some MPs may choose not to run a constituency office but to conduct all their work out of the House of Commons or their own home. In this case they are entitled to claim for additional costs incurred for using their home as an office but cannot claim mortgage costs.

This chapter of the report explores the perceptions in relation to offices and office equipment as an expense, looking at the participants' views on the system overall and specifically, at how office equipment should ideally be provided, the use of home offices and hiring offices from a political party.

6.1 Principles underpinning the system

The provision of a budget to cover the running of an office was generally perceived to be an acceptable expense given the need for MPs to run an office in order to carry out their role effectively.

'They need to have a base; they need to work from somewhere.'

(Cardiff)

Similarly to the issue of staffing, there was not a strong desire to overhaul the system currently in place for offices and office equipment; however, participants did want the system to better take account of the principles of clarity, transparency, scrutiny and accountability. To do this, it was thought necessary to provide clear guidelines outlining exactly what can be bought under this resource and to introduce stringent processes for monitoring and regulated spend in order to remove the potential for abuse of the allocated budget. It should be noted, that the introduction of *'safeguards'* was key to the public's acceptance of the expense.

'[It is seen as acceptable] providing there are safeguards about things like that.'

(Birmingham)

As an alternative or addition to the current system it was suggested that in order to help regulate the system equipment could be purchased or leased from either

an agreed supplier where the items available for purchase were approved, or from a centralised pool organised by the House of Commons or an independent body.

'if it is in a pool where you can pull the equipment out and say there you go, there's your bundle of equipment, enough for you and a PA or whatever or, you know, they shouldn't need to be having thousands and thousands of pounds worth.'

(Birmingham)

It was felt that either approach would ensure the budget was used to buy essential items rather than luxury goods; help reduce costs as equipment could be purchased in bulk; guarantee the provision of a certain standard of goods; and provide parity between MPs.

'I think central supply is a great idea. You're buying in bulk, you know exactly what they need.'

(Glasgow)

Under the centralised system equipment could then be returned to the central pool or passed to another MP in the case of MPs leaving office. Similarly the leasing option would allow the equipment to be updated when needed and again returned at the point of leaving office.

Discussions around agreed suppliers and central supplies seemed to be more prolific than the idea of leasing office equipment. It seemed that the attraction to the concept once again stemmed from a desire for more transparency and control to prevent any abuse of the system.

6.2 Home offices and equipment

Participants were generally happy for the budget to be spent on setting up home offices and purchasing equipment to be used within the MPs' home, as this was seen as legitimate and necessary expense that would enable the MP to conduct their role effectively.

In addition to this, the use of work equipment by either the MP or their family for personal use was also deemed acceptable providing it was genuinely bought for the purpose of work; in this way it was the intent and transparency surrounding the purchasing of the goods that was paramount. To an extent it was seen as 'normal' and 'natural' for work equipment to be used at home by the employee or their family and certainly, this was something participants were able to directly relate to as many of them had laptops provided by work that were used at home. The only concern noted related to concerns about confidentiality given that work laptops could hold sensitive information.

As with the purchasing of office equipment more broadly, participants called for complete transparency and accountability in relation to setting up home offices and as such, it was seen as essential to outline clear guidelines on what can be bought for the home office and a monitoring system to ensure the regulations are abided by.

6.3 Leasing from a political party

Leasing party offices was seen as an acceptable practice and almost a non-issue for participants, providing the process was transparent, provided value for money, offered suitable office accommodation and was not used to directly benefit the party by either paying above the market value for the office space or by allowing party staff to use the equipment.

'But if they were charging four times the market value for their office space because it was going back into the Labour Party or, you know, Conservative Party, I'd have an issue with that, you know.'

(Cardiff)

'But if it was the same as the market value ... similar office space or less, well there's no harm there, is there?'

(Cardiff)

The potential benefit to the political party was viewed positively in a very limited number of cases, in so far as financial remuneration for the office space could act to fund party activities which could in turn be of benefit constituents.

7 Travel

MPs are expected to spread their time between Westminster and their constituency, by spending up to three or four days a week in Westminster when the house is sitting and the remaining in their constituency. Consequently, travel is an integral part of a MPs' role with some MPs having to travel great distances as a result of the location of their constituency. As a result of this MPs may claim travel expenditure to cover travel by themselves, their staff and to a limited degree their families. MPs may claim for all travel between Westminster, their constituency and their main home, as well as travel within their constituencies. They may also claim for up to three visits a year to the national parliaments of Council of Europe member states or EU institutions.

This chapter of the report explores the perceptions surrounding travel expenses, looking specifically at the public's views on the current budget set aside for travel, perceptions around travel between home and Westminster, class of travel and providing transport for MPs' family members.

7.1 Principles underpinning the system

It was generally accepted that MPs should be able to claim for travel costs incurred directly as part of their job, for example, travel to meetings, or when travelling between their constituency and Westminster. Overall, this expense was seen as being less controversial than other expenses as it was felt to be less ambiguous, less likely to be taken advantage of and less costly overall. Furthermore, participants were generally able to identify with the idea of claiming for travel expenses, as this was seen as standard practice within any organisation and was usually something they were able to do as part of their job.

'Because I mean most, virtually everybody, if they have to travel for work away on business they get all the travel fares paid, I think anything they use they should get paid, that's pretty fair, I have no quibble with that.'

(London)

Given that MPs are required to travel as part of their job and between their constituency and Westminster on a regular basis. The provision of travel expenses was also seen as key to ensuring the role of MP remained accessible and attractive to the widest range of individuals possible.

While the participants readily accepted the need for MPs to claim expenses for travel, it was still perceived to be important for the system to adhere to certain values. Details of these are outlined below:

- **Value for money:** Although participants accepted the need for travel expenses to be claimed, it was suggested that MPs should act responsibly and

do all they could to limit expenditure. In addition, the system should be set up and continuously reviewed to ensure that cost saving measures were considered and implemented.

- **Reasonable:** It was important for the rules surrounding travel expenses to be reasonable, fair and proportionate.
- **Clarity:** It was suggested the rules relating to travel expenses should be agreed and clearly outlined to ensure MPs and members of the public were aware what they could claim for.
- **Transparency:** It was important for the system to be transparent and this meant MPs providing receipts for all travel claimed in line with the rules usually adopted within other organisations.
- **Scrutiny:** In order to be workable and command public trust the system needed be monitored, audited and scrutinised by an independent body.

'Well basically I think that everybody who is in business has to log their mileages their journeys and they have to present for expenses purposes something that can be audited, that can be seen. And anything that's not justifiable they wouldn't put it. So therefore if it is reasonably well audited I don't see a problem.'

(Glasgow)

7.2 Travel between home and Westminster

While it was accepted that MPs should be able to claim for travel costs incurred as part of their job, it was suggested that limitations should be placed on the travel made between home and Westminster and that guidance should be developed to clearly communicate these rules.

Primarily it was felt that travel expenses should be limited according to the distance travelled. It was largely viewed as acceptable to claim travel expenses between home and Westminster where MPs were required to travel longer distances, for example, where MPs lived in a constituency outside of London. However, the payment of travel expenses for shorter distances was more contentious, particularly in relation to travel within London (inner or outer) with this expense generally not being seen as acceptable or legitimate.

Objections to travel payments for shorter distances were generally based on the idea that members of the public were generally expected to pay for travel from home to work, even where they were able to claim for other work related travel expenses, for example, travel to meetings. Although participants understood the argument for meeting these costs in the case of MPs who were required to travel

longer distances, they were less able to understand the need for this in the case of those who lived closer to Westminster. As with a most of the topics discussed, when a discrepancy was thought to have been identified between the rules and regulations applying to the public and those adopted for MPs, the response was generally to align the MP with the regulations applied to the public.

'Well it is because I understand they should travel for business purposes, I definitely understand if they have got to go to Hull or whatever, but if they live in London, we don't claim it when we work.'

(London)

However despite identifying a need for limitations to be set according to the distance travelled between home and Westminster, participants across the workshops were generally unable to define the exact distance.

It was clear that participants did not think it was acceptable or necessary for travel costs to be paid in the case of those travelling from a second home to Westminster, where the second home was already being claimed for through the expenses system. Claiming this expense was seen as benefiting twice given that the MP had already received payment for accommodation in order to ensure they were located close to Westminster.

'No what I am saying is if they live in London for example, they've got their second home, somewhere near Westminster, they've still got to take a tube to Westminster, why should they, they shouldn't claim for that. They claim for if they are going far places outside London.'

(London)

Similarly, it was felt if MPs chose to live outside of their constituency, then paying for travel between their home and the constituency was unreasonable and out of alignment with the rules generally applied to the public.

7.3 Class of travel

Reactions to the concept of paying for first class travel were mixed. The initial reaction was often to reject the idea on the basis that as travel was paid for by the public and should therefore be provided in the most cost effective way and that MPs should not be given preferential treatment.

However, following discussion and consideration of the benefits and problems with first class travel, perceptions shifted and ultimately it was usually agreed that a degree of first class travel should be provided. The following reasons were given for this:

- **Security:** It was thought first class travel would offer greater security and privacy necessary in the case of senior MPs, for example, cabinet ministers and for those working on confidential documentation.
- **Working Facilities:** It was acknowledged that the working facilities provided in first class coaches would be superior, with participants mentioning increased access to internet connections, electrical sockets and general space. As a result it was thought MPs would be able to work more effectively and therefore maximise the time the spent travelling which would ultimately be of benefit to the public.

'First class gives you access to the internet, you can use the internet so that means they can work. So sometimes if they travel quite a distance between where they live into Westminster, probably they have a lot of work to do. The last thing they want is anybody thinking they can approach them and say 'oh you've done this and you've done that'. They need a bit of privacy and probably in first class would be where they can get that kind of privacy. They can get a plug to plug in their laptop and get some work done.'

(Glasgow)

- **Frequent Travel:** Given the amount of travel an MP undertakes, it was often simply considered to be 'fair' and more 'humane' to allow first class travel.

'I believe they should be allowed to travel first class ... let them travel first class. I agree with that ... I think it's quite fair to be honest with you. The one [expense] that concerns me is the home expenses.'

(London)

7.4 Family Travel

The rules and regulations surrounding family travel were not seen as being unreasonable or overly generous and were largely seen as acceptable providing they were reasonable and proportionate.

The overarching reaction was that the allowance to transport families was acceptable and importantly in line with policies often adopted by other organisations in the case of employees who worked away from home.

'I think that's fine, shall I tell you why, because TFL or the Government for that, they get that at the moment, they get free tube, for you and your partner and your kids. It's the same process.'

(London)

'If they [public] can get it I mean why cant MP's get the same kind of thing.'

(London)

Furthermore, it was thought that enabling family members to claim for limited travel expenditure would work to make the role more attractive and accessible to people with families. It was however suggested that if an MP does transport their family, it should be for a *'genuine business journey'*. Here again the concern was that the system could potentially be used in to benefit the MP outside of the limitations of their work.

8 Communication

MPs are expected to communicate with their constituents, responding to individual correspondence as well as keeping them informed of relevant parliamentary matters. At present there are two mechanisms designed to support MPs communication:

- MPs get a limited provision of House of Commons stationery and pre-paid envelopes which they may use to correspond with individuals; and
- MPs may claim for communications expenditure which is designed to meet the costs of producing publications, such as reports, surveys and petitions and can also be used to send out contact cards, set up websites and advertise surgeries and constituency meetings. It cannot be used for party campaigning. The current maximum is £10,400 a year and has been fixed until 2012.

This chapter of the report explores the perceptions surrounding communication as an expense, looking specifically at the public's views on the current budget, access to communication, the principles needed to underpin the system, the potential for benefiting political parties and the annual report.

8.1 Providing communications

Communicating with the public and constituents was seen as an essential part of the MP's role and therefore it was seen as legitimate and justifiable to provide an allowance to cover the cost of communication. Communication was seen as being increasing important and accepted part of contemporary society which would help to engender trust and respect between the public and MPs.

'I don't have an issue with it, if that money has been spent to inform constituents. What people have issue with, is what's been hidden.'

(Birmingham)

Given the importance placed on communication, participants were usually opposed to the idea of decreasing or stopping the communication allowance, as it was felt this would work to further separate MPs from the public at a time when relationships needed to be improved.

While the communications budget was seen as 'justifiable' in principle, experiences of actually receiving communication were mixed, with some participants suggesting they received regular communication from their MP and others not having received any communication, aside from that received during election campaigns. For example, in one instance a participant explained how they received regular newsletters from their MP detailing local issues, such as

street lighting. These communications were always said to include a picture of the MP.

'I think pre-local elections, we sometimes, not always get some paper flyer popped through the door.'

(Birmingham)

It was felt that with a budget being available for communication, MPs should work to ensure everyone receives information and certainly, the lack of communication received by participants called into question how effectively the allowance was currently being spent.

Overall the proposition of an annual report was largely supported as it was viewed as a means by which the public could be informed on the progress made by MPs and could potentially be used as a *'key performance indicator'*. However, participants acknowledged that production of an annual report could be costly and ultimately there was no willingness to pay for it. Moreover, participants were sceptical about whether the public would actually read a report of this nature regardless of their general appetite, simply as a result of the effort involved in

It was also accepted that communications would need to be approached flexibly given the differences in constituencies in terms of geography and demography. However, it was felt they should be designed to be accessible to all as far as possible, for example, being provided in different formats, such as paper and web-based.

'You would imagine they would be moving more towards web based communication however that leaves a bit section of the community out, who don't have computers, all that sort of thing.'

(Belfast)

As an alternative, it was also suggested that communication could be provided by a central supplier in order to cut costs, as this would enable mass discounts on printing and production of communication material. There was generally limited support for this idea.

8.2 Principles underpinning the system

In order for the allowance to work effectively in the future it was felt the following values would need to be considered and adhered to. Providing this occurred participants were broadly content for the system to remain unchanged. The principles highlighted are outlined below:

- **Scrutiny and accountability:** There was a perceived need to provide firm guidelines for what and how the communications allowance should be used

and then for this to be monitored closely on an on-going basis. It was accepted that the allowance would need to be driven and ultimately determined by the MP given they are central to the process locally. However, it was felt the monitoring and regulation of the allowance needed to take place by an independent body, as with other issues of policing the system.

'As a constituent I would like to know what [they do], I mean they do some leaflet drops on vandalism, ASBOs, whatever it is they have issue with this year. So I think in that terms of communication [the MP] would need to be the one who has to decide what budget and what issues there are. But I think the issue is how are the expenses audited through the year. What was done and how was it marketed, was it done effectively.

(Birmingham)

- **Transparency:** Participants called for clear and transparent information in relation to how the allowance was being spent, for example, they called for clarification on: what communications take place, what mediums are used, the key messages included in the communications and whether the process was carried out effectively.
- **Proportionality:** The key concern in terms of proportionality was whether or not spend on communication was proportionate to how much MPs are letting their constituents 'know' and how effectively this is being distributed. Proportionality was also brought up in terms of the uniformity of the budget across different constituencies. It was seen that different constituencies would have different communication requirements as a consequence of size or other variables and as such should be granted a budget according to their need.
- **Honesty:** This principle largely related to the 'messages' being communicated by the MP and a desire to be able to trust the accuracy of the information communicated.

8.3 Promoting the MP and their political party

It was thought to be very challenging to separate communications aimed at informing and making links with the public, with those aimed at promoting the MP or the political party to which they belonged. The distinction between these communications was thought to be rather blurred and as a consequence participants thought it would be hard and perhaps unnecessary to resolve the issue.

Overall it was accepted that the promotion of the MP and to a lesser extent the political party to which they belonged was an unavoidable bi-product of communication, given that all communications can be seen as a form of campaigning and providing the communication benefited the public this issue was

not generally of concern. However despite this, participants stressed the importance of limiting the overt promotion of the MP or a political party where possible. It was suggested this could be achieved by setting firm parameters regarding how and when communications could be sent out and specifically, avoiding periods leading up to elections.

9 Leaving office

A Resettlement Grant is available for MPs who fail to be re-elected or who do not stand at a general election. It cannot be claimed by MPs who leave the House during a Parliament. The level of grant received varies from six to 12 months salary; this is equivalent currently to between £32,383 and £64,766.

This chapter of the report explores the perceptions of the Resettlement Grant with particular reference to whether or not the resettlement grant should be retained and if so how it should be organised and reformed.

9.1 The resettlement budget

Views in relation to the Resettlement Grant were generally found to change during the course of the discussion. Initial reactions were often negative, with the grant being seen as an unnecessary privilege that was out of step with the treatment of employees in other sectors and in cases where MPs were voted out, a reward for not doing their job properly, essentially a 'reward for failure'. It was suggested the possibility of losing their job should be an accepted risk of the profession and as such MPs should not receive payment to cushion this. However, following discussion and debate views regarding the need for a resettlement grant tended to shift towards a general acceptance that a grant of this nature should be provided in some form, in order to maintain attractiveness of the role and provide a buffer in the same way that redundancy payments might in other professions.

'You are rewarding them for failing, you are rewarding them for not being voted back in, I don't see why they should be rewarded.'

(London)

'If they stand and they don't get re-elected then at least they have then, in a sense, been made redundant like anybody else who was no longer required.'

(Glasgow)

More exceptionally, it was even suggested that MPs deserved this payment as a 'thank-you' for the time they spent engaged in public service.

'I suppose this is also, that lump of money we are talking about, it's also a way of saying thank you, you've been an MP and you've done something quite unusual, that kind of payment.'

(London)

While ultimately there was a general acceptance of the need for a resettlement budget, the amount received was generally seen as being overly generous. In

fact the amount received often shocked participants and they universally struggled to understand why a payment of this level would be required.

'When you said those figures, I was horrified'

(Birmingham).

' I think it fits with the idea, I think it is fair, I think it's a nice gesture but may be a little bit too much.'

(London)

A number of principles can be identified in relation to reforming the system and these are outlined below:

- **Value for money:** The current Resettlement Grant was generally thought to be overly generous in terms of the level of the grant received, especially given the current economic climate. In addition to reducing the overall level, it was emphasised the grant should be applied according to individual circumstances in order to reduce the overall cost and provide greater value of money to the taxpayer.
- **Proportionate, reasonable and fair:** It was felt that rather than providing a blanket fee to all MPs leaving office, the grant needed to be organised according to the individual circumstances of MPs and their need for a grant of this nature. For example, it was not thought to be fair or reasonable to provide this grant in cases where people had left under a cloud.
- **Equity:** The principle of providing a grant of this nature to act as security to MPs who needed it was supported, as it was felt this made access into politics more equitable. However it was stressed that receiving this grant and the amount received should not be a given and should be agreed on a case by case basis.

9.2 Reforming the Resettlement Grant

It was widely accepted that the system should take account of the circumstances under which an MP leaves office when deciding on whether to pay a grant and the level of grant received. It was generally felt that the grant should not be available to those who leave voluntarily, under a cloud or otherwise due to their own poor performance. Retirement was very much aligned with leaving voluntarily in so much as it could be prepared for.

'I think if they don't stand then they shouldn't be paid, because you have chosen to leave the job.'

(Glasgow)

'Well I suppose they have to be clean, they have to be clean, in other words they haven't left under a cloud, they haven't been accused of anything, or found guilty of anything.'

(Northern Ireland)

In addition to considering reasons for leaving, participants also thought the system could take account the financial circumstances of the MP, with some even suggesting the grant should be means-tested. For example, it was felt that the grant should not be available to those who voluntarily retire as MPs. Those who chose retirement would benefit from a generous retirement package and should not therefore be in need of a resettlement grant. The grant should not be paid in cases where the MP had a second job capable of supporting them or where they had already found alternative employment. It was also felt that the relocation needs of an MP could be taken into account. Moreover it was suggested that if the grant was paid monthly rather than as a one-off payment it could be better tied to need.

'And if that's their sole employment and they are not on the board of directors and getting a salary, if that's their only source of income yes'

(Northern Ireland)

There was also overwhelming agreement that the level of entitlement should be reduced. It was suggested that length of service and the performance of an MP should affect the level of grant payable.

10 Multiple Mandates

Currently there are no regulations preventing an MP from sitting in other legislatures once they become an MP, the only exception being the European Parliament which does not allow MPs to sit concurrently.

The current position in the House of Commons is that 16 out of 18 Northern Ireland MPs also sit in the Northern Ireland Assembly; one Scottish MP (Alex Salmond) sits in the Scottish Parliament; and no Welsh MPs also sit in the Welsh Assembly. This chapter of the report explores the perceptions surrounding what is known as 'double-jobbing' and the implications of this for the public and the MP. Please note, this issue was only discussed with participants in Northern Ireland.

10.1 Views on Multiple Mandates 'double-jobbing'

Participants were generally familiar with the issue and debate regarding 'double-jobbing' with information primarily being drawn from the media. Although views in relation to the issue were mixed, for the most part participants were not in favour of the practice.

'It should be phased out'

(Northern Ireland)

Regardless of their overall perception of the practice, participants were able to identify advantages and disadvantages and these are outlined in turn below:

The main advantage associated with 'double-jobbing' related to the ability of the MPs to represent their constituents in two places, that is within the Northern Ireland assemble and also in Westminster. It was felt this could offer the MP greater scope for raising awareness of and potentially managing particular issues that affected their constituents. It was also suggested this practice created cross fertilisation, with the knowledge gained by MPs as part of their additional role being used to benefit the public.

'Well if you are my MP and you covered Belfast and I have a problem or an issue that I wrote to you with you can not only bring it up to Parliament here, you have also got the power of bringing it up in Westminster.'

(Belfast)

In contrast, a number of disadvantages were raised in relation to this practice and these tended to relate to the impact of this on the MPs ability to act in the interest of their constituents, the appropriateness of receiving two salaries and having the opportunity to claim for two sets of expenses and impact this had on widening access to politics.

It was felt that spreading their time between the Assembly and Westminster meant MPs would be unable to meet their responsibilities and deliver effectively in both areas. For example, if MPs were working 70 hours per week in one role, participants questioned how they would have time to undertake another to a high standard.

'If they are working 70 hours already ... they can't possibly be at their full potential'

(Northern Ireland)

It was felt MPs ran the risk of focusing on one role at the expense of the other, becoming Westminster focused or visa versa. This practice was also seen as being out of line with those adopted in other professions, where it was thought undertaking two jobs would not be allowed.

'A lot of businesses in the private sector, there's no way they would allow another employee to have a second job outside their main employment, because of the adverse effect that would have on the quality of the work.'

(Northern Ireland)

In addition to undermining the quality of their work, it was also felt double-jobbing opened up greater potential for conflicts of interest to arise which could again impact on the MPs ability to serve their constituencies effectively.

The ability of MPs to receive two salaries and claim for two sets of allowances was also criticised. It was felt this system would foster greed, potentially attract the people to the role for the wrong reasons and provide greater opportunity to exploit the system. Moreover, given participants questioned the ability of MPs to fulfil both roles effectively given time limitations if nothing else, it was felt inappropriate and dishonest to claim for two salaries.

'They would be paid twice for the same job'

(Northern Ireland)

Ultimately, this system was thought to remove scope for widening involvement politics, an issue that participants felt needed to be remedied given the limited pool of politicians involved in politics in Northern Ireland.

10.2 Reforming the system

- There was a degree of sympathy towards the MPs currently double-jobbing with participants acknowledging this situation was not solely of their making. Rather it was felt this situation had arisen as a result of the history of Northern Ireland politics which fostered a general unwillingness of members of the public to become involved in politics. Furthermore, this system was said to

have been endorsed by the public in so much as they voted MPs into two positions.

- Notwithstanding this, double-jobbing was not thought to be of benefit to the public and for the most part participants called for the practice to end as soon as possible. It was suggested that political parties needed to drive this forward by fielding alternative candidates for these positions.
- Regardless of the desire to reform the system as soon as possible, it was generally acknowledged this would need to take place over a period of time in order to take account of a number of practical considerations. Participants disagreed about the time period over which the transition should take place and no consensus was reached on this. A number of specific suggestions were made in relation to the timeframe, these included:
 - **2010 General Election:** It was suggested these changes could be made as part of the 2010 general elections; however this received limited support due to the narrow transition time it offered;
 - **2011 Northern Ireland Election:** It was suggested these changes could take place at the 2011 Northern Ireland elections;
 - **2014 General Elections:** It was said this practice could be phased out gradually by the 2014 general elections. There were mixed views regarding this suggestion with some participants viewing the time period as too long and others suggesting that the slow transition would be necessary to protect the system and the MPs; or
 - **Variable transition periods:** It was said the practice could be phased out gradually with MPs determining their own timetable, as it was felt they would be best placed to ensure the change did not impact on the system overall. While there was limited support for this approach it did demonstrate a degree of trust in the MP to make the right decision.

'Well I suspect that if it was made known that this was the intention you'd get a lot of politicians going I agree and they would generally go their way when they were ready, rather than be seen to be the ones holding on tight. So I think there could be a stake involved here but I think you'd find an awful lot of politicians who would go oh yes I was thinking that for years. And they'd want to be the first ones to be seen to be doing it properly.'

(Northern Ireland)

A number of specific issues were highlighted for consideration when deciding how and over which time period to reform the system are outlined below.

- **De-stabilising the system:** Concerns were expressed in relation to removing experienced MPs from the system without a transition period and replacing them with inexperienced politicians as it was felt this could be chaotic and work to de-stabilise and potentially damage the *'fledgling'* the system.

'Yes well I suppose we want continuity of service. We don't want a breakdown in the system as consumers so we are looking for a gentle transition to where we want to go. I mean if we were to pull the plug on all these guys you could find people in jobs they can't really handle.'

(Northern Ireland)

- **Cost to the public:** Practical concerns were raised in relation to the cost of overhauling the system given the current economic climate. Specifically, participants mentioned the cost of holding a large number of bi-elections.
- **Impact on the MPs:** Participants had some sympathy with MPs who currently held two positions and reasoned that any reform of the system would need to take into account the impact this would have on them. It was suggested that MPs would need to be given sufficient notice of this change, although what 'sufficient notice' constituted was not clearly outlined.

11 Summary

A number of principles were highlighted as part of this research in relation to how a system of MPs' expenses might be reformed. Importantly, the principles noted were consistent across the workshops, even where the detail of how these might be achieved differed. Notwithstanding this, there was much consensus in views across the sample, regardless of perceptions of the current system.

Participants were clear that a new system of expenses should be underpinned by a series of principles and these were reflected in discussions relating to each resource. The key principles noted included the following:

- **Scrutiny and accountability:** The issue of policing the system was raised spontaneously across all the workshops and provided the context against which other issues were considered. Tackling the issue of policing ahead of other topics made the discussions more constructive overall; this was especially the case when discussing the more contentious topics, for example, the accommodation allowance. The principles of scrutiny and accountability were identified as key to the effective policing of the system, specifically, it was felt the system needed to be overseen by an independent body and MPs needed to be held account for misusing the system, including being subject to sanctions where these were appropriate. The realisation of these principles was identified as central to restoring public trust in the system of MPs expenses.
- **Openness and transparency:** Regardless of the level of monitoring put in place, it remained important for the system to be open and transparent to the public, in terms of both the rules governing the system and how expenses were being spent. Specifically, the public wanted details of MPs' expenses to be published as completely as possible (without impacting on security) in order to provide another level of checks and to ensure MPs were directly accountable to the public.
- **Clarity and simplicity:** In order to prevent misuse of the system (intentionally or otherwise) it was viewed as important to make the system as unambiguous as possible to ensure it was understood by both MPs and members of the public and could be clearly monitored. To achieve this it was said the system needed to be 'simple' in terms of design and communicated in a 'clear' way, for example, through guidance.
- **Proportionate and reasonable:** Following consideration of the issues as part of the workshop discussions, participants were generally happy for expenses to be paid to MPs in relation to the resources discussed, providing the rules governing this were proportionate and reasonable and took account of the real needs of MPs. Specifically, it was said the expenses system should

provide a 'basic' assistance to enable MPs to conduct their role, rather than offering anything that could be seen as a luxury.

- **Parity and equity:** It was seen as important to ensure a level of parity between the systems put in place for MPs and those experienced by members of the public. It was seen as essential to align the rules governing MPs expenses, as far as possible, with those experienced by the public given the public used their own experiences as a barometer against which to judge the expenses system. Furthermore, it was said the system needed to be equitable in terms of what MPs could claim for. However, participants were clear to note this did not mean all MPs should receive the same, rather it was felt the system should be organised to ensure MPs received what they needed given their circumstances.
- **Value for money:** Providing a cost effective system that offered value for money was seen as key given expenses were being paid by the taxpayer. Although value for money was important in relation to all resources, the issue of value for money was raised specifically in terms of allowances paid for travel, the resettlement grant and accommodation. Interestingly, although cost was perceived to be an important consideration, it was seen as more important to ensure MPs were unable to gain personally from the system. The issue of cost effectiveness was seen as being of additional importance given the current economic climate and it was felt MPs not only needed to recognise this and limit spending, but the system should also be designed to 'boost' the economy wherever possible, for example, by paying back profit made from second homes into the treasury.
- **Selflessness:** It was seen as imperative that a system of MPs' expenses supported MPs in undertaking their role, rather than enabling them to benefit personally in any way, whether that be through profit received on a second home or by providing them with a generous resettlement grant when leaving office (where this was not needed). It was clear the role of MP was seen as a vocation rather than a career and as such, it was felt MPs should undertake the role to serve the public, rather than to benefit themselves and this meant they should (to a degree) also accept the inconveniences of the role, such as working away from home, or travelling.
- **Honesty, integrity and leadership:** Rather than capturing these principles within a new system of expenses, it was suggested these values needed to be adhered to by MPs when following the system.

12 Appendices

12.1 Sample profile

Variable	
Area	London (14) Birmingham (26) – 2 workshops Cardiff (13) Glasgow (18) – 2 workshops Belfast (29) – 2 workshops
SEG	AB (26) C1C2 (44) DE (30)
Educational attainment	Spread – including GCSE level, (35) A level (28) and degree level (31) Lower (6)
Gender	Female (49) Male (51)
Age	18-24 (15) 25-34 (29) 35-44 (18) 45-54 (22) 55+ (16)
Ethnicity	White (65) BME (35)
Interest in current affairs	Strong interest (43) Some (31) Minimal interest (27)
Disability	<i>Physical disability – include at least 5 across sample as a whole – across all workshops (5)</i>
Family type	Parent (51) Non-parents (43)
Total	100