

Sir Christopher Kelly KCB
Committee on Standards in Public Life
35 Great Smith Street
LONDON
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Our Ref: KELL010/090182

24 June 2009

Dear Sir Christopher

Review of MPs' Expenses

Thank you for taking the time to meet with me and a member of my staff earlier this week. I am writing to follow up that meeting so that my comments may be treated as a formal submission to your inquiry and be made available in the public domain.

As you know, I believe the current level of staffing allowance to be inadequate to meet the needs of a busy inner city constituency office. In my view, we need a system of funding MPs' offices which is capable of treating all MPs fairly but which has an element of flexibility to enable MPs to bid for extra funds if it can be demonstrated that the constituency caseload demands it.

An inner city constituency such as Tottenham places far greater demands on its MPs than, for example, an affluent suburban constituency might. The volume of casework is extremely high and the nature of the cases particularly challenging. Of course, there are many other constituencies which also experience a high volume of casework or which face other challenges such as a rural population which is dispersed over a large geographical area. In making my case I do not seek to detract from other Members' concerns and I hope they too will make a case to you should they feel the need to do so.

My constituents are some of the most vulnerable and needy in the country and require a great deal of representation. Tottenham is on the index of deprivation, has the highest unemployment rate in London and is ethnically diverse.

The caseload in Tottenham is tremendous and includes many difficult child protection, housing, immigration, intimidation, crime and anti-social behaviour issues. Baby P is a recent example of the level of seriousness of the issues dealt with by my office. Last year my office handled 2,227 new individual constituents' cases, held over

20 advice surgeries (I see, on average, 60 people per surgery) and answered over 600 letters from constituents asking for my views on policy issues, as well as handling the countless other enquiries my office receives on a daily basis. My office is currently taking on about 150 new cases every month with only one paid staff member to handle them.

In addition, as a politician with a national profile there is a certain level of expectation, particularly amongst black and minority ethnic communities that I am available to people beyond the boundaries of my Tottenham constituency.

I am worried that there are vulnerable people in my constituency who struggle to get through to my office because there are simply not enough staff to deal with the volume of incoming correspondence.

As you know, there is currently no assessment of need and of the staffing levels necessary to do casework – all MPs receive a flat rate allowance to pay staff salaries regardless of the circumstances of their constituency. My constituents should be able to expect that adequate public funds be provided to enable me to do my job as their MP effectively.

The allocation of resources to casework should accurately reflect the level of need. Caseworkers do a job that is entirely about public service (they are not political). I believe there is a case for ring-fencing a proportion of the staffing allowance for caseworkers and for allocating those funds according to the level of demand for casework each MP can demonstrate s/he is dealing with on an annual basis.

I hope these observations are helpful to you in your continuing enquiry and I look forward to hearing the result of your deliberations.

Finally, you said you would be interested to see the Housing and Anti-Social Behaviour handbooks which my office produced using the Communications Allowance – copies are enclosed for your information.

Yours sincerely

David Lammy

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