

Submission to the Committee on Standards in Public Life 5June09

Review of MPs' Expenses

I support the guiding principles and presumptions set out in the booklet of issues and questions. I believe that two of the key principles are that arrangements should provide best value for the tax payer and that the arrangements should encourage representation from all areas of society. My comments relate primarily to these two matters but don't in any way suggest that the other principles and presumptions are unimportant.

The issue of best value for the tax payer.

MPs need support in order to do their job effectively, the systems to ensure this must be able to be accessed easily. This does mean central procurement for various services – eg. as currently in relation to IT (although better monitoring and oversight of this is needed). There is clearly a case for using the bulk buying of equipment to over 600 MPs to achieve significant savings.

The provision 4 years ago of credit cards for buying train tickets has enabled MPs who know when they are travelling to pre-book tickets online making significant savings. This is however left to individual MPs to do as they wish, there is no information provided to MPs not using this system to encourage them to do so.

The issue of encouraging representation from all areas of society.

This is more complex area; there are probably as many different personal arrangements as there are MPs. In addition, over time personal requirements change – MPs marry, have children, divorce, children leave home, and parents become elderly and need care etc. Add to this the situation of MPs before they are elected. Many live in the constituency and therefore need a property in London, others live in London and need a property in the constituency, and others have families living elsewhere who may have to move either to the constituency or London.

The suggestions therefore that only rent should be payable is not necessarily tenable for many MPs. If someone has a permanent home in London there may not be suitable rented accommodation in their constituency as housing markets vary widely across the country. Those who suggest rent only seem to envisage a situation where the MP comes to London on their own for four days a week, returning to their family for the weekend.

I appreciate public's concern that MPs should not benefit from public money in investing in property. But, the reality is that over time mortgages are often the cheapest option for public money. MPs would then have the choice of paying for accommodation which is suitable to their circumstances if they can add to the public support from their own resources. In order to make this acceptable there should be a cap on rent or mortgage payments as the current interim arrangements have put in place.

An alternative suggestion, which I would support, is that the pay of MPs should be increased to reflect the need to have two homes. This would ensure that the amount is taxable, and would leave individual MPs to make arrangements that best suit them. It would also do away with a layer of bureaucracy in the House of Commons Fees Office.

It seems wrong to say that MPs should not be reimbursed for the cost of furniture. The financial strains on MPs are greatest when they are first elected. I believe that MPs should be given a set up allowance that can be spent at any time during their first term. It cannot be right that MPs whose background is one of limited resources are unable to buy a bed or chair.

Scrutiny & Audit

One of the key points in all these arrangements is proper scrutiny and audit. There needs to be a sea change in the processes. MPs, and certainly those who will be elected in the future, will want the reassurance that their arrangements meet the guidelines. They should be able to get authoritative advice in the way that is currently available from the Registrar of Members' Interests. The new arrangements for audit should be allowed time to bed in but be monitored to ensure that they are operating correctly.

New arrangements should be put in place for staff to ensure they are being appropriately employed. At the time of appointment it should be possible to go beyond the current requirements for lodging a contract and job description. For example, the MP could make a statement on why they believe the person is capable of undertaking the tasks in the job description, including previous experience and qualifications. This could provide greater reassurance that any relatives who are employed are suitable for the job.

Greater assistance could also be given to MPs in the form of standard employment documents, such as leave sheets, sickness records, time sheets and appraisal forms. These could include advice on good employment practice.

Meg Munn MP