

Submission from Ms P Gravell

Dear Sir

I find it difficult to understand that MPs have had no understanding of what is a reasonable expense when spending our tax payers money. To me it is simple, just look at the rules parliament has made for the public when they have needed a second home either temporarily or permanently or goods to furnish a home, then apply the same rules to MPs.

The rules I am talking about are of course those rules found in the welfare benefits system.

If a person who has one home and needs help towards the costs of a second home, they must apply for income support mortgage interest payments or housing benefits. Mortgage interest is limited to loans below £100,000 and is paid at a standardised interest rate, it is means tested of course. Housing benefit is similarly means tested. If a person needs to travel to work or incur accommodation costs in doing a job away from his normal workplace then there is no compensation via the tax credits system or by way of tax allowances for this expenditure so why should MPs be treated any differently. A person fleeing domestic violence who cannot stay in their own home because it is unsafe will have to pay their usual housing costs plus additional housing costs of their temporary accommodation out of their own pockets and will only receive help from the benefit system if they are on low income - ie subject to a means test. Why can't MPs accept that their wages are sufficient to pay these expenses and not claim any extras at all. A person who wants to claim benefits for a 2nd home rarely receives payments for more than 52 weeks, they are expected to relocate and not keep on running two homes. If somebody is homeless and needs emergency overnight accommodation and applies to their local authority for help it will be provided on a night by night basis for which the homeless person must reimburse the full cost, subject to any housing benefits received. The same should apply to MPs. They should not be allowed a second home of any sort either rented or bought but should make arrangements on a night by night basis the cost of which should be assessed by the rent officer for their area - in fact no new rules are needed - just look at the local housing allowance rates which are published on the rent service website, these are based on tenancies which are usually for a minimum of 6 months so perhaps a multiplier could be applied to reflect the fact that night by night accommodation will be more expensive.

If a person who is homeless or loses all their belongings through fire/flood or other disaster and has insufficient means to replace them because, for example they are uninsured, they will need to apply to the Social Fund for help and may apply for a community care grant. The maximum CCG paid for any one claim in 2007-8 was £5,081.46 and I would anticipate that this was for a whole household's furnishings. If MPs want to know what is a reasonable expenditure or which goods are deemed as essential then they should look at some of the decisions made by the Social Fund for members of the public. They would find that plasma screen TVs, garden maintenance and other high value electrical items

would not be funded. what happens to the goods paid for by the tax payer? Once the MP no longer needs them why are they allowed to keep them? Why are they not public property and could be used by the next MP needing the same item? Do these high value TVs not last long enough for more than one person to have the benefit of them?

In many jobs uniforms are returned, cleaned and then made available to the next employee of the right size. I'm sure these goods could be returned, stored and reissued and if an MP does not handle the items carefully they should be billed for any damage not deemed fair wear and tear. I bet if somebody repeatedly claimed to the social fund for a damaged toilet their treatment of it would be questioned.

If anybody not on means tested benefits applies for a community care grant they will be refused and may be offered a social fund loan instead- which needs to be repaid - MPs should not receive any benefit towards personal goods unless their income falls so low that they need it topped up by Working Tax credit because of their personal and family circumstances, then any payment should be by way of loan to be repaid and subject to the same test of reasonableness and necessity as applied to members of the public in similar circumstances.

MPs should only be allowed to claim the costs of actually doing their job, eg, replies to constituents, and should not be able to claim the costs of self promotion and other propaganda for their party. MPs should not be allowed to employ family members unless those members have succeeded in getting the job through a widely advertised and fair selection process, they should declare the relationship and be subject to extra scrutiny.

MPs who breach the rules should go through the same criminal investigation process that claimants who are accused of welfare benefit fraud are subject to. I'm sure that many a shoplifter has genuinely walked out of a shop and forgotten to pay for very low value items but has been prosecuted and a court has decided otherwise and they have a criminal record to show for it - let the criminal justice system decide whether these MPs genuinely forgot they were claiming for mortgages which had been paid off etc or whether they should be prosecuted for the courts to decide the issue.

Lunch expenses of up to £5 should not need receipt, that will just keep more people in jobs for which we are paying for- every other claimable expense should need a receipt. Travel costs should be limited to public transport except where it is unavailable or unreasonable practicable, mileage allowances should not increase with size of car - this encourages pollution. Car sharing should be encouraged with costs shared. Alcohol should never be a claimable beverage.

yours faithfully

Patricia Gravell (ms)