



Sheffield Hallam Constituency Labour Party

Secretary: G Smith

Committee on Standards in Public Life - Review of MPs' Expenses

Response from Sheffield Hallam Constituency Labour Party

General

1. In making this submission we have taken account of the issues and questions outlined in 1.14 to 1.16. of the consultation document without addressing them all. We have addressed what we consider to be the main and most pressing issues.
2. As political activists in touch with the electorate through campaigning we are acutely aware of the strength of public feeling about this issue. As strong supporters of representative democracy we are concerned that the reputation of the House of Commons and public faith in party politics should be restored as quickly as possible.
3. We know and admire many MPs and believe that the majority of them are honest men and women of integrity who have entered politics primarily to help others. However, we accept that some of the recent revelations make it appear that many are motivated mainly by greed. It will take a while to change this perception but it is essential that a system of expenses and allowances is in place which is transparent, fair and restores public confidence.
4. It is also important that women, and men and women with young families, are not discouraged from becoming MPs. An important element in this is the working hours that the House of Commons requires but another element is some of the rules about expenses. For example it has been suggested that the main home should always be in the constituency and the second home should always be in London but there may be good family reasons for this not being the case.
5. The media, both national and local, has made much of the current situation and it is clearly part of their role to uncover wrongdoing. However, we hope that once a new regime is in place that they act responsibly in reporting MPs' salaries, expenses and allowances and, in particular, do not regress to the lazy and misleading habit of bundling them up altogether and giving the impression that the total cost is what MPs receive themselves.

Second Homes

6. The main issue is second homes. We expect MPs to work in two places, their constituency and the House of Commons. It is unreasonable to expect them to pay for the upkeep of two homes from their salary. Accordingly some support for a second home is required. However, some strict limitations are required as follows:
 - i) It should not be possible for MPs to profit from the support by being able to achieve a capital gain through having their mortgage interest paid. It would be simpler to limit support to rents. However, if paying such interest gave better value for money then it might be worth devising a scheme whereby on making the capital gain, or when they left the House of Commons, they had to pay back all of the gain.

- ii) The amount that MPs are allowed to claim should be enough to allow them to have a reasonable and modest second home not one that most people would consider to be luxurious.
- iii) There should be separate maximum amounts for rent, maintenance, and furnishings and goods.
- iv) With furnishings and goods there should be much a larger allowance in the first year than in subsequent years when some limited replacement only is required.
- v) Food and gardening expenses should not be allowed. An MP does not have to eat more in Westminster and a garden is not necessary in a second home (nor is a moat or a tennis court).
- vi) MPs whose constituencies are within a reasonable distance from Westminster should not be able to claim a second allowance. However, how reasonable that distance is might depend on the working hours of the House of Commons.
- vi) A daily allowance is neither necessary nor helpful. Local parties and electorates should be able to decide if an MP is working hard enough and effectively, and a daily allowance looks like being paid extra for turning up at work.

Arrangements

7. Two practical issues have been raised about expenses, how much information about them should be published and what body should agree parameters and individual claims ? Some of the recent revelations about individual items have been trivial and/ or sensational and have not helped with the public perception of politicians. Arguably in the longer term publication should be restricted to fairly broad categories rather than extended to individual items. However, in the short term it is probably necessary to have more detail rather than less in order to restore public confidence.

8. There should be an organisation, or part of an organisation, which decides on the maximum amounts that can be claimed and vets individual claims. We do not specify who should do this but clearly it ought not to be the current Fees Office which does not have public confidence, and should be a body with procurement and audit experience which is completely independent of MPs.

Staff

9. It is important that MPs are supported by competent research and administrative staff and many are. However, MPs often recruit staff as if they were self-employed or running family businesses. This is inappropriate. It is important that the public are reassured that such staff undertake relevant work and are capable of doing it. There is also an equal opportunities dimension. Many people want to work for MPs in the House of Commons or in constituencies; these are sought after positions. Accordingly all posts should have job descriptions and person specifications, they should be publicly advertised, selection processes should be fair and open, and all such staff should be employed by the House of Commons on standard pay grades and terms and conditions.