

Review of MPs' expenses
The Committee on Standards in Public Life
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Submission from the National Council for Voluntary Organisations

The National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO) is the largest general membership body for charities and voluntary organisations in England. Established in 1919, NCVO represents over 7000 organisations, from large 'household name' charities to small groups involved in all areas of voluntary and social action at the local level. NCVO champions voluntary action, our vision is of a society in which people are inspired to make a positive difference to their communities. A vibrant voluntary and community sector deserves a strong voice and the best support. NCVO works to provide that support and voice.

We are responding to this consultation as a membership body for the voluntary and community sector (VCS). As a vital and vibrant part of civil society, the VCS helps to build trust and confidence within and between communities, as well as between individuals. Civil society strengthens democracy by promoting participation, by holding government to account and by creating space for conversations about how the world is and how it could be.

It is vital for a strong and healthy democracy that there is trust between voters and their elected political representatives. Following the recent expenses scandal, we need to renew that trust and reengage citizens with the democratic process. In order to do so, it is important that the rules governing MPs' expenses and MPs' conduct should be clearly set out and independently scrutinised. Many Members of Parliament already maintain high levels of conduct and serve their constituents well. However others have been shown to fall short of expected standards. MPs must subscribe to the highest standards of integrity, transparency, accountability and financial prudence.

A number of key principles should apply, including:

- MPs must be transparent about the expenses they claim.
- It should be clear what they can claim for and to what limit.
- MPs should be properly supported and reimbursed for the unavoidable costs they incur as part of performing their parliamentary duties.
- MPs should be expected to provide receipts for all out of pocket expenses.
- MPs should not be able to gain any personal financial advantage and should not be in a position to determine the nature and size of their own expenses scheme.

An independent office of political regulation (OFPOL) should be set up. OFPOL should be responsible for approving the rules governing expenses (including the complex decisions relating to personal advantage and value for money to the taxpayer), publishing all details in a transparent and accessible format and policing adherence to these rules.

There is a case for radical simplification of the expenses system accompanied by some appropriate adjustment to the levels of MP's pay. The level of pay should be a matter for OFPOL.

Where appropriate, any fraud should be properly investigated and individuals prosecuted for wrongdoing. The rule of law should apply to those MPs who have committed deliberate fraud - in the way that anyone else would be prosecuted.