

Consultation Questions on Constituency Office Expenses

Following the information provided on pages 5 to 16, we are now seeking your views in relation to each of our proposals. Please tick the relevant box in the columns to the right and use the space provided at the end of the questions to add any further comments.

Q		Yes	No	No Opinion
1	Do you agree that the current system of Office Cost Expenditure should be replaced with a Constituency Office Expense of no more than £13,500 per Member per annum? (page 7 refers)		X	
2	Do you agree that an overall limit of not more than £8,000 per annum should be set for all premises rented by Members as a constituency office? (<i>para 4.3 refers</i>)		X	
3	Do you agree that where a Member shares premises with another Assembly Member the allowable rental limit should be set at not more than £6,000 for each Member in the premises? (<i>para 5.3 refers</i>)		X	
4	Do you agree that where a Member shares premises with an MP, MEP or Councillor (including a councillor who works for them as an employee) the allowable rental limit would be set at not more than £4,000 per annum for each Member in the premises? (para 5.4 refers)		X	
5	Do you agree that where any benefit from the payment of rent on a Member's constituency office accrues to a connected or associated person, the allowable rental limit would be set at not more than £4,000 per annum? (para 5.5 refers)		X	
6	Do you agree that each Member may only claim rent expenses in respect of one set of premises in their constituency? (<i>para 6.1 refers</i>)		X	
7	Do you agree that where Members voluntarily use their home as their office they should be able to claim a personal allowance of not more than £2,000 in lieu of rent expenses and to defray the costs they incur? (<i>para 7.1 refers</i>)	X		
8	Do you agree that all leases signed by Members must be non-repairing leases (i.e. leases under which the landlord is obliged to maintain the premises)? (<i>para 8.3 refers</i>)	X		
9	Do you agree with the Panel's proposals on page 11 relating to constituency office opening hours?		X	
10	Do you agree with the Panel's proposals on page 11/12 relating to constituency office signage?		X	

11	Do you agree with the Panel's proposals on page 12 to change the rules on the use of constituency offices for electoral purposes?		X	
12	Do you agree that Constituency Reports should be produced in line with the guidelines on page 13 and in electronic format only?		X	
13	Do you agree that a range of electronic office equipment and mobile phones should be provided centrally by the Commission to each Member to assist the operation of their constituency office? (page 13 refers)		X	
14	Do you agree that all equipment would remain the property of the Commission and would be returnable upon a Member leaving office? (page 14 refers)	X		
15	Do you agree with the Panel's proposal that all expenses claimed by Members under COE would be subject to an annual audit by External Auditors, through a 20% random sample chosen by the appointed auditors on an annual basis? (page 15 refers)	X		

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS

Please use the space below to include any further comments you have relating to the Panel's proposals on Members' Constituency Office Expenditure:

I note the comment at Paragraph 4.3 which I repeat for clarity prior to my response "following careful consideration, the panel is of the view that an overall rental limit of not more than £8,000 per annum should be set for the premises rented by a member as a constituency office. We believe that each member would be able to obtain a suitable office within their constituency for such a maximum sum per year!"

I have sought clarity from the panel on their views of what this £8,000 rent would provide. The response was basically "the responsibility for obtaining an office rests with the MLA". A similar question in relation to disabled access, location and accessibility was left to the MLA.

The panel do not understand the needs of a busy constituency office. The NEEDS of a constituency office must include disability access, accessibility and location. The office must be large enough to accommodate a public office with a reception area, a counter to act as a barrier and to provide security for office staff, a private office for interviews, a private office for MLA, a filing area, staff toilets and a kitchen.

We deal with many welfare and health issues that can not be dealt with at a counter they must be dealt with in private to maintain privacy.

That is a simple non-negotiable fact.

These cases create at times vast amounts of reports, in detail medical notes and other medical information. Files must be kept in a secure area to maintain data protection.

I also feel that within this suggested maximum the panel have overlooked rates entirely, business rates will be approximately £4,000 on an £8,000 property which suggests the panel believe an MLA can then run an office on £1,500 per annum to cover electric, heat, internet, telephone, fax, waste disposal, cleaning and stationary.

Considering that the panel has already removed the £1,000 stationary allowance, and considering the costs incurred £500 remaining may just about provide one month costs

leaving eleven months in darkness or with candles and a semaphore communications system.

I do support a reduction in allowance where an office is shared by another MLA, MP or MEP but the suggestion that a Councillor be included in the restriction is a non-starter as a Councillor does not receive any allowance to cover office accommodation and this condition would certainly be open to challenge by those employed by MLA's.

Most public/government offices open Monday – Friday 9.00 – 5.00 to suggest differing hours for an MLA office is interesting. Let me state categorically that under no circumstances will my office open on a Sunday. I regularly open my office on a Saturday or provide late evening opening for constituents or I can do a "house call".

If the panel want regular evening surgeries on Saturdays there is a question of overtime payment for my staff. Any other organisation which requires additional working hours pays overtime. I do not see any overtime budget within the proposals so perhaps the panel will indicate how these additional staff hours will be paid for?

I strongly oppose 10, and see no reason to deviate from the current regulations in the members handbook, and believe this assertion of conditionality is not within the Panels remit, but agree that a differential needs to be made in regard to signage designating party "advice centres" and an MLA's Constituency Office. I would have objections to the restrictions set under – "the sale or promotion of party materials or materials for other bodies e.g. clothing, books, souvenirs and lottery tickets" – as members are often asked to "sell" charitable items from their offices for example – Poppies for the RBL: wrist bands for Help for Heroes, Children's HeartBeat Trust, or are asked to put collection boxes for registered charities on their counters – does the panel disagree with this utilage.

While supportive of 12, I do not agree that party logos should not be allowed but could be utilised in conjunction with the Assembly logo in this instance. It is common practice throughout UK and Ireland to use party symbols on offices and I enclose examples.

In relation to 6.1 I cannot agree. In fact due to volume of issues I have been asked to run an outreach surgery in Bready.

Constituencies such as West Tyrone and our neighbouring Fermanagh South Tyrone need two offices to provide sufficient coverage.

Constituents and distances of twenty miles plus, and limited public transport restricts ability to call into offices.





I would also strongly advise against Constituency Office Bank accounts – as these could be open to abuse and perceived to be open to abuse, the system of introduction of drawing down monies in advance subject to audit, increases the financial burden on members and staff and would increase workload and require an increase in skills base and training for Constituency staff, so we believe the current system is better suited to be retained, and believe this to be in stark contradiction to the aim set out in 3.2.

While supportive of the attendance requirement, I believe the threshold to be set too high, and a lower threshold would be more beneficial – 80 days – and for any other considerations I would suggest that attendance at other bodies be taken as attendance for example the Policing Board as we as a Party treat this as a Committee associated with the Assembly. A lower rate would be more transparent as in the event of a member running short of days coming to the end of the year there is nothing to prevent them attending Stormont everyday with the specific purpose of logging their presence. I am also of the opinion that 99 days has been selected by the panel to facilitate the calculation at 16.4 to facilitate their introduction of TSE.

I do not see the need for additional auditing as the commission already have a system of audit reasonable any other amendment would lead to further unnecessary costs.

Travel and Subsistence Expenses

15 Current Travel and Subsistence Expenses

15.1 Members are currently entitled to claim travel and subsistence allowances for a range of purposes in connection with their duties as a Member and when conducting constituency work. These fall into three broad areas:

- Mileage allowances for travel (and other travel expenses);
- Subsistence allowances for meals; and
- Hotel expenses when staying away from home.

15.2 Travel expenses, including mileage are the highest proportion of these expenses. A Member is entitled to claim payment for travel, which has been incurred wholly, exclusively and necessarily in carrying out his/her Assembly duties. This commonly would include the following types of journeys:-

- Between a Member's home and Parliament Buildings¹⁰;
- Between a Member's home and his or her constituency office(s);

¹⁰ Parliament Buildings is located on the Stormont Estate, some 6 miles from the centre of Belfast

Consultation Questions on Travel Expenditure

Following the information provided on pages 19 to 24, can we now seek your views below in relation to each of our proposals? Please tick the relevant box in the columns to the right and use the additional space provided at the end of the questions to add any further comments.

Q		Yes	No	No Opinion
16	Do you agree that the payment of home to office mileage for all Members should cease with effect from the start of the New Mandate? (para 15.10 refers)	X		
17	Do you agree that individual mileage and subsistence claims should be replaced by a flat rate Travel and Subsistence payment, based on criteria set out at paragraph 16.1 for each Member?		X	
18	If you answered yes to question 17, do you consider the rates detailed in Table 3 on page 23 appropriate?			
19	Do you agree that to qualify for the full amount of TSE, a total of 99 days attendance (i.e. 90% of 110 days) in Parliament Buildings must be registered by the Member in each calendar year? (page 16 refers)		X	
20	Do you agree that where attendance falls below 99 days, the Member must repay 1% of the allowance in respect of each day below this number within two months of the end of the year? (page 16 refers)		X	

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS

Please use the space below to include any further comments you have relating to Members' Travel and Subsistence Expenditure:

I disagree with 17, 18, 19 & 20 on the basis that a TSE payment while easier to manage would see some members paid for mileage that they actually did not undertake, and that this in future would be held as a further example as to how members were abusing public monies.

I also believe that "overnight accommodation" allowance should still be permissible for members who have to travel some distance and that late sitting require overnight accommodation, it may be the panels perception that a member could utilise TSE to pay for their own accommodation if they saw fit but I do not believe this to be good use of public monies.

Again I disagree with the 99 day limit, this would also discriminate against members who are on Committee that sit on Wednesdays and Thursdays, while some members have now

Committees who meet on a Tuesday, so would be “better off” under the TSE scheme.

I also believe the 99 day limit to be manufactured to meet the attendance criteria.

To clarify does 16.4 mean that mileage would be paid retrospectively annually?

Childcare Expenses

17 Current system for Members’ Childcare Expenses

17.1 The Panel has been asked by the Assembly Commission to consider the removal of Members’ childcare allowance. The Panel is mindful that childcare arrangements and support are currently under review at a National level. Within the Assembly, all Members can currently apply for a contribution towards the cost of the care of their children while they are at work.

17.2 In 2012, the Panel determined that an Assembly Member could claim a Childcare Allowance in respect of childcare expenditure which they have incurred for a child or children up to the age of 14. This allowance is taxable.

17.3 The current rates are:

- £40 per week until the child reaches 5 years of age or starts school, whichever is the earlier, and
- thereafter £20 per week until the child reaches the age of 14.

17.4 The removal of a childcare allowance for Members would result in savings of approximately £60k based on the anticipated full year costs for the 2014/15 financial year. The Panel previously proposed in their 2012 Report that the Assembly Commission consider other childcare schemes available, including the establishment of a Childcare Voucher Scheme for Members. The panel is now seeking views on whether to remove or retain the existing scheme.

Consultation Question on Childcare Expenses

Q	Yes	No	No Opinion
21 Do you believe the Panel should continue to provide a childcare allowance to Members based on the rates stated above?	X		

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS

Please use the space below to include any further comments you have relating to Members' Childcare Expenses:

A number of bodies both internal & external have expressed the need to make politics more "family friendly" and a recent Inquiry by the AERC Committee referenced this and we believe that the current system of childcare expenses facilitates a more flexible option than vouchers.

18 Next Steps

The Panel invites your views on the proposals listed above and any other additional comments which you wish to make.

18.1 Additional Comments

Please use this space to include any additional comments you may have on the proposals outlined in this consultation document. Your response and comments will help inform our decisions for our next Determination.

I have been in correspondence with the panel on several occasions over past months. I have submitted detailed accounts both to the panel and NIAO. My personal contribution to my office includes payment of all electricity, telephone, internet, insurance, and registration with Information Commissioner and a contribution to staff costs.

This is a substantial amount of money and indicates my commitment to provide a disabled friendly, accessible, confidential, open 21st century facility to my constituents.

It is my duty as a public representative to spend public money wisely and every penny I spend is subject to audit and to public investigation. The restrictions suggested by the panel are a backward step. Reduced constituency office expenses will mean offices will either be in side streets hidden from public view in a dingy pokey facility difficult or impossible for disabled or parents with young children to access or relocated to out of town centres. I would even doubt if toilet or kitchen facilities could be provided with the suggested limited funding.

If you want people to access their Political Representatives you must be aware of the facilities required to deliver:-

- Completion of DLA/ESA forms
- Review and completion of appeal papers
- Complex health need appeals
- Education/Housing issues

I could go on but I won't I think the picture is quite clear I believe your proposals are totally unworkable and will destroy any feeling of accessibility and confidentiality if offices are to be those envisaged by the panel. They are more 19th century then 21st century models.

Should you wish to respond electronically, please download the consultation proposals by typing or pasting the following link into your internet browser:
<http://ifrp.org.uk/consultation/>

Alternatively you may send your response to:

Independent Financial Review Panel
Room 241, Parliament Buildings
Ballymiscaw
Stormont
Belfast BT4 3XX
E-mail: info@ifrp.org.uk

You may wish to note that the names of respondees and, in some cases, the full response, will be published unless you indicate when you submit your response that you do not wish this to happen.

Are you content that your information is published?

YES NO

NAME: ROSS HUSSEY MLA

ORGANISATION (IF APPLICABLE):
ULSTER UNIONIST PARTY

ADDRESS:
64 MARKET STREET
OMAGH

Please note that it is not essential to include your details. You may respond anonymously if you prefer to do so.