

The logo for the Independent Financial Review Panel is a solid blue rectangle. Inside the rectangle, the words "Independent", "Financial", "Review", and "Panel" are stacked vertically in a yellow, sans-serif font.

Independent
Financial
Review
Panel

INDEPENDENT FINANCIAL REVIEW PANEL CONSULTATION ON MEMBERS' OFFICE COST, TRAVEL AND CHILDCARE EXPENDITURE

**DEADLINE FOR RESPONSES:
5 PM ON FRIDAY 11 SEPTEMBER 2015**

A copy of this consultation document can be accessed on the IFRP website (www.ifrp.org.uk), by email (info@ifrp.org.uk) or by writing to the IFRP at:

The Independent Financial Review Panel
Room 241
Parliament Buildings
Ballymiscaw
Stormont
Belfast
BT4 3XX

The Consultation Document can be made available in large type on request.

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? (para 4.3 refers)		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? (para 5.3 refers)		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? (para 6.1 refers)		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? (para 7.1 refers)		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)? (para 8.3 refers)	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:

We believe a limit higher than £13,500 be set, and that a set fraction be used for example one third of total OCE, we do not agree that a cap should be applicable within this sum in regard to rent but that it is the members discretion as to how the amount is split. We do however support a reduction in the amount claimable by an MLA who shares an office with another MLA, MP or MEP. We do not support the inclusion of a Councillor in this grouping, even if an employee of the MLA, as a Councillor does not receive any allowance to cover office accommodation, and we see this as a penalty to the MLA for employing a Councillor, we also believe this condition to be open to challenge. We also believe the adverse implication of this stipulation would be that MLA's/ MPs & MEP's then establish separate offices rather than share offices as is the current practice.

In relation to 6, we would oppose the intention to allow an MLA to support only one office we feel to be discriminatory against smaller parties, especially in rural constituencies, for example where one party has 3 MLA's they can locate 3 separate offices to cover the entire constituency whereas this restriction would force the smaller party or single member to be restricted to one location.

We would also oppose 7, as this would allow each member to claim £2,000 for "home usage" which would be open to abuse and ridicule.

In regard to question 8, members have expressed a difficulty in sourcing a location for an office in the desired area that does not initially meet with all their requirements.

While supportive of 9 we do not believe it is within the Panels remit, to assert this type of conditionality on MLA's office opening hours, and with the stipulation of 30hrs would be concerned that some may take this as an acceptable limit rather than a minimum.

We 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. We 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 Hero’s, Children’s HeartBeat Trust, or are asked to put collection boxes for registered charities on their counters – does the panel disagree with this utilage.

We do not agree that Party logos should not be allowed but could be utilised in conjunction with the Assembly logo in this instance.

We would query the necessity of additional IT & printers as each MLA currently receives a provision of these from the Commission which are returnable on a member leaving the Assembly, we would not be supportive of this extending to mobile phones, as members contract vary within our own Party due to lack of signal/provision from certain suppliers in certain areas. We do believe a saving could be made via centralised phone & electricity supply contracts – which could be serviced by Direct payments thus endearing additional savings.

We 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, we believe the threshold to be set too high, and a lower threshold would be more beneficial – 80days – and for any other considerations we 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. We are 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.

We do not agree with the assertion or remit of the auditors as appointed in 14.3.1 to “enforce” the panels determination as we do not believe the divesting of such powers is within the varies of the Panel, and that this would result in further overheads, as this function is already exercised under the auspices of the Commission with a 25% random selection.

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:

We 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.

We would also disagree with the introduction of the "Proposed Annual Constituency Travel Expense per Member" as this would again disadvantage smaller parties in rural constituencies as for an example where a Party has three members one can attend a meeting close to them, whereby where there is only one Party member in the constituency he/she must travel right across the constituency attending more meetings.

We 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 we do not believe this to be good use of public monies.

Again we disagree with the 99 day limit, this would also discriminate against members who are on Committee that sit on Wednesdays & Thursdays, while some members have now Committees who meet on a Tuesday, so would be “better off” under the TSE scheme.

We 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?

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.

We believe that address should be made where by a Party has more than one MLA in a Constituency.

We are also happy to discuss any aspect of this response with the panel.

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: Robin Swann

ORGANISATION (IF APPLICABLE):
Ulster Unionist Party

ADDRESS:

C/o Room 34 Stormont

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

CONSULTATION RESPONSES

**THE DEADLINE FOR RESPONSES TO THIS CONSULTATION IS
5PM ON FRIDAY 11 SEPTEMBER 2015.**

**RESPONSES RECEIVED AFTER THIS DATE MAY NOT BE
CONSIDERED.**

DISCLOSURE OF INFORMATION

The Independent Financial Review Panel may publish, or make available on request, any information provided to it in relation to this consultation exercise. In line with the provisions of the Data Protection Act 1998, information containing personal data will not be disclosed. You should be aware that your response, or an extract from it, may appear in a Report or may be included on a list of evidence submitted. In the event of a request under the Freedom of Information Act 2000, it may be necessary to disclose information which you provide.

If you are providing any information, other than personal data, which you feel is not suitable for public disclosure; you should identify that information and provide reasons against its disclosure. The Independent Financial Review Panel will take this into account when publishing information or when responding to requests for information.

CONTACT DETAILS

The Independent Financial Review Panel
Room 241
Parliament Buildings
Ballymiscaw
Stormont
Belfast
BT4 3XX

Telephone: (028) 90521930

E-mail: info@ifrp.org.uk