

7. NUS – USI response

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)	√		
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>)	√		
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>)	√		
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)	√		
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)	√		
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>)	√		
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>)		√ MLAs should not be able to gain any expenses from working at home	
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>)	√		
9	Do you agree with the Panel's proposals on <i>page 11</i> relating to constituency office opening hours?	√		
10	Do you agree with the Panel's proposals on <i>page 11/12</i> relating to constituency office signage?	√		
11	Do you agree with the Panel's proposals on <i>page 12</i> to change the rules on the use of constituency offices for electoral purposes?	√		

12	Do you agree that Constituency Reports should be produced in line with the guidelines on page 13 and in electronic format only?	√		
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? <i>(page 13 refers)</i>	√		
14	Do you agree that all equipment would remain the property of the Commission and would be returnable upon a Member leaving office? <i>(page 14 refers)</i>	√		

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? <i>(page 15 refers)</i>	√		
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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:

It is right and fair that MLAs not only face cuts to their mileage and office expenses, but it could also be argued that MLAs should not be able to agree pay increases for themselves unless all public sector pay, the minimum wage, pensions and benefits are rising by at least the same percentage as any proposed MLA pay increase.

We also believe that MLAs should not be paid for using their house as a premises while working at home. As regards question seven, few if any people working in other professions get paid for using their house to work from home in, therefore there should be no proposed £2,000 personal allowance if MLAs use part of their home as an office.

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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)	√		
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?	√		
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? (<i>page 16 refers</i>)	√		
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? (<i>page 16 refers</i>)	√		

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS

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

NUS-USI also believes that MLAs who attend less than 99 days attendance at the Assembly per year should have their salary docked by 1% for every day less than, 99 per year that they attend the Assembly.

There is a crisis of public confidence in politics in Northern Ireland. People are massively disillusioned with politics here and the role that politicians play. The public have been forced to bear the brunt of austerity cuts, redundancies and pay cuts and freezes. The public have in recent years often had more pressure placed on them to deliver in work and have often faced pressure to work increasing amounts of overtime during the downturn, therefore it is understandable that people are frustrated with the MLA expenses system and its essential that many of the reforms which are at the very least as stringent as those outlined here take place.

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?	√		

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS

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

It is essential that strong childcare expenses support is available to MLAs. It is also essential that childcare facilities are available at Parliament Buildings so that there no barriers to any parents as regards getting involved in politics. In light of the 2015 report on women in politics and the Northern Ireland Assembly, it is important to highlight that childcare was seen to be one of the main barriers for women getting involved in politics in Northern Ireland.

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.

NUS-USI believe it is essential that the Executive acts to restore public confidence in politics and these reforms are crucial to doing this.

Given the extremely difficult time that people face financially due to austerity and the high cost of living. It is essential that politicians have their expenses reduced. Also the public will quite rightly be annoyed at the levels of mileage expense claims because many members of the public do not get travel expenses for their journey from home to work.

It is also essential that the Executive and political parties act to break down any barriers to getting involved in elected politics. The demographics of our society is not accurately reflected in the demographics of the people who are Assembly members, and this must be addressed as a matter of urgency. Women, people from minority ethnic backgrounds and people who are LGBT are under-represented and strong action must be taken to ensure equality and break down any barriers to being involved in politics.

