

## 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 <b>page 11</b> relating to constituency office opening hours?	X		
10	Do you agree with the Panel's proposals on <b>page 11/12</b> relating to constituency office signage?	X		

11	Do you agree with the Panel's proposals on <b>page 12</b> 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? ( <b>page 13 refers</b> )	X		
14	Do you agree that all equipment would remain the property of the Commission and would be returnable upon a Member leaving office? ( <b>page 14 refers</b> )	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? ( <b>page 15 refers</b> )	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:

12.1 I believe that the Constituency Report represents a great platform for Members to effectively engage with their constituents, and while I note that many Members do not deliver these, those that do make themselves more available and accountable to their constituents. To produce and deliver these does not come without cost, and I appreciate that the Panel favour electronic media as it is a cost effective way of delivering information. The reality however is that many of those that receive printed constituency reports have no means of receiving them electronically, nor the capacity to know how or where to access these online, and so this would isolate a large and vulnerable proportion of society. Digital platforms are of great benefit to Members in engaging with their constituents, but they cannot be assumed to be adequate as a standalone mechanism. Mindful of the costs associated with printing and posting many thousands of Constituency Report, in recent years when we have produced these reports we have done so in conjunction with other Members, in an effort to offset the cost and better utilise OCE funding. I believe that other avenues to offset costs should be explored, such as collaborative efforts between Members or an adjustment to the frequency of reports, as opposed to an outright withdrawal of the option. Based on the feedback received by our office in the wake of these reports, we find constituents appreciate being informed about developments in their constituency, the work of the Member(s) on their behalf, and being made aware of the service and support a Member can provide to them. Additionally there is often a sense of pleasant surprise as many note that they typically only receive literature from elected representatives close to elections. Following delivery of our most recent report, we received more than 40 new enquiries in the week that followed, and a similar number of enquiries were made with the second Members office. We have endeavoured to embrace digital platforms and while we also publish our constituency reports online, the degree of engagement and service achieved by the printed version could not be equalled by electronic media alone.

13.3 I am in agreement with some of the inclusions for suggested items to be removed

from the list of admissible expenditure, such as hiring, leasing or renting vehicles; Televisions & Satellite News TV Subscriptions; and all IT Printers and Copiers not supplied by the Commission. Newspapers and subscriptions arguably help to inform a Member and enhance their capacity to serve from a knowledgeable perspective, however I understand that as all Members are now provided with a laptop computer, in addition to the majority using desktop computers, smart phones and tablets, much of this content is now available online, and the Assembly Library has an impressive list of subscriptions allowing Members to peruse specific new sources. The list is not exhaustive however, and perhaps if expenditure for subscriptions and newspapers were to be removed, additional organisational subscriptions could be acquired by the Assembly Library. Additionally, perhaps the concept of delivering digital versions of daily newspapers could be explored, whereby the newspapers were scanned and compiled into PDFs by central secretariat before being emailed to each Member.

My experience of measured and appropriate advertising for constituency services has been largely positive and when we have had the occasion to utilise advertising in publications (which has been infrequent) we have found it to be an effective means of enhancing communications between the Member and constituents, similar to the constituency report, in informing the electorate of the Members presence and mandate to serve and legislate on their behalf, and ultimately how they may engage and communicate with the Member. Openness, accountability and accessibility are arguably key factors in overcoming the negativity often associated with local politics, and advertising Member services is an important tool in addressing this imbalance. While noting and agreeing with the panel's rationale to limit Members to maintaining only one constituency office, with many constituencies being large and spread out, I fail to understand how removing advertising expenditure will allow Members to remain visible in rural constituencies, or notify constituents of satellite surgeries or office opening hours. I would understand if limitations around costing and frequency were to be explored, but I do not believe the removal of advertising expenditure in entirety would be advantageous.

This same logic also feeds in to my understanding of the need for effective website set-up and maintenance for Members. I applaud the panel for their recognition of electronic media in offering an effective means of communication and engagement between Members and their constituents, however I do not believe that the removal of funding for website design / consultation / hosting and maintenance costs is wholly conducive to this concept. In unison with conventional methods of communication and engagement, but not necessarily at their expense, Members websites have a greater role to play now than ever before and represent a unique and innovative platform for constituents to remain informed and to directly engage with their elected Members. The panel clearly appreciate that the tide of how people access information and engage is turning in a digital direction, a notion which undoubtedly underpins proposals for Members Constituency Reports, but in order once again to be open, accountable and accessible, Members websites are an asset in engaging and informing. It is unfortunate that more Members do not have websites, or indeed keep them properly maintained and updated, but I appreciate that these skills are not necessarily aligned to those typically found in political service, at both an elected and a supporting level. Without the guidance of professionals in setting up, hosting and assisting in the maintenance of the Members website in our office, we simply would not have the capacity to deliver what has become an integral part of the service the Member provides to constituents. In our office, which is located in a busy urban location, we continue to receive an ever increasing number of enquiries via the Members website (25+

per month), and I suspect that for all Members, this platform could be even more valuable in the face of proposed limitations to constituency office expenditure, restrictions on the number of offices and advertising. A Members website arguably has the capacity to serve as a digital constituency office in many instances, accessible to a wide range of constituents, including those rurally isolated and socially vulnerable, and far from restricting a Members capacity to deliver such a service, perhaps the panel might instead seek to encourage more Members to utilise this platform as a means to adapt, and to improve their capacity to engage with and represent their constituents.

## **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 Buildings<sup>10</sup>;
- Between a Member's home and his or her constituency office(s);
- Between a constituency office and Parliament Buildings;
- Constituency travel; and
- Non-constituency travel.

15.3 The Panel has examined the current pattern of claims for mileage allowances in detail. Collectively, such claims amount to some £450,000 per annum or just over £4,500 per Member on average. There are, however, disparities in the amounts claimed, with individual Members claiming between £0 and £16,000 per annum. Such claims cover, for example, travel from a Member's home to Parliament Buildings, Stormont as well as travel within the Member's constituency e.g. to meet constituents or visit sites. However, some Members also claim mileage for travelling each day from their home address to the edge of their constituency i.e. in effect they are paid home to office mileage. These expenses are permitted within the current rules but, as the tables below show, they can be substantial with a small number of Members claiming up to almost £12000 pa in home to office travel expenses.

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<sup>10</sup> 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?	X		
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> )	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? ( <i>page 16 refers</i> )	X		

### ADDITIONAL COMMENTS

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

## 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

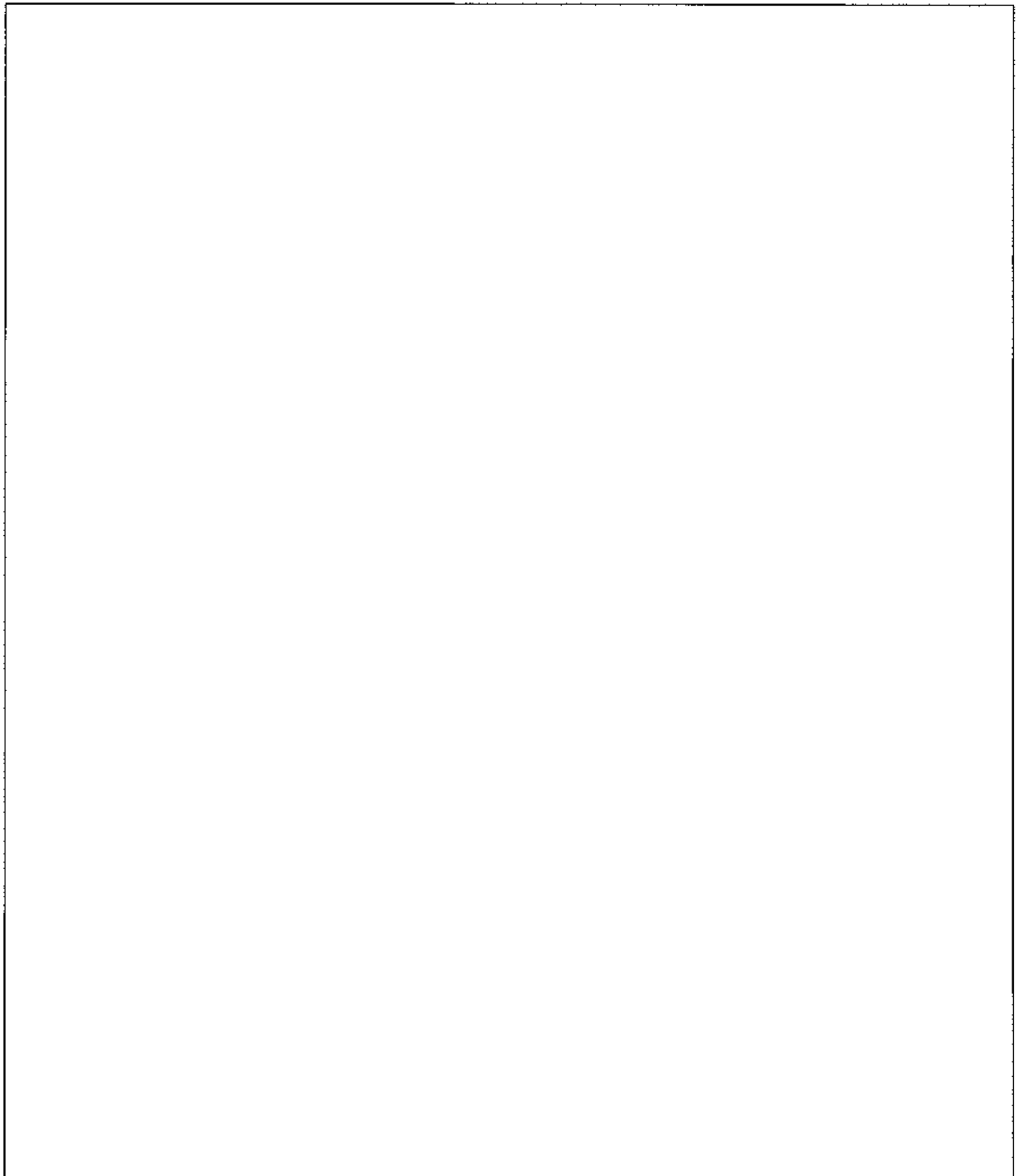
Please use the space below to include any further comments you have relating to Members' Childcare Expenses:

## **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.*

A large, empty rectangular box with a thin black border, intended for the user to provide additional comments on the proposals.

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](mailto: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: \_\_\_\_\_

ORGANISATION (IF APPLICABLE):

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ADDRESS:

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