

Cope 9

09/01/10

Thank you for the opportunity to respond to your consultation on MPs' expenses.

Broadly I welcome the proposals, though there is one issue of principle which I believe they get wrong and there are other matters of detail which could be improved.

On the principle, I believe MPs should not be able to profit from the expenses they receive by acquiring assets which they personally own and can then sell, whether that is property to live in, property to work in or equipment to use at home or for work.

However, in the list of suggested principles it is only personal profit that is derived from "exploiting" the system which is banned. This is ambiguous and could be taken to imply that personal profit which flows from following the system in an above the board way would be acceptable. It should not be.

Therefore, in answer to question 1, I believe principle number three should be amended accordingly and this principle should be followed through in all the detailed recommendations.

On question 6, the details in the full report imply that a printed version of MP reports is envisaged (due to the reference to costs of production). For such a report to be meaningful, and for MPs not to have the opportunity to decide to bury any versions which contained unpopular information, distribution would also have to be paid for and enforced. This rapidly builds up in to an expensive process of dubious value. Instead, as all the data will have been gathered in electronically by the Parliamentary authorities, they should publish each year a report for each MP, along with overall totals and averages for comparison purposes.

If this information is made available in a helpful data format, it is extremely likely that existing third party services such as those run by MySociety will then take the information and further analyse and publicise it, similar to the way in which they have significantly expanded the spread of information from Hansard. This will be a more effective way of making expenses transparent and public.

Under question 12 I would like to raise an apparent loophole in the proposal in paragraph 7.14. I very much welcome the intention to ensure that if an MP intends to live both outside their constituency and also away from Westminster then their travel costs from home to these locations should not be paid in future.

However the wording of 7.14, which permits the claiming of costs associated with travel within the constituency, implies that travel from constituency home to constituency office could be reclaimed. This is analogous to the normal commuting costs which in other jobs people have to pay for themselves, and it should not be claimable by MPs.

Under question 19, I would like to raise the issue of office costs varying considerably around the UK. The property costs for offices in London, for example, are significantly higher than those for offices in rural Wales. The current allowance, whilst generous in areas of the

country with low business property costs, is very parsimonious in areas with high costs. I hope you will therefore consider a regional variation to reflect differences in regional average costs.

In coming up with your final plans, I hope you will also use terminology that will clearly differentiate between payments which are expenses in the usual meaning of that word in other jobs and payments which are for office and staff costs. The salary of someone's PA in another job would not be considered as part of that person's expenses in the way that reclaiming travel to a training event would be. The use of "expenses" in Parliament to cover both such areas of expenditure only produces confusion and misunderstanding.

Finally, I agree with the other proposals, and in particular with the proposal under question 16 to end the Communications Expenditure Allowance.

Yours sincerely,

Mark Pack

