

Dear Sir or Madam,

With reference to the IPSA consultation on the allowances and expenses of MPs, I feel that an opportunity has been missed to better regulate the employment of unwaged staff. Currently the system is open to abuse and some MPs are using well-educated interns to carry out work as a way of lowering their individual allowance. Although this may provide good value for the taxpayer in pure expenditure terms, it is unfair for those who work often for long periods without pay and artificially lowers the wage of staff that are paid.

The practice of not paying staff is widespread and it damages parliament's reputation because it creates a system where only those who can afford to work unpaid will ever gain enough experience to get access to a fully paid job. It clearly discriminates against those who are less well-off and those who come from outside of London. This creates a homogeneous system where people working at the centre of British democracy are people who do not bear much resemblance to Britain as a whole. If it weren't for the fact that I was a paid intern, I would not be able to live in London or work in parliament. There must be many others who are very well qualified for an internship, but simply cannot afford to move to London.

Even for those who can afford to undertake internships, the experience varies wildly: from those who essentially carry out a full time post at a high level with high stress to those who gain little from their experience and have wasted their money on rent, travel, and expensive food costs. This is clearly unfair for both cases. The fact that interns are often not allowed to benefit from the parliamentary training, which is provided for paid staff, is unfair and can and should be changed.

The experiences of an intern should be made clear when recruiting but they should be subject to a check by IPSA that they are not job adverts but offers for internships. Where they are ultimately job offers without pay and have specified roles, they should be paid at least minimum wage. This is especially clear in the offices where there is no paid staff, only unpaid interns.

There are several other possible options, which could be considered: e.g. a central guaranteed pot for internships, ending the use of unpaid staff, or a system, which would have to be rolled out in the private and public spheres, where internships were paid at the rate of jobseekers allowance and would be outside of the law as far as minimum wage.

I also believe there is a problem with the whole system of taking on staff. Recruitment should always take place on a public basis and while I do not believe family members should never work for MPs, other candidates should always also be considered for the role.

I feel that the way MPs' employees are currently advertised for and paid (or not) is outdated and it varies widely from MP to MP. People should be given a living wage for their work and positions should always be advertised publicly and openly.

Yours faithfully,

James Williamson