



Parliamentary Resources Unit

East Cloister House of Commons London SW1A 0AA

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Website <http://www.parliamentaryresources.com>

Sir Christopher Kelly
Review of MP's Expenses
The Committee on Standards in Public Life
35 Great Smith Street
London SW1P 3BQ.

By email Inquiry@standards.x.gsi.gov.uk

5 June 2009

Dear Sir Christopher,

Parliamentary Resources Unit

We would be grateful if your Committee could consider the position of the Parliamentary Resources Unit when it studies staffing arrangements for Members of Parliament. Our primary concern is to ensure that an innovation recognised by the Senior Salaries Review Board (SSRB) as providing better value for taxpayers is not inadvertently put at risk by the Committee's recommendations. However, there may also be some benefit in considering how the pooled support model for Members developed by the Unit might be more widely applied to support Members from other parties or in a wider range of duties.

About the Parliamentary Resources Unit

The Unit is a pooled research service for Conservative Members of Parliament. Founded in 1998, the Unit is constituted as a members' association. 155 MPs subscribe gaining access to the following:

1. Briefings on the content of legislation before the House, at each major stage of its passage, including summaries of debate in Committee and third party views on the provisions of Bills (by contrast the House of Commons Library only provides briefings at the point the Bill is initially published)
2. Briefings for Oral Parliamentary Question time, providing background to the questions on the Order Paper, and suggestions for supplementary questions to be asked in the House
3. Briefings for topical and general debates, providing background, data, and third party views on a wide variety of subjects.
4. Advice to Members' staff on dealing with constituency casework, including contacts and guidance on what information needs to be provided to various bodies to ensure they can respond effectively.



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5. Draft letters for use as the basis of responses to constituent correspondence, subject to review and editing by individual Members to suit their personal style and include their personal views, both for;
 - a) common topics raised by multiple constituents, and
 - b) in response to specific issues raised by individuals
6. Briefings for Members prior to meetings with constituents or other third parties in the course of their Parliamentary duties
7. High level legal support for Members and their constituents through licensed access to the Bar.
8. Individual research for Members

The team also supports Conservative peers through a collective subscription made on their behalf by the Leader of the Opposition, currently for a fee of £45,000 + VAT. Additional briefing is provided for starred questions, Thursday debates, and Second Readings of Bills in the Upper House. The Scottish Parliament and Welsh Assembly also subscribe for reference access to the research.

The Unit is managed on a day-to-day basis by its Director who reports quarterly to an Executive Committee of 7 Members, elected by all subscribers, which includes the Opposition Chief Whip. The Executive approves the Unit's budget, salaries and strategic development.

Members choose whether or not to subscribe to the Unit, providing direct pressure on the team to perform and deliver value for taxpayer's money. To operate in this way, independently of direct control from individual MPs, the team requires management and direction, provided by its Executive, Director and deputy director, but this generates significant benefits including; a career structure, a training programme, regular formal appraisals, mentoring, an intern programme, vacation cover, skills transfer etc.

Economies of scale

The material and support is provided by 16 researchers, each specialising in one or two government departments, led by a director and deputy director. This specialisation and pooled arrangement generates significant economies of scale. Staff in subscribing Members' offices can cope with the ever-increasing workload generated by constituent enquiries about policy and specific casework through leveraging the Unit's output. Duplicative work in researching background for the business of the House – Bills, debates and question time – is eradicated in Members' offices. The quality of the research is also improved through the specialisation, and the training and quality control which can be implemented in a managed team environment.

Constituents frequently demand to know their MP's party's view on a policy issue, and this is where a significant economy of scale is achieved through the model. Instead of each researcher for 155 members contacting the shadow minister's office



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for his / her view, the Unit has that conversation once and can pass on the information to all other Members and their staff who need it.

The Unit is heavily used. Its secure website, where most of the documents 1 – 5a above are held, is accessed 420 times per day. In the 12 months from June 2008, 34,223 such documents have been downloaded from the PRU website by our subscribers (220 per Member). Many draft letters are used as the basis of responses to a large number of constituents, so the overall contribution to Members' dealings with their constituents is a significant multiple of this statistic. A substantial number of documents are also emailed directly to MPs' offices, broadly covering 5b – 8 above.

The majority of subscribers pay £3,300 + VAT for their annual subscription from either their Staffing Expenditure or Administrative and Office Expenditure allowances. This fee has not risen for four years, improving value for money annually, while simultaneously extending the scope of the Unit's services as well. For example, a Casework Centre of Excellence was added last year to provide advice for caseworkers. 14 Members estimate they will need more than 25 hours of personal research per annum, and pay a slightly higher subscription of £5,000 + VAT for 75 hours instead). These fees represent a modest fraction of the cost of an individual member of staff working directly for the MP, but provide access to 16 experts and a library of research built over years.

Compliance and Transparency

The Unit ensures that its work is wholly, exclusively and necessarily in support of Members' parliamentary duties. Party political work is prohibited, and in many ways more easily policed within a central team than perhaps is possible within Members' individual offices. For example, requests to provide material for Party newsletters, speeches or meetings are systematically refused by the Unit's Director. Given the difficulty in distinguishing between Parliamentary duties and party political activity, the director errs on the side of caution in any grey areas. Where, for example, the Conservative Party's views on a Bill or issue are included in a brief or draft letter, they are clearly sourced from the frontbench shadow ministers or their political staff, with an audit trail. A senior member of staff is designated as compliance officer.

All its standard materials are made available to the Department of Resources which has access to the secured internet site which is used to distribute them.

The Unit's finances are externally audited. It operates within a budget designed to break-even each year, although maintains a modest surplus to cover wind-up costs if they arise. All staff contracts are modelled on the standard Parliamentary contracts – with some minor amendments to enable more flexible working and address differences enforced upon the Unit by its unique status e.g. staff are not covered by winding up arrangements for MPs' personal staff, so separate redundancy provisions are made. Copies of the standard contracts have been provided to the Department of Resources. All staff are paid within Parliamentary pay-scales for researchers or senior



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researchers, although the Unit's director and his deputy are paid above these scales to reflect their experience and management responsibilities.

Parliament's Department of Resources administers the Unit's payroll for a monthly fee, although staff are not presently given access to standard benefits provided to directly employed staff such as the Portcullis Pension Scheme and child-care vouchers (see comments in the SSRB 2007 Review below).

Staff are recruited and their performance is assessed and pay reviewed by the director, with involvement from Members. For example, where a defence specialist is being recruited, the shadow defence team are invited to provide a member of the interview panel to advise the director on the technical prowess of candidates, and the shadow team provide input to the director's annual appraisal process. All job opportunities are advertised publicly on the www.w4mp.org website and ongoing internships are publicised on the Unit's public website.

The Unit does not presently employ any family members of its subscribers, although given its independent and open recruitment processes, presently has no policy against this.

The Unit maintains a comprehensive public website which publishes its compliance policy, a register of interests of its staff which goes beyond the requirements for Members' staff and information on its funding. (www.parliamentaryresources.com)

External endorsement

Report No. 64 of the Senior Salaries Review Board "Review of Parliamentary pay, pensions and allowances 2007" stated:



Review of parliamentary pay, pensions and allowances 2007

Parliamentary Resources Unit (PRU)

5.22 We received evidence from the Chairman of the Parliamentary Resources Unit which is a pooled research facility funded from MPs' allowances. It provides factual research and briefing to Conservative MPs. In principle we welcome pooled research and support facilities for MPs since these have the potential to provide better value for money, but we believe they should be staffed and funded from within the existing ceilings on staff and expenditure (or possibly, where they serve a single party, from 'Short money'). We understand the Parliamentary Resources Unit has some difficulties, for example because its staff are excluded from the pension arrangements applying to individual MPs' staff.

We consider that the MPs and staff concerned should not be disadvantaged because those MPs choose to employ staff collectively rather than individually and we urge the House authorities to facilitate such arrangements, provided they do not have the effect of circumventing in any way the normal limits on staffing and expenditure.

A previous report also made reference to the Unit:



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Review of parliamentary pay, pensions and allowances 2001

In-depth research support

- A relatively small minority of MPs employ full or (more often) part-time researchers primarily to support their 'specialist subject(s)'. Members of Select Committees would like much more support of this kind. A recent innovation, at least on the Conservative side, is the establishment of the Parliamentary Research Unit, which has been given space by the House authorities. This employs around 12 graduates who research topics in depth on request from subscribing Members. We understand that subscriptions to this service are in the £2,000 to £5,000 per year range, and are sourced from the OCA. By contrast, research support to backbenchers from the political parties is said to have declined.

Wider application of the model

The Unit currently only serves Conservative members who choose to subscribe. There is the potential that other political parties could benefit from replicating the model, reducing the pressure on directly employed staff. The model is particularly applicable to Opposition parties who do not have the benefit of civil service support with correspondence, for example. However, business planning by the existing Unit has confirmed its continued effectiveness and demand for its services should the Conservative Party form a government.

We would not recommend creating a central function to serve Members of all parties because, for example, where constituents wish to know party policy, then letters need to reflect that. Also, constituents draw conclusions about their MP based on how effectively they respond to letters or support them with casework. It is therefore important that a central support unit is accountable to the Members and their Party, as its effectiveness is so closely associated with that of its subscribing Members.

(In considering the wider challenge of staffing arrangements for Members, the Unit's matrix management approach might be considered as the essence of an arms length body for each party which would be involved in the recruitment, assessment and reward of staff, but leaving Members' personally responsible for day-to-day management of tasks. The central entity would undertake ad hoc supervision to ensure compliance and provide independent performance assessment. That body would need similarly senior sponsorship to that provided by the Unit's Executive Committee to ensure it has a sufficiently powerful mandate to moderate Member's use of their personal staff.)

The Unit's Executive and management would be willing to provide advice to other parties wishing to take advantage of the efficiencies this model could provide, in the



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interests of reducing pressure on the public purse in providing the support Members' need to meet the demands placed upon them.

Oral Evidence

The Chairman and Director are available to provide oral evidence to the Committee, and very happy to respond to any written requests for clarification or documentary evidence.

Yours sincerely,

Iain Corby
Director

Tim Boswell MP
Chairman, Executive Committee