

Members Expenses from Adrian Bailey West Bromwich West

Accommodation

The basic problem is that the current salary is not adequate to cover the costs of spending 150 or so days a year in central London and run a home. The current allowance is at about the right level to meet the average cost of a modest hotel or rented flat. The provision for paying mortgage interest on purchased properties whilst subject to much criticism, often offers better value for money for taxpayers as members can pay off the mortgage or put down a substantial deposit thereby saving on interest payments.

If there are to be restrictions on the sale of members properties then it should take into account the amount of money invested by the purchaser. To deny anyone any return on capital would be unjust. Some members have paid off their mortgages entirely and reduced their call on the accommodation allowance accordingly.

Whilst there may be alterations recommended in any of these schemes I believe that any changes should be implemented to give adequate time for members to readjust their accommodation without enduring a financial penalty.

I believe that the current media campaign on MP's expenses has discredited all the present provision for accommodation payments. Even the most legitimate and necessary items of expenditure are now represented as some sort of outrageous claim on the public purse. It is difficult to see how, without reducing the level of transparency, this will change. The impact on the public perception of parliament and MP's can only be damaging to democracy.

My preference is for an independent body to set the level of salaries bearing in mind the accommodation needs of MP's. This should result in savings in administration costs. Whilst this is more properly the role of the SSRB the current salary scales are predicated on the existing expenses regime. If these are altered it is reasonable to expect the SSRB to take this into account.

If the review is not willing to take this course then a per diem allowance at a suitable level with appropriate monitoring and audit is the best way forward. This would give the flexibility needed to meet the different accommodation arrangements already existing. It would give members discretion on spending for their accommodation requirements without holding them up to public ridicule. This already exists in the House of Lords.

There would need to be arrangements made for Members on maternity leave or enforced absence for sickness. Implementation would have to be sensitive to the needs of members who have regular ongoing accommodation obligations during the recess but would only receive allowances during the Parliamentary session. There would have to be some sort of attendance verification. I do not see these problems as insurmountable.

Response to issues raised.

1. The necessary elements of a supporting system should be transparent, cost effective, adequate to meet the intended purpose and independently audited.
2. Expenses should be independently determined but there must be a mechanism whereby members can feed into the process. This could either be a separate committee representing members interests or representatives on the responsible body. Contrary to public perception it is Parliament, in the face of public hostility, that often waters down independent recommendations. Members may well benefit if their current role were removed because it takes away their answerability to the media on this issue.
3. Broadly about right level and adequate. It is the administration which is the problem.
4. In the past they were inadequate which is why we have the current problems. It is too early to pass judgement on the new arrangements but they should be given time to work.
5. Considered in opening remarks.
6. Considered in opening remarks. Quite clearly there is a case.
7. There must be a system that removes the cost of running offices from consideration as some sort of members allowance or expense. The current system is liable to media misrepresentation and frequently is. There must be a balance between members rights to choose employees and salaries subject to a cap and some sort of suitability monitoring.
8. Appropriate salary or overnight allowance. Could have a hybrid system whereby basic costs are met eg rent, mortgage interest with a daily allowance to meet the costs of food and other items.
9. Should be where the member spends the lesser time. Where a member changes the designation it should be required to provide evidence that working of family life pattern has changed.
10. It should be allowable as family members are often more knowledgeable, experienced and committed than others. There needs to be monitoring of their suitability for the job and salary.
11. Yes.
12. Total figure under category headings. This seems academic as the Media will make the requests and publish anyway.

13 Yes but it should be transparent. Outside positions bring the benefits of professional experience but the risk of personal interests. It is reasonable to know the level of commitment and the remuneration involved. I don't believe that it is necessary to have further legislation on this matter.

14 Yes.