

Independent Panel on Members' Pay and Allowances

IRP – 04

Response from Plaid Cymru Group

Living Accommodation in Cardiff

The most important thing is that any changes to the present arrangements should not penalise Members who live outside the Cardiff area and have no option but to stay overnight in Cardiff for at least part of the week. For this reason it is felt that the present system, as long as expenses reflect actual costs within reasonable limits, is fair and simple to operate.

One way to counteract the charge that Members profit from the property boom would be to change the current system to require Members to repay the sum that they have received for a second home in Cardiff when that home is sold when the Member stands down and no longer needs it.

There has been a suggestion that perhaps the Assembly should provide an accommodation block for Members with constituencies outside the Cardiff area. Any arrangements that are made about Members' accommodation should bear in mind that Members' privacy needs to be respected, and that some Members have families who are in Cardiff with them. Failure to do this will make it very difficult for people with family commitments to be Assembly Members, and that will of course impact most on young women. There are also safety issues to be considered. One woman AM has been stalked and known "Assembly Accommodation" could make this sort of thing worse. The possibility of protests also needs to be considered.

Support Staff

The Plaid Group feels strongly that Members need to be able to recruit their own staff, decide on job descriptions and be responsible for managing their staff. Different communities need to be served in different ways, and Members' staff are inevitably exposed to information that is politically sensitive. It is, therefore, very important that Members should be able to employ staff that they, personally, can trust.

Individual Members will have different priorities, and it should be for Members to decide what the balance should be between, for example, case work, publicity, and research.

The Plaid Group strongly support unified terms and conditions, and would advocate that we should be paying our staff better, both from the point of view of fairness and in order that we can recruit and retain good people.

It is also important that Party Groups remain able to pool resources if they choose to do so.

Constituency Offices

The Plaid Group believes that Members should have discretion in deciding what and where their offices should be. Consideration should be given to the variable cost of office space. For example, it is much cheaper to rent a town centre space in Llanelli than it would be for an AM to rent in Cardiff or Newport. Perhaps the answer would be some kind of fair rent list held by the Fees Office varied to reflect different rents in different parts of Wales.

An extra office costs allowance should be available to newly-elected AMs to enable them to establish constituency offices. The current allowance is adequate for the day to day running of the office but is not sufficient to cover the setting-up costs incurred during the first year.

We do not see any problem with the practice of renting from local political parties, provided that the rent is fair, and that, where buildings are shared with parties, there is a clear, obvious difference between Party space and resources and Assembly space and resources. A system which makes it acceptable to use public resources to pay rent to private landlords but not to voluntary organisations, which is, after all, what local Party branches are, does not seem just.

Additional Costs Allowance

Members should be able to claim for additional caring costs. For example, it is right and proper that Members, like any other parents and carers, pay the usual 8 - 6, Monday to Friday, nursery fees, but the extra costs for out of hours care should be claimable. As should the costs of extra, out of usual hours, care for an elderly or disabled relative for whom the AM is a sole or main carer. It seems wrong that we can claim for cleaning and gardening services, but not for care costs. This is another example of the current expenses system not supporting the additional responsibilities of women, since women still do the great bulk of childcare and other care.

Constituency / Regional Members

The Plaid Cymru Group does not believe that there should be any difference made between the support available to constituency and regional AMs. Regional AMs cover 7 or 8 constituencies which leads to additional pressures in terms of travel and correspondence. Constituency AMs may handle more individual cases, but the cases regional AMs deal with tend to be more complex, requiring more staff time to address. There are differences in the workloads of regional and constituency Members but overall requirements and expenses work out roughly equal.

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