

Independent Review Panel – Financial Support for Members

IRP- 73

Response from Plaid Cymru Support Staff

Band System

It is felt that the Band system used for paying Assembly staff is too restrictive and inflexible. The following concerns have been expressed:

- The fact that Members are only allowed to appoint 1 employee from each band can lead to conflict and is felt to be unfair. It also makes it difficult for Members to re-structure their office staff when any changes are made. For example, the number of staff per member was increased from 2.5 to 3 giving members an opportunity to review their staffing arrangements and job descriptions but they were constrained by the bands in which their current staff had been employed.
- The fact that there are only 5 points on the scale of each band leads to a higher turnover of staff and means that there is no career progression. Staff cannot progress to a higher band unless another member of staff leaves and good, enthusiastic members of staff are forced to apply for other jobs if they wish to progress their careers.

Group Allowances

Allowances for party groups allow groups to employ staff and provide for additional staff costs and the purchase of equipment. Groups have two options as to how they claim their staffing allowance. They can instruct the Fees Office to pay their staff out of a lump sum allowance or they can use the same system as individual members, in which the Fees Office pay staff directly. It would seem that the Fees Office prefer the second option as, when we worked the figures out, we were worse off under the first option and therefore chose option 2. The same banding system applies to groups as for individual AMs.

The situation is further complicated by the fact that the Plaid Group is now in coalition government, which has meant a reduction in staff entitlement from 7 to 4. We believe that this reduction in staff entitlement should be reviewed for the following reasons.

- It was put in place before the separation of the Government from the Assembly Commission. The separation has meant that backbenchers no longer have access to the same services as the government and therefore still need research staff, especially for the portfolios where the group does not have Ministers.
- The regulations do not take into account the number of Ministers a group has. Even if only one Minister were appointed the staff entitlement would still be cut from 7 to 4. A fairer system might be to calculate the allowance on the number of backbenchers remaining in the group.

- Coalitions are not as stable as one party governments and can be created or disbanded overnight, leading to a lack of job security for staff.

Allowance Structure

Because the allowance structure is unduly complicated ways have to be found around it. Up to 25% can be vired from one allowance to another and the Plaid members vire part of their additional staffing allowance into the group budget every year so that they can employ extra group staff.

Perhaps it would be better to have one allowance for staffing and office costs and to allow members more freedom as to how they allocate it, keeping within agreed terms on employing staff. A newly elected member setting up a constituency office, for example, would need to spend more on office costs during the first year than members who already have an established office.

Fees Office

We would like to pay tribute to the staff in the Fees Office who, even when under pressure at the end of the financial year, are helpful, friendly and always available to give advice.