

From: SWINSON, Jo
Sent: 12 September 2008 12:44
To: Leader of the House of Commons
Subject: Members' Allowances - response to August consultation document

Firstly, it is extremely disappointing that yet another review to reform the expenses system is needed. The reputation of Parliament has already been severely damaged by the various expenses scandals and the consequent public perception that all MPs are fiddling their expenses. The fact that MPs and the House of Commons authorities have then failed to sort out the mess and implement a robust, transparent and accountable expenses system has lowered the standing of Parliament still further.

My submissions to the MEC, attached below, represent my views on the reform of the expenses. Given this new review specifically asks whether APMA should set a zero limit for receiptable expenditure, I would like to add my support to this proposal, that receipts should be required for everything.

The internal audit system is one step in the right direction, but I would like to reiterate my support for external auditing. I believe this is needed to restore public confidence in the system.

Jo Swinson MP

Previous submissions to the MEC review:

Further to my submission below, and following the Members Estimate Committee's report of 31 March 2008, I would like to reiterate my opposition to the Communications Allowance. Most of the discussion around the review has understandably centred on ACA and staffing, but I wouldn't want the Committee to infer from this that those of us who opposed the Communications Allowance when it was voted through on 28 March 2007 had changed our minds. I still think it is wrong and would be much happier if it were scrapped. Kind regards Jo

From: SWINSON, Jo
Sent: 06 March 2008 20:23
To: MARTIN, Michael; HARMAN, Harriet; MAY, Theresa; BELL, Stuart; HARVEY, Nick;
Subject: Review of Members' Allowances

Submission to the Members Estimate Committee Review of Members' Allowances

Following the informal session for Lib Dem MPs to share thoughts with the MEC earlier this week regarding the review, I wanted to provide a summary of my thoughts for the Committee to consider as part of the review.

Input to the review

Consultation among MPs is very welcome, however for this review to have legitimacy the public must also have their say. It is vital that the new proposals are seen as fair and reasonable. The idea floated at the meeting of Citizen's Juries is an excellent one for this kind of consultation, and I would urge the MEC to take up this suggestion.

Cost of living away from home

It is appropriate that the costs of living away from home incurred by MPs should be met by the House, as they are in other jobs where travel of that sort is required. However, I cannot see a justification for continuing the current system where MPs can make capital gains (or losses) as a result of using the ACA allowance to pay mortgage interest. It may be the most cost-effective solution to buy rather than rent property, but I think the House should take the risk, and make the capital gain accruing. Over

time this could actually mean there would be no ongoing burden to the taxpayer as the House would effectively build up a property portfolio.

Additional food costs

There are additional food costs incurred by MPs through living away from home and the requirement to eat out so often due to the hours and unpredictability of voting. However I think the system of being able to claim up to £400 per month for food without receipt should not continue. Either the food allowance should be rolled up into the salary (at a considerably lower rate than £400 per month which in my view is excessive), or an amount set for claiming on a per diem basis, or clear guidance given on what should be claimed for and receipts provided.

Expenditure without receipts

I already provide receipts for the vast majority of items regardless of the amount. I cannot see why this should not be standard practice. I am in favour of a very low or zero limit for non-receipted expenditure.

Transparency of expenses

In my view the House has done itself no favours by resisting moves to greater transparency, through challenging Freedom of Information rulings and attempting to exempt MPs from the FOI legislation last year. Instead, I would urge the MEC and the House of Commons Commission to comply with the FOI requests and go further by taking a lead and being proactive in opening up the House to scrutiny. I hope this review process will be the start of that. There are, however, some areas where the House should safeguard information. In being specific about protecting information in those areas, rather than generally avoiding transparency, a strong case can be made. One such area is information on staffing costs. MPs are rightly subject to public scrutiny, but it does not follow that our staff should be too. Other public or private sector workers do not have their names and salaries published, and MPs staff should be treated the same. However given the issues raised by the conduct of Derek Conway, we do need clear guidelines on employment of family members, which the Committee on Standards and Privileges is working on. Finally, I personally feel very uncomfortable about the latest ruling that says MPs addresses in London should be public information. This should be challenged on security grounds – both the security of the property if it is public knowledge that it is empty for example, during weekends or recess, and more importantly, the personal security of MPs. I know I would feel much less safe walking home after a vote at 10pm if my London address was freely available to anyone who wanted to know it.

Auditing of expenses

Public confidence has been dented by recent media stories, and in some cases by the conduct of MPs. A robust and independent auditing process is necessary to restore this, and to prevent any future such problems arising.

Jo Swinson MP