

**TGWU PARLIAMENTARY STAFF BRANCH 1/427
SUBMISSION TO THE SENIOR SALARIES REVIEW BODY:
REVIEW OF PARLIAMENTARY PAY AND ALLOWANCES**

Background

1. The TGWU Parliamentary Staff Branch represents over 350 employees of Members of Parliament, from different political parties, both at Parliament and in constituency offices. We are pleased to again be given the opportunity to submit to the review of parliamentary pay and allowances, following our submission of our survey-based *'Democracy on the Cheap'* to the previous review.
2. We welcome the introduction of the new system for MPs' allowances and the benefits of a 'ring fenced' salary allowance as well as new IT equipment, introduced in July 2001. However, we have a number of concerns regarding the current arrangements and put forward a number of recommendations based on consultation with branch members and others working for Members of Parliament. We also base our recommendations on the findings of our last survey of staff working for MPs in December 2002,¹ a copy of which is enclosed with this submission.
3. The time for official recognition of the branch by the parliamentary authorities has come. Given the centralisation and standardisation of employment contracts and staff pensions we believe this has enhanced our case for union recognition. Our experience in increasing staff pension uptake and the additional Finance Office-based introduction of a staff pension scheme could have been more effectively implemented if the trade union branch were fully involved from the outset. Trade union recognition would make it easier for employers and employees to work in partnership for mutual benefit. The current ad hoc and informal approach when dealing with matters concerning staff employees is failing both staff and employers. Furthermore, given the nature of working for a Member of Parliament, it is often difficult for staff working in constituencies outside of London to deal with concerns affecting their employment.

Staffing Allowance

4. Staff Pay Guidance

We are concerned about the current House of Commons Guidance on Pay Rates for Members' Staff. We believe that this information needs to be more detailed and, in the main, requires a degree of simplicity. To reach this we support the introduction of a pay spine, which would provide MPs and staff better guidance on what salary could be expected based on experience, ability and appropriate performance.

¹ 479 completed survey questionnaires

MPs would also be guided on the salary level. Often, the responsibilities of staff go beyond the boundaries of any single job

description. At present, there is no specific guidance to take into account work experience or length service and the addition of a pay spine would help seek to rectify this.

5. Staff Salaries

Whilst there have been improvements in the pay of staff, we are of the view that many of our members are still under paid given their experience, commitment and ability. We note that a *Research and Support Officer to a Member of the Greater London Authority* is placed on a starting salary of £27,303. However, when comparing with the salary guidance for a *Research/ Parliamentary Assistant* – the Parliamentary comparable – there is a considerable pay gap with a starting salary of £16,068. We see such differences as unacceptable and call for a review into salary guidance and therefore the available amount of funds for staff salaries.

We believe that the issue of an increase in staff salaries should be addressed. The current agreement to increase pay scales merely by the rate of the Average Earnings Index (AEI) is unacceptable. A structured approach needs to be introduced to ensure a fair reward, including a formula to reward long-serving staff for their loyalty and increased experience in post. An enforceable pay spine could ensure this.

In 2003-04, the Staffing Allowance was increased in line with the combined public and private sector average earnings increase. We believe it is clear we are part of the public sector and future increases should be based on the public sector AEI.

We also call for a confidential audit of staff to establish the impact of the House of Commons staff salary guidance. We feel that the present guidance is open to abuse and it is not accurately adhered to.

We believe that MPs should be able to 'carry forward' any underspend in the Staffing Allowance in order for them to better plan for systematic staff pay rises.

In 1986, according to the *British Election Survey*, 11% of people contacted their MP. This rose to 17% in 2002. We therefore believe that an overall increase in the staffing allowance is required. At a time when public regard for politicians is at an all-time low, and when most people's first port of call to an MP is through their staff, an increase in staff can only improve an MP's service to his or her constituents.

Consideration should be given to providing an Exceptional Staffing Allowance for MPs with exceptional caseload, either permanently (eg for MPs with a high reading in the deprivation index) or temporarily (eg for rural MPs during the foot and mouth outbreak).

Case Study. It is appropriate at this point to quote from one union member who was consulted regarding this submission: *"I know for a fact that my salary will never increase from £20,500 (excluding inflation increases) due to the other staff members we also have on the pay roll at present taking up the entire budget - and it should be noted that I am the highest earner in our office, so it isn't that others have outrageous/unrealistic salaries. In other words, our titles and wages were decided more on financial constraints than on what we actually do.*

Personally my opinion is that if you want a professional workforce you have to be prepared to pay for it - and given that it seems that I will never get another pay increase and cannot afford to buy a house in the South East on the current wages it leaves no option for people like me but to look for other employment sooner rather than later."

6. London Allowance

We urge the review to support the separation of the extra London allowance for full time staff that is currently added to the staffing allowance. This, we believe, should be added to the salary and visible in the net pay packet of staff working in London. The extra funding for London staff is acknowledgement of the extra costs of working in London and goes directly to the employee. It separates and makes the pay system more transparent.

7. Staff Training

We are concerned the absence of any 'ring fenced' training budget for staff and urge the review to consider the establishment of a centrally administrated fund for specified training or learning. This would be of significant value to staff development and in line with government policy on work based training and life long learning. It would also increase staff retention.

We note that those employed by the House already receive generous assistance for education and training courses and fail to grasp why those working for MPs should not be able to benefit from such provision. For example, in the case of approved courses, the House will fund 80% of tuition fees, after the first £5. The House will then contribute 50% to the total cost of reading material up to a maximum of £95 per course and a claim can be made for travel costs above the normal cost of travelling, as an additional benefit for undertaking the course.

We recognise that our members training requirements may differ to those already approved by the House and recommend that this idea be explored; working with the TGWU Staff Parliamentary Branch and other interested bodies.

8. Employment of Members' Spouses

Some branch members have expressed concern regarding the nature of 'employment' by Members' spouses. It is highly unfair if spouses are being paid from the staff allowances when not fulfilling respective responsibilities or duties as outlined in the guidance. This affects the work and morale of the office. We believe this issue needs to be addressed on the grounds of fairness in the workplace and transparency. Given the nature of the working relationship between staff and MPs it is very unlikely that this complaint would be dealt with amicably and successfully. Ensuring transparency on this issue would help reduce the most recent negative press coverage relating to MPs employing their spouses.

This position should not be taken to reflect any opposition to MPs employing appropriately qualified spouses in genuine positions in their offices.

9. Overtime Payments

The qualification for overtime payments is contained within the employment contract, but due to the nature of employment and the rigidity of the staff allowance, it is difficult for MPs to estimate the likely cost of overtime over a financial year. We understand from our members that overtime is very rarely claimed and that staff feel very uncomfortable about requesting an overtime payment. One possible solution would be to reflect this situation by factoring in an estimated overtime into each job description outlined in the staff salary guidance.

10. House Staff employment compared to Members' Staff

We note the differences in employment packages of those employed by the House and believe that such entitlements should be made available to Members' Staff. In particular, we believe that the entitlement to transport loans for permanent employees would be extremely beneficial as well as the ability to request references for entitlements such as mortgage applications, personal loans, tenancy agreements, through the Personnel Office. Such benefits are currently available to House staff and the equalisation of entitlements should be considered.

Incidental Expenses Provision and Related Issues

11. Staff Travel Warrants

From our survey it is clear that MPs are employing more staff. In doing so, we call on the review to increase the allowance for staff travel warrants as any extra journeys would be used from the Members' Staff allowance. It is apparent that the total number of yearly warrants available to staff to travel from Westminster and the constituency and vice-versa on parliamentary business is insufficient. We call on the

body to review the present arrangement with a view to introducing nine return standard class rail warrants per member of staff as opposed to the current system of issuing nine return warrants per office.

12. Health and Safety

We believe that employers have a clear duty to safeguard the health, safety and welfare at work of their staff. Members have expressed concern that staff who are employed in particularly busy offices, such as those based in deprived inner city constituencies, often deal with a far greater level of correspondence and case work. As interaction with constituents increases so to does the need for tighter security to protect staff against verbal and physical abuse. We call upon the review to introduce an additional allowance to tighten and improve levels of security in constituency offices in-line with indicators of deprivation.

We believe that clear guidance should be made available to all staff as to their entitlement to recovery of employment-related costs, such as those for eye tests, from the Incidental Expenses Provision.

13. Rate of Incidental Expenses Provision

Consideration should be given to increasing the IEP for activity that advertises the work of the MP in Parliament, eg advertising, newsletters and websites, to assist in improved turnouts in elections and better engagement with the public.

MPs should be allowed to carry over and underspend in the IEP to avoid wasteful spending at the end of the financial year by Ms intent on spending the maximum, and to enable MPs to plan ongoing publicity campaigns properly.