

Independent Review Panel – Financial Support for Members

IRP - 74

Response from Labour Assembly Members Support Staff Group

Background

Following the last review of Assembly Members Pay and Allowances in 2004 carried out by the Senior Salaries Review Body (SSRB), changes made to the previous system such as the introduction of a structured and formal pay spine were broadly welcomed and appreciated by members of support staff.

However it has been four years since the last assessment of these issues and after detailed consultation with all staff employed within the Labour Group, we feel this current review is an appropriate and welcome opportunity to look again at the current system and resolve the inflexibilities and inadequacies that exist within the present structure.

Among the major issues we feel need to be addressed are ongoing problems with staff retention that have led to skilled and experienced staff leaving to find more attractive salaries in the private sector.

Labour AMs Support Staff are a group of loyal, committed and dedicated individuals who seek to enhance the professional service their employers provide for constituents across Wales. Whilst we recognise the difficult economic climate places a special responsibility on this institution to exercise restraint in its system of pay and allowances, it is in light of the increasing workload and additional responsibilities being placed upon Assembly Members staff following the introduction of the recent Government of Wales Act that we hope this review can lead to a reassessment of the way AM Support Staff are currently paid and employed.

We note that in March 2008 Assembly Members were awarded an 8.3% pay rise which recognised the increased workload placed upon them. Support staff believe that an appropriate acknowledgement of the new political framework and the added work this involves should be made within support staff pay and conditions.

1. Banding Issues

1.1 Since the introduction of an enforceable pay spine in 2004, starting salaries for Assembly Member Support Staff have improved. The previous system of voluntary guidance was insufficient and was felt to be unfit for purpose. However it is the case that the majority of Support Staff remain

underpaid within the current structure given the wide breadth of ability, skills and experience they bring to the job.

1.2 In Parliament, an enforceable pay spine similar to that in the Assembly is not in force, yet MPs do have the flexibility to reward staff for their experience and loyalty. The upper limit for an Office Manager is £40,052, the upper limit for a Senior Caseworker is £29,716 and for a Senior Research/Parliamentary Assistant the limit is £40,052.

1.3 Obviously MPs staffing allowance is capped at an upper limit, but the scales suggested above do provide the potential for career progression and reward for loyal service.

1.4 It is therefore the view of AMSS that salaries are generally lower than what they can earn for similar roles in the UK Parliament. (See Annex A attached as an example)

1.5 We also believe the issue of staff retention should be a key focus of this review. Currently, staff move up one point on their pay band each year unless the Fees Office is otherwise instructed by the individual AM. However on reaching the top of the band staff cannot be rewarded for good performance or loyalty of service other than through the yearly cost of living increase.

1.6 We believe that this current structure, whilst providing surety and protection against wide variations in pay, does act as a disincentive for staff to remain any extended length of time in the employment of their Assembly Member. The consequent regular staff turnover and loss of experienced personnel hampers Assembly Members in their efforts to provide constituents with the most efficient and comprehensive service possible.

1.7 We believe AMs should be given greater flexibility to place more than one member of their staff in any one band. This would help attract more experienced and qualified candidates to work in their offices. Currently, each of the three full-time staff working for an AM have to be placed on different bands with no provision for AMs to employ more than one person of equal status. By allowing Assembly Members the option of placing more than one member of staff on a particular band AMs can, if they so wish, have a flatter office structure, as is common in MPs offices.

1.8 The unsatisfactory nature of the current system is evidenced by AMs having to give bonus 'top-ups' to experienced staff to encourage them to stay on beyond more than a couple of years by use of the virement system. The very fact that such a practice takes place clearly shows that AM's feel that their staff are not rewarded enough for their good work. We believe it would be better to structure pay awards sufficiently in the first place rather than put pressure on the office costs budget that is used by AM's to top up staff salaries.

2. Staff Numbers

2.1 With the coming into force of the Government of Wales Act 2006 and the expanded range of Assembly powers following May's election, the scope and remit of the National Assembly for Wales has obviously extended significantly. This has in turn clearly increased the workload of AMs and their staff.

2.2 Both the caseload in an AMs constituency/region and the research work required by them in Cardiff Bay has increased since the last SSRB in 2004, as the Assembly has taken on a greater range of area responsibilities. To assist in this regard, staff numbers were recently increased to the equivalent of three full-time members of staff per each AM.

2.3 Whilst this has helped, AMs are increasingly being asked to conduct closer and more detailed legislative scrutiny. Plenary time has now been extended during the week and this has in turn meant Assembly Members requiring greater and more comprehensive support.

2.4 As the report of the Richard Commission highlighted, the number of AMs currently in the Assembly was barely sufficient to undertake adequate scrutiny and accountability for the Assembly's previous arrangements. As the Assembly further develops its legislative competence over the next few years, yet retains the same number of AMs, much extra, detailed, support will be needed from support staff to assist Assembly Members.

2.5 We therefore believe that AMs existing complement of 3.0 full time staff should be increased by 1.0 to take account of the changes outlined above. Given the rising expectations of the National Assembly and the growing realisation amongst members of the public in Wales of its strategic role in running public services following eight years of devolution, it is important that AMs are resourced and staffed adequately to meet those expectations.

3. Temporary Staffing Allowance

3.1 We note that the present £5,600 allowance for AMs to employ short-term, temporary staff is insufficient. Given the small size and tight-knit nature of every Assembly Members office, any staff absence for a continued period, whether through illness, maternity leave or jury service, for example, has an impact upon the running and operation of the various offices managed by the Assembly Member.

3.2 We call upon this review to enhance the temporary staffing allowance to allow AMs to put in place the necessary, experienced cover when appropriate.

4. Fees Office

4.1 Currently, when a member of staff begins work they start at the bottom of a particular pay scale unless the Assembly Member employing them can

justify, with supporting evidence, that their experience warrants them beginning higher up the scale. Disagreements are handled and ruled upon by the Presiding Officer.

4.2 We feel the appeal system, in the event of a problem, should be changed and the review team examine the possibility of a committee of arbitration being set-up to resolve such disagreements as and when they arise.

5. Overtime Payments and Staff Training Budgets

5.1 Following consultation with support staff in preparation for this review it has become clear that overtime payments, whilst provided for in most contracts, are rarely, if ever, claimed. Staff feel uncomfortable asking for overtime payment because such payments are made from the same pot as staff training and bonuses and any such claim may have the effect of denying other members of staff the opportunity for career development or a bonus at the end of the year.

5.2 We call for the review to look closely at the issue of overtime payments and establish a dedicated budget for overtime and bonus payments separate from any training/career development budget.

6. Life Cover and Critical Illness Cover

6.1 Currently a Member shall be entitled to claim an allowance in respect of the cost to him/her of contributions made to any life assurance or critical illness policy authorised by the House Committee in respect of any staff paid from: (a.) the Staff Salaries Allowance; (b.) funding for groups or (c.) directly employed cleaning staff funded through the Office Costs Allowance

6.2 As is currently the situation with pension contributions, we believe that information on Life Cover and Critical Illness Cover should be given to staff with the presumption that it is taken up, unless waived by staff members in writing.

7. Staff Training

7.1 As was alluded to in the above point, we believe a separate training budget should be set up and ring fenced from other budgets that may put pressure on it.

7.2 This would be of fundamental value to staff working for AMs and fully in line with the Welsh Assembly Government policy on work based training and lifelong learning. It would also help in achieving the stated aim of greater staff retention and we recommend this recommendation is explored carefully.

8. Support Staff Travel to Region/Constituency

8.1 Current experience suggests many staff make in excess of the numbers of journeys to their Assembly Members constituency/region allowed for in the current determination of members allowances.

8.2 In Scotland the maximum number of journeys in relation to which reimbursement may be claimed in each financial year is equivalent to twice the number of weeks that the Parliament meets in that year, not including weeks when only committees of the Parliament meet.

8.3 Evidence has also emerged of support staff working for North Wales and Mid and West Wales AMs having to fund overnight stays because provision is not currently made in the current structure.

8.4 We believe the review should look closely at this issue as support staff travel reimbursement should be increased beyond the current level of 18 return trips to the Assembly Members particular constituency or region.

8.5 We believe an overnight funding allowance should be made available for staff working for North Wales and Mid and West Wales AMs.

9. Exemplar Employer

9.1 During the consultation with support staff it was suggested that in recognition of the fact that the National Assembly for Wales has been such an innovative, world leader on equality and diversity issues as well as helping to set-up a significant range of initiatives to promote better balance in work and family life, this should be reflected in its arrangements with staff.

9.2 Support staff recognise that there are tangible benefits from supporting flexible working practices, implementing family friendly initiatives, promoting career development as well as assisting employees to achieve a balance in their work commitments and their life outside of work. We believe taking a lead on this issue will help members in their effort to retain staff and promote excellent employment practice in the workplace.

9.3 We therefore feel AMs should consider the possibility of drafting and signing up to a voluntary statement that commits them to be an Exemplar Employer.

10. Regular Review

10.1 We feel that given the importance of the issues involved in this review, and the fact that the new arrangements introduced under the Government of Wales Act 2006 are still developing, another smaller review to monitor the effect of the increasing workload and arrangements is made next year.

Annex A:

Comparison of Office Manager (Westminster) and Head of Office (Assembly)

As of 01.04.08:

Westminster	National Assembly for Wales
<p>Office Managers/Executive Secretaries</p> <p>£21,320 to £40,052</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Provide the full range of secretarial and administrative support• Manage the office, overseeing budgets, supervising other staff and volunteers etc• Deal with telephone enquiries and visitors• Draft and sign letters on a range of issues• Respond to e-mails and letters• Manage the diary and arrange engagements <p>They may also deal with some constituency casework and provide secretariats to special interest groups. They may delegate keyboard work to others.</p>	<p>Head of Office</p> <p>£20,512 p.a to £29,162 p.a.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Provide the full range of secretarial, casework, research and administrative support• Manage the office, overseeing budgets, supervising other staff and volunteers etc• Co-ordinate the office to ensure that telephone enquiries and visitors are dealt with appropriately• Draft and sign off letters, on behalf of the AM, on a range of issues• Respond, or delegate other staff to respond, to e-mails, letters and enquiries• Overall responsibility for managing the Members' diary and arranging engagements• Establish, manage and monitor standards, processes, communications, training and systems to ensure the workplace satisfies health, safety and welfare requirements for ventilation, temperature, lighting, sanitary, washing and rest facilities• Liase with local Party officers & members• To deputise for the Assembly Member and make final decisions on casework and administration etc if the Assembly Member is temporarily unavailable• Ensure compliance with data protection legislation