

REIMBURSEMENT OF MEMBERS' EXPENSES SCHEME – USE OF PARLIAMENTARY RESOURCES

Executive summary

1. The SPCB is invited to consider a complaint regarding the distribution outwith his Highland and Islands region of a 2019 parliamentary report by Jamie Halcro Johnston MSP.

Issues and Options

2. A complaint was received on 29 March 2019 which raised concerns that Mr Halcro Johnston had distributed his parliamentary report outwith his region. The complainer highlighted that the report was received at an address in Lumsden, near Alford, which falls within the AB54 4 postcode area. The majority of this postcode falls within the North East Scotland region.
3. Under Section 7 of the Code of Conduct Members must abide by the Reimbursement of Members' Expenses Scheme and the policies of the SPCB. Section 4.1.2 of the Scheme does allow Members to be reimbursed for the cost of the publication and distribution of newsletters, annual reports and surveys. The SPCB's policy on Members' publications states that a publication funded through parliamentary allowances must not be distributed outside a Member's electoral area.
4. Having raised the complaint with Mr Halcro Johnston he has advised that he arranged Royal Mail to deliver the annual report. Whilst Mr Halcro Johnston's region does include the AB54 4 postcode the majority of the postcode falls outwith his electoral area. Mr Halcro Johnston advised that he used the Royal Mail door to door postcode finder as directed by Royal Mail, given this was the first time they had used them to issue his report, to determine where to issue his reports within the region and identified that the postcode in question was one of the areas that fell within the Moray constituency. Mr Halcro Johnston was aware that the boundary was within the postcode but given the area was so rural it was difficult for them to have any reliable way of telling how many houses were within the region.
5. The Allowances Office has looked into the matter and I can confirm that Mr Halcro Johnston issued 1,359 reports to the AB54 4 postcode. Given that only a small very rural part of the region is covered by the postcode it is estimated, based on population figures for the area, that there should have been around 200 reports issued to the element of the postcode that fell within the Highlands and Islands Region and therefore approximately 1,159 of the reports have been issued outwith the Members' region. Taking account of the full cost of producing and delivering Mr Halcro Johnston's report the cost of the annual reports being distributed outwith his region totals £137.58.

6. Mr Johnston fully accepts that the mistake occurred due to him and his staff being unfamiliar with the Royal Mail process and the fact that Royal Mail do not split postcode deliveries should they cross over into a different electoral area but purely base delivery on the full postcode provided. The Member has been advised that different delivery methods will be required for this part of the region in future to ensure such an error does not re-occur as is required in other areas where postcodes cross over regional and constituency borders.
7. The SPCB will wish to note that Mr Halcro Johnston has repaid the full cost of the incorrect distribution at a total of £137.58 including VAT. The SPCB will also wish to note that this is the second consecutive year that Mr Halcro Johnston's annual report has been distributed outwith his region, Mr Halcro Johnston having repaid monies for last year's report as well.
8. The SPCB is invited to determine whether they wish to take any further action on the matter.

Resource Implications

9. The costs in relation to publication and distribution were £137.58 which has been fully repaid.

Governance issues

10. The SPCB's policy on Members Publications specifically prohibits distribution of publications outside a Member's electoral area.

Publication Scheme

11. This paper can be published in accordance with the SPCB's publication Scheme.

Next steps

12. To inform the Member and the complainant of the decision.

Decision

13. The SPCB is invited to consider the complaint noting that repayment of the incorrect distribution costs has been made and decide whether it wishes to take any further action on the matter.

Allowances Office

May 2019