

## **REGIONAL OFFICES**

### **Executive summary**

1. James Kelly MSP wrote to the Presiding Officer on 23 May 2016 on behalf of the Scottish Labour Party (copy attached) requesting that the SPCB consider increasing the number of regional offices allowed under the Reimbursement of Members' Expenses Scheme (the scheme) to two per registered political party for every electoral region in Scotland, where that party has more than one Member in that region.
2. Any amendment to the scheme requires to be made by a resolution of the Parliament.

### **Issues and Options**

#### **Current position**

3. Since 1 October 2008, the provisions as they relate to regional offices have largely remained constant and provide at paragraph 4.2.5 that where more than one Member is returned from a political party's regional list, those Members are entitled between them to reimbursement of the costs of only one office for that region. Paragraph 4.2.6 allows the SPCB to make an exception to this rule whereby it may determine in relation to the Highlands and Islands, North East Scotland, South of Scotland, West Scotland and Mid Scotland and Fife regions that reimbursement of the costs of an additional office is permitted. Applications for such a determination require to be made by all of a party's regional Members.
4. When the proposed scheme was first debated by the Parliament in 1999, there was active consideration of a proposal for each regional Member to be reimbursed for the cost of a regional office. An amendment was agreed at that first debate to restrict this provision to only one regional office for Members from the same party. That amendment allowed exceptions for the three largest geographical regions (Highlands and Islands, North East Scotland and South of Scotland). The exception allowed that the SPCB "may determine after inquiry that the regional Members concerned may run one additional office because it is necessary for the regional Members concerned to carry out their Parliamentary duties effectively".
5. A review in 2000 led to the Mid Scotland and Fife region being added to the original three exceptions and a further review in 2011 added the West Scotland Region. The latter change was made due to the impact of boundary changes leading to a significant increase in the size of the regional electorate and the lengthy journey times between the south and north of the region.

## Issues

6. The attached letter to the Presiding Officer seeks consistency of treatment across all regions, suggesting inconsistency and unfairness in the current rules.

7. As set out above, the scheme operates by way of exception, explicitly allowing different decisions in different regions. The scheme has been designed in this way to acknowledge significant differences in geographical size and in ease of travel around parliamentary regions. Reflecting this, where the SPCB has been asked in the past to consider applications under paragraph 4.2.6, it has insisted that there is a significant geographical distance between the existing and proposed additional office before granting the application.

8. In June 2007, the then SPCB commissioned a full-scale review of expenses which was carried out by an independent panel under the chairmanship of Sir Alan Langlands. The subsequent report (March 2008) noted that in relation to the provision of regional offices, "there has to be a balance between the public's accessibility to a democratically elected regional representative and value for money." The review concluded that there was no need to alter existing arrangements which it considered provided local accessibility and a shared base for regional Members.

9. As mentioned above, West Scotland was added to the list of regions covered by para 4.2.6 in 2011 following a desk-based exercise undertaken by officials. This exercise also looked at the possibility of adding Central Scotland, Glasgow and Lothian Regions, but the SPCB decided that there was no case for so doing.

10. There are three options open to the SPCB in responding to the Labour Party request:

a) to make no changes. The SPCB may consider that the principle of different treatment for different regions based largely on geographical size is sound and meets the requirements for balance established by Langlands between accessibility and value for money and that the current arrangements best reflect that balance.

b) to request officials to examine the case for inclusion of one or more additional regions in para 4.2.6. Such a review may cover, for example, geographical size, travel options and the number of local authorities or health boards within the region with which regional Members interact.

c) to accept the case for consistency set out in the request and seek to adjust the scheme to allow all regions to have more than one regional office where a registered party has more than one representative in that region. A motion proposed by the SPCB would require to be lodged for consideration by the Parliament.

### **Resource Implications**

11. Resource implications depend on whether (a) the expenses scheme is amended as requested, (b) each party entitled to apply under the amended rules does so and (c) the SPCB grants each request. Should the scheme be amended as requested, each party applies and each request is granted, additional funding of £114,202 per annum would be required to fund the additional offices.

### **Governance issues**

12. The expenses scheme is created, approved and amended by a resolution of the Scottish Parliament. The SPCB has, in line with its statutory role to provide the Parliament with the resources required for the Parliament's purposes, responsibility for the operation of the scheme and ensuring compliance with its terms.

### **Publication Scheme**

13. This paper will be published in line with the SPCB's Publication Scheme.

### **Decision**

14. The SPCB is asked to consider the issues and options set out in paragraph 10 above and agree its preferred option. In doing so, the SPCB will wish to have regard to earlier decisions relating to regional offices, the principles of accessibility and value for money and the specific nature of the regions that are the subject of the request.

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