

REIMBURSEMENT OF MEMBERS' EXPENSES SCHEME – USE OF PARLIAMENTARY RESOURCES

Executive Summary

1. The SPCB is invited to consider whether the issuing of an electronic survey complies with the SPCB's guidance on the use of Parliamentary Resources in the period 22 January to 19 September 2014.

Issues and Options

2. Guidance on the use of Parliamentary resources in the period listed above was issued to Members on 29 January. The guidance specified that in this period:-

“Parliamentary funded publications such as annual reports, newsletters, general surveys, general circular letters, questionnaires and petitions may not be issued.”

The guidance went on to further advise that:-

“Members can continue to issue circular letters and/ or surveys to local residents providing that such publications are solely related to a specific local issue such as the closure of a local facility, withdrawal of a local service or an issue that has a local impact based on a decision taken by another body or organisation.”

3. The Allowances Office has received a request for clarification in relation to the guidance and in particular whether an electronic survey may be issued to constituents who have previously specifically requested to receive a copy. To enable it to determine whether the survey complied with the guidance, the Allowances Office requested further details in relation to the content. The Allowances Office was advised that the survey would cover a general range of issues. On the basis of the information provided, advice was provided to the Member that the survey did not meet the guidance criteria and could not be issued.

4. The Member advised that the response provided by the Allowances Office appeared to contradict advice received earlier and clarification was also sought as to why the Allowances Office considered that the electronic survey would fall under the “publications guidance”.

5. The earlier guidance being referred to was provided in relation to an enquiry related to the continuation of corresponding with two groups of constituents who had written to the Member on two different national issues.

In response to this enquiry the Member was advised:-

“As you have been contacted individually by these constituents and have responded directly to them I would not consider this is unsolicited correspondence. Therefore, any future updates could proceed on that basis, as we would consider this form of exchange to be the same as day to day correspondence you have with constituents, albeit on a wider scale. The main difference between this type of correspondence and the unsolicited circular letters covered by the policy is that, as you say, you have been contacted directly by each constituent. They could therefore reasonably expect updates from you as matters are progressed as part of this continuing correspondence.”

5. It was considered by the Allowances Office that the issuing of an electronic survey on “general issues” did not directly equate to the scenario of writing to constituents to update them on specific issues previously raised and advised the Member accordingly. The Member was also advised that the SPCB’s guidance on parliamentary resources included surveys. In doing so, the offer of raising this matter with the SPCB for determination was extended.

6 The Member has now asked for the matter to be referred to the SPCB for final determination.

Resource Implications

7 There are no direct costs in relation to the expenses scheme.

Governance

8. The SPCB’s guidance on the use of parliamentary resources in the period 22 January to 19 September 2014 prohibits the circulation of general surveys.

Publication

9. This paper can be published in line with the SPCB’s publication scheme.

Next steps

10. To inform the Member of the decision.

Decision

11. The SPCB is invited to consider whether an electronic survey on general issues may be issued in the period 22 January until 19 September 2014.