

14 June 2011

REIMBURSEMENT OF MEMBERS' EXPENSES SCHEME – REVIEW OF REGIONAL OFFICES

Executive summary

1. At its previous meeting the SPCB agreed to a review of the number of regional offices permitted in the West of Scotland region. This paper sets out the arguments that have been made for an additional office within that region and invites the SPCB to consider whether the scope of this exercise should be extended to cover other regions where only one office is currently permitted.

Issues and Options

2. Paragraph 4.2.6 of the Reimbursement of Members' Expenses Scheme (expenses scheme) provides that where in the Highlands and Islands, North East Scotland, South of Scotland, or Mid Scotland and Fife Regions more than one MSP is returned from a registered political party's regional list, the SPCB may, on the written application of all of the MSPs concerned, determine that they are entitled to reimbursement of office costs in respect of an additional local parliamentary office within the region.

3. In the West of Scotland, Central Scotland, Glasgow and Lothian where more than one MSP is returned from a registered political party's regional list, those MSPs are entitled between them only to the reimbursement of office costs for one office.

4. Towards the end of the last parliamentary session it was drawn to the SPCB's attention that some Members had expressed disquiet surrounding these arrangements for regional offices, and some Members considered that the provision for additional regional offices should be extended.

5. As the SPCB is aware from the legacy report, the then SPCB suggested that the new SPCB might wish to consider a small desk based review of the current arrangements regarding the possibility of an additional office in the West of Scotland and Central Scotland. Any change to the current arrangements would have to be taken forward by way of a resolution of the Parliament amending the expenses scheme.

6. Following the election in May this year we have received strong representations from some West of Scotland MSPs asking if consideration could be given to an additional regional office in the West of Scotland.

7. The arguments that have been put forward include the geographic nature of the region straddling the River Clyde and the associated travel

issues. The MSPs also point out that the region has grown in size with the Cunninghame South constituency now forming part of the West of Scotland region. The region therefore now consists of 10 constituencies and extends further south. The region also includes island communities which, again, form part of the wider travel issues within the region, particularly the public transport network and associated costs.

8. One option for the SPCB is to agree to an additional regional office in the West of Scotland based on the representations made and to promote an amendment to the scheme to give effect to this.

9. Another option would be to ascertain if the same arguments that have been put forward for the West of Scotland could also apply to Central Scotland. While on the face of it there is unlikely to be a strong argument in favour of Glasgow and Lothian, not to include the regions in any review could attract criticism from the regional Members for those regions. These issues could be considered as part of a small review, undertaken over the summer recess with a report prepared for consideration in September.

10. The SPCB is invited to consider whether it wishes to consider the West of Scotland in isolation or for any changes to the expenses scheme to be considered following a review of all the regions.

11. The review could look at whether there had been any changes to the number of constituencies within each region, any significant changes to electorate numbers and transport links. Additionally, we are aware of other issues arising in relation to the expenses scheme. One of these is the location of established local offices following the most recent parliamentary constituency boundary changes. It would be helpful to include this issue, which also appeared in the legacy report, as part of the small review exercise.

12. In undertaking such an exercise it would also be helpful to have a steer on whether it should be solely desk based or whether there should be any form of consultation with MSPs in the regions affected.

Resource Implications

13. The financial implications of the review itself would be met from within the existing SPCB staff resources. Any financial costs of an increase in office numbers would be dependent, if additional offices were recommended, on how many MSPs in the regions concerned applied for an additional office. Using the May 2011 election results the implications for each region (if all regions were reviewed) would be (based on the revised office costs entitlement for each MSP):

West of Scotland – possible 3 additional offices (£ 42,217)
Central Scotland – possible 2 additional offices (£ 32,274)
Glasgow – possible 2 additional offices (£ 29,177)
Lothian – possible 2 additional offices (£29,177)

14. The total additional costs, if all 4 regions were permitted additional offices could be up to £132,900.

Governance issues

15. Any amendment to the expenses scheme would require agreement by the Parliamentary Bureau for a resolution to be put to the Parliament.

Publication Scheme

16. This paper can be published in line with the SPCB's Publication Scheme.

Next steps

17. The review could be undertaken over the summer recess with a report shortly thereafter.

Decision

18. The SPCB is invited to:

18.1. Consider whether it wishes to promote an amendment to the expenses scheme for an additional regional office in the West of Scotland; or that any changes to the expenses scheme should be considered following a review of all regions where only one office per party is currently permitted.

18.2. Agree that any such review considers other local office related issues.

18.3. Consider whether the review should be solely desk based or whether there should be any form of consultation with MSPs?