

Reimbursement of Members' Expenses Scheme – Use of Parliamentary Resources

24 March 2021 by Correspondence

Reference: SPCB(2021)Paper 22

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1. The SPCB is invited to consider a complaint regarding the use of parliamentary resources by Miles Briggs MSP.

ISSUES AND OPTIONS

2. A complaint was received on 10th March 2021 which raised concerns about some of the content in an email, redacted version attached as Annex A, issued on behalf of Mr Briggs by a member of his staff in response to a constituent query. The concern was specifically in relation to the following sentence which the complainant felt was party political in nature and contained a clear campaign message. The sentence was:

“Ultimately, the SNP Government’s main priority is another divisive independence referendum this year rather than our young people’s education. That is why it is so important to stop an SNP majority in May and get the Scottish Parliament 100% focused on rebuilding Scotland from this crisis.”

3. Under Section 7 of the Code of Conduct Members must abide by the rules of the Reimbursement of Members' Expenses Scheme and the policies of the SPCB. The SPCB's policies on the use of parliamentary resources and the Scheme state that parliamentary resources must not be used for party political purposes or for political campaigning.
4. The Allowances Office has looked into the matter and can confirm that the email was issued by the Member's member of staff and did contain the information detailed above. Mr Briggs has apologised for this and advised that it has been included in error due to the pressure staff are under to respond to constituents and that the information had been copied incorrectly from another email sent to Mr Briggs and pasted into this one. This assertion could be backed up in part by the text being in a different font to the rest of the email.
5. The SPCB will wish to note that whilst parliamentary resources and a small amount of staff time paid for from the Members' Expenses Scheme were used to respond to the email the majority of the email is a legitimate use of parliamentary resources. Therefore it is only 2 lines of the email that could be considered to be in breach. The SPCB will wish to note that as the cost is so small it is not possible to determine the costs associated with the issuing of the email or the 2 lines within it.

6. The SPCB is invited to determine whether a breach has occurred, and if so, whether they wish to take any action on the matter.
7. Given the limited financial implications, we suggest that a course of action would be for the Presiding Officer to write to the Member seeking assurances that this will not happen again. We would also suggest that this paper is published (alongside other SPCB papers) on the website this week. The SPCB will be aware that we would normally publish papers following a meeting of the SPCB, but that it is unlikely there will be another meeting this session.

GOVERNANCE

8. The Reimbursement of Members' Expenses Scheme and the SPCB's policies on use of parliamentary resources state that parliamentary resources must not be used for party political purposes or for political campaigning.

RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS

9. Any cost to parliamentary resources would be incalculable due the small amount.

PUBLICATION SCHEME

10. This paper can be published in accordance with the SPCB's Publication Scheme.

NEXT STEPS

11. To inform the Member and the complainant of the SPCB decision.

DECISION

12. The SPCB is invited to consider the complaint and if it considers a breach has occurred, agree that:
 - The Presiding Officer, on behalf of the SPCB, writes to Mr Briggs seeking his assurances this will not happen again; and
 - this paper is published on the website this week.

Annex A

Dear

Thank you for contacting me regarding the vaccination of teachers and school staff.

Ensuring the safety of school staff is of great importance in ensuring schools are able to reopen as soon as possible.

The rollout of the COVID-19 vaccine is of the utmost importance in the coming months, and we are clear that this process should be clinically led. This is why we support the current plans to vaccinate the population in line with the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation (JCVI) priority list. This means lowering overall risk of death through vaccinating elderly age groups, frontline healthcare workers and other vulnerable groups as a priority in the first phase of the vaccination process.

While we had hoped for the next phases the JCVI would prioritise certain groups like teachers, we are glad that they have considered all options, and what matters now is that every cohort is vaccinated as soon as possible. We will continue to push the SNP to meet their targets and vaccinate everyone – including teachers – more quickly.

Vaccination and improved testing in schools will be key to ensuring continued school closures can be fully taken off the table. The onus is now on the SNP to ensure these measures are in place.

The vaccination process is essential to saving lives, defeating this virus, and ensuring no further disruption to young people's education.

Ultimately, the SNP Government's main priority is another divisive independence referendum this year rather than our young people's education. That is why it is so important to stop an SNP majority in May and get the Scottish Parliament 100% focused on rebuilding Scotland from this crisis.

Once again, I thank you for taking the time to contact me on this issue.

Miles Briggs MSP