



The Scottish Parliament  
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

# Reimbursement of Members' Expenses Scheme – Cross-Party Groups Support

7 March 2024

Reference: SPCB (2024) Paper 18

## Executive summary

1. The SPCB is invited to consider whether costs associated with Cross-Party Groups (CPG) should continue be met from the Reimbursement of Members' Expenses Scheme.

## Issues and options

1. The SPCB agreed in June 2012 that CPG travel costs for Members could be met from the Reimbursement of Members Expenses Scheme where it related to research, that staff paid from the Scheme could prepare papers associated with CPG meetings as part of their duties and that tea and coffee could be provided for meetings but only where constituents were present for the respective Member.
2. As SPCB will be aware Cross-Party Groups can use meeting rooms within the Parliament to meet but are otherwise not able to use any other parliamentary resources. This is because Cross-Party Groups are not deemed part of formal parliamentary business but are discussion groups which bring MSPs from across parties together with other individuals and organisations with a common interest in a particular subject or cause. However, the SPCB may wish to note that this position may not necessarily reflect the value that Members themselves and external stakeholders place on the opportunities presented by Cross-Party Groups. This can be seen from the number of Groups – over 120 – that are currently registered.
3. At their meeting on 24<sup>th</sup> October 2024, the SPCB considered a request to meet travel within Scotland costs associated with a CPG trip abroad and asked officials to investigate the current expenditure in relation to CPG travel claimed from the Reimbursement of Members' Expenses Scheme for this session with a view to informing an SPCB discussion on whether to continue to meet such costs from the Scheme or not.

4. On analysis, there are currently 7 Members who we have identified as claiming such travel costs to a total of £1,143 so far this session. The SPCB will wish to note that due to how these claims are recorded on the MyExpenses travel and expenses system, the cost could be slightly higher as they are not easily discernible from other claims by way of coding, and we have had to rely on Allowances Office knowledge, accurate descriptions of travel on the system and cross referencing with such travel on Members' register of interests.
5. The agreement in 2012 also covered staff costs in relation to preparing papers for their Members' attendance at meetings. The amount of time staff spend on supporting Members on this is not able to be determined but we do not anticipate that this is will be significant.
6. Given the original agreement also includes the cost of tea and coffee where constituents are present, we have also looked to identify these costs but as with travel these are not recorded separately from any other meeting in Parliament where Members provide tea and coffee for attendants and therefore, again we are reliant on descriptions entered at the time of booking. As such whilst we are aware that there have been bookings, due to Allowances Office knowledge and queries we have received from Members' offices, we are unable to confirm the actual cost of this during this session. Looking at overall spend on hospitality in the Parliament by Members on tea and coffee this comes to £3,666 for the whole session and only a portion of this will relate to Cross Party Group catering.
7. Looking at both the travel and catering figures since the start of the session this is not significant, and the cost of staff is not identifiable. Therefore, whilst withdrawing the ability to claim would create a small saving to the Parliament over a session it may not be welcomed by Members given the importance placed by them and others out with Parliament on these groups and their associated interactions.
8. As reflected at the meeting in October a contributing factor to the low level of costs could also be the potentially low level of awareness amongst Members of the ability to claim such costs and raising awareness of this could then change behaviour in relation to this, which in turn could mean an increase in the level of costs incurred.
9. Should the SPCB decide to continue to meet these costs and the level of costs incurred does increase in the future, it may then be worth the SPCB re-visiting the position at that point to consider the implications of any increased level of cost.
10. There are currently no specific rules outlined within the Reimbursement of Members' Expenses Scheme in relation to CPG costs, however costs are currently allowed to be met in line with the previous SPCB decision and this is detailed in the Members' Expenses Scheme Guidance

document, which supplements the Scheme and provides more detail on what is permitted and what is not within the Scheme.

11. The SPCB is invited to consider whether costs associated with Cross-Party Groups should still be met from the Reimbursement of Members Expenses Scheme as detailed above or whether to withdraw this completely or in part, for example only withdrawing the travel element and allowing continuation of staff preparing papers and Members able to pay for teas and coffees when constituents are present from within their limited office cost provision. Any decision at this point would not prevent the SPCB from revisiting the position at any point should circumstances change.

## **Governance**

12. Currently, these expenses are allowable under the Reimbursement of Members' Expenses Scheme.
13. No amendments would be required to the Reimbursement of Members' Expenses Scheme however amendments would need to be made to the guidance document should SPCB decide that some or all the costs are not to be met going forward.

## **Resource implications**

14. It is not possible to quantify the complete costs of CPG travel, staff support, and catering claimed thus far as detailed above, however the costs that we have identified are not significant and we are comfortable that any unidentified costs remain minor. Removing this would therefore not produce a significant saving to Parliament.

## **Publication Scheme**

15. This paper may be published in line with the publication scheme.

## **Next Steps**

16. Advise Members of the SPCB's decision and update the Reimbursement of Members' Expenses Scheme Guidance, as necessary.

## **Decision**

17. The SPCB is invited to consider whether to:

- Continue to allow costs associated with CPG travel, limited staff support and refreshments to be met from the Reimbursement of Members' Expenses Scheme; or
- Remove all or part of the ability to claim CPG associated costs through the Reimbursement of Members' Expenses Scheme.

**Allowances Office**

26 February 2024