



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

Reimbursement of Members' Expenses Scheme – Use of Resources By Correspondence Reference: SPCB (2024) Paper 50

Executive summary

1. The SPCB are invited to consider the findings of the investigation by parliamentary officials into the alleged misuse of parliamentary resources by some Members' offices as detailed below and to determine whether they are content with the proposed recommendations.

Issues and options

2. As SPCB Members will be aware a complaint was received by the Presiding Officer on Thursday 20th June 2024. In the email, an individual anonymously shared a screenshot from what appeared to be an SNP Office Managers' WhatsApp chat. The individual was concerned that this indicated that several MSPs were using stamps paid for by Scottish Parliament expenses to pass to UK Parliament election candidates for campaign activities, such as sending target letters to hard-to-reach addresses.
3. The individual indicated that they were concerned about the open discussion, seemingly involving several Members' offices, and had copied the email to opposition party leaders as well as the Presiding Officer. The individual then shared a further 6 screenshots on Friday 21st June 2024 relating to the purchase of stamps and the changeover to new stamps as well as the use of old stamps or returning them.
4. Parliamentary officials have now looked into the matter to determine whether there has indeed been any misuse of parliamentary resources or not. In gathering the necessary information to fully consider the matter all staff identified in the screenshots were contacted, along with their employing Members, to raise the matter and seek an early meeting to discuss the concerns raised. This resulted in meetings with 10 Members and their respective members of staff. All Members and their staff complied fully with the investigation.

5. Information on the purchasing, using, and recording of stamps was also gathered from the Facilities Management office who manage the process for buying bulk stamps in Parliament. Officials also discussed the matter with the member of mail room staff named in the chat as a source of advice.
6. All meetings took place between Friday 21st June and Thursday 26th June 2024.
7. Having completed the investigation, we can advise the SPCB as follows: -
 - Members can bulk buy stamps for use in their constituency or region for contacting constituents. The costs for this are met from the Engagement Provision of the Members Expenses Scheme. We do not require Members to show how they have used the stamps but Members are required to use parliamentary resources for parliamentary purposes only as per the declaration they sign at the beginning of each session to confirm they have read and understood the Scheme, that they will follow the principles of the Scheme and will use parliamentary resources only as intended for parliamentary purposes.
 - Stamp usage cannot be traced. Royal Mail has introduced new stamps which have a barcode or QR code. This code is not for customer tracing but for internal Royal Mail operational efficiencies, improved security and paves the way for new customer services. If you currently scan the barcode it will take you to Royal Mail controlled video content. The only mail that can currently be traced is recorded delivery, tracked mail and special delivery. None of these delivery methods would involve the use of stamps bought through Parliament but would require specific postage arrangements.
 - Out of the 10 Members' offices identified in the shared screenshots from the chat, 4 had purchased stamps in the last 6 months. However, as stamps can be purchased at any time and used later this does not provide any definitive information either way on their use. Some confirmed that their recently purchased stamps had not been used to date or hardly used at all. Whilst some Members invited parliamentary officials to attend the local office and check the stamps if they so wished, we do not feel this would be helpful.
 - All Members confirmed that they had discussed the matter with their office staff and were assured that any use of parliamentary purchased stamps had purely been for parliamentary purposes and that no stamps had been passed to others to use in election campaigning. This was reconfirmed in writing by all in agreeing to each meeting's summary note.

- Particular consideration was given to some of the comments that featured in the WhatsApp chat around traceability, people being in front of the SPCB, and using stamps for campaigns. The following information was provided:
 - In relation to traceability the individual asking if they were traceable was simply looking to find out because they had sent something to a constituent but as they worked from home in another part of Scotland to their Members' constituency, they didn't want it to look like it was coming from elsewhere and wondered if the new bar code on stamps allowed it to be traced, in a similar way to being able to track a parcel.
 - In relation to the comment about people being up in front of the Corporate Body the individual said this was meant to be light-hearted and jokey and a warning to individuals that if they did misuse any stamps that is what would happen. After further questioning they confirmed they did not know of anyone misusing stamps and that they had not done so themselves.
 - In relation to the comment about the "stamp fairy" being good for campaigns, the individual advised that they were referring to local constituency campaigns for the Member and not election campaigns. They confirmed that they had not used any stamps for anything other than parliamentary purposes given local campaigns are allowable under the Scheme. Others also advised they took the meaning to be local campaigns and not electoral campaigns.
 - Members have also contacted their local election agents and asked them to confirm that they had not received any stamps from parliamentary resources. Those contacted confirmed that where they had purchased stamps, this would be recorded appropriately on their electoral returns and that they had not received any stamps bought using parliamentary resources.
 - Whilst Members issuing mail from Parliament must use franking, which is cheaper, any post from the local office does not have to be brought in and posted from Parliament, hence the ongoing need for pre-paid envelopes and stamps.
8. Officials have found no evidence that stamps were used inappropriately, and all Members have provided reassurances that they and their teams have not provided stamps to others for election purposes.
 9. As the SPCB is aware, we are about to start a review of the Scheme ahead of session 7 and, should the SPCB wish, we can review the position of bulk buying stamps during the review to ensure that it continues to be the best postage option for Members' local offices.

Governance

10. Under the SPCB's use of parliamentary resources policy, the SPCB can act on any policy breach. Given the investigation has found no evidence of misuse of parliamentary resources, no further action is recommended.

Resource implications

11. As there has been no misuse of parliamentary resources there are no resource implications.

Publication Scheme

12. This paper can be published in line with the SPCB's publication policy.

Next steps

13. If the SPCB accepts the recommendations in the paper, we will: -

- Issue a response to the individual who raised the matter, to advise accordingly and thank them for bringing this to the attention of the SPCB given the importance it places on the appropriate use of publicly funded resources;
- Advise the Members and their staff involved in the investigation of the outcome prior to any response being issued to the individual.
- Include a review of bulk stamp purchasing in the Members Expenses Scheme review to ensure the process continues to be the best option for Members' local offices and our processes for issuing stamps remain appropriate.

Decision

14. The SPCB is invited to: -

- Agree that no further action should be taken on the matter and the individual and Members advised accordingly; and
- Consider whether bulk purchasing of stamps should be included in the review of Members Expenses Scheme already planned.

Allowances Office

11 July 2024