

Independent Review Panel - Financial Support for Members

IRP - 68

Response from Trish Law AM

As the Assembly's sole Independent member my circumstances are, of course, unique.

While the four groups have the luxury of having spokespersons for the various service areas which fall within the Assembly's jurisdiction I am the Independent spokesperson for health, education, housing, heritage and everything else.

And so I alone have somehow to absorb the same workload as that dealt with by each group's spokespersons collectively.

For example, a report or consultation on, say, an education topic will go to each of the four groups and me, as often happens. In the case of the four groups it will become the responsibility of the respective education spokespersons. The report to my office becomes my and my alone responsibility.

Similarly, a report/consultation document on a health issue will fall within the remit of the groups' health spokespersons and, as there is no-one else, I have the responsibility of dealing with the copy that ends up in my office.

Being the only Independent I have no divine right to sit as a member of a committee. With the agreement of the whips I was for a short time in the Second Assembly a member of the Social Justice and Regeneration Committee, but I have to say I found the extra demands on top of an already demanding schedule overly-onerous and an added strain on resources.

Nonetheless, I feel I should keep an eye on the agendas, reports and deliberations of committees in case there are issues which impact on my constituency or raise matters which are of particular concern to me, poor health and housing, certain educational issues, and so. This does of course add to the pressures on my limited staff resources.

There are, indeed, many more demands on the political side of my role as an AM.

What has also struck me since I became a member in June, 2006, is how the constituency workload has grown. We have, inevitably I suppose, had a number of successful outcomes to cases I have pursued with various authorities – and success breeds success, leading to an even greater workload. I share the constituency office in Ebbw Vale with Dai Davies MP and we have had to start shutting the office on Wednesdays to enable staff to play catch-up on casework. Constituency work is taking up more and more of

my time which is really no surprise given the huge problems of poor health, inadequate housing, etc, that exist in Blaenau Gwent.

Back to my 'political' role in Cardiff Bay, I must say in all honesty that my workload consequent to the passing of the Government of Wales Act 2006 has not increased significantly. I have not, for example, had to sit on a committee set up to oversee LCOs. However, the increasing legislative role is giving rise to a greater workload on plenary sessions, and there is talk of plenary sittings on Thursdays.

Up until May, 2007, there were two Independent AMs which did enable us to share some of the workload. Had we gained, instead of lost, one Independent AM we would have had three members and would have been constituted as a group. That would have entitled us to significant additional staff resources amounting, I believe, to something in the order of £150,000. I consider it somewhat perverse that the loss of an AM has meant an increased workload for me and that the prospect of being able to engage more much-needed staff has been lost, at least for the time being.

At present I have 1.5 people involved in the Cardiff Bay operation which I have to say is woefully inadequate. They are called researchers but actually carry out a very wide range of duties without which I would have great difficulty being able to function. They are envious of the considerable pooled staff resources enjoyed by members of the four groups.

Clearly when the rules governing allowances in particular were drawn up the situation of a single member outside the group regime was not envisaged. Proportionately, the workload on my office in Cardiff Bay is greater than any other and I believe this should be reflected in the allocation of staff. I am not seeking special treatment, just a level playing field.

Thank you.

Trish Law