

Independent Review Panel- Financial Support for Members

IRP- 72

Response from Welsh Liberal Democrats AMSS

The Independent Review Panel on Members Allowances earlier this year clearly accepted that the workload of an AM has drastically increased since the Introduction of the Government of Wales Act 2006. This was the basis of the restructuring of the Members Allowances which takes that into account and links them more fairly with those of Members of Parliament at Westminster.

That having been established, it would seem that it must also be accepted that the roles and responsibilities of staff have changed, and we are also taking on a greater burden, with both the quantity of work and arguably the quality having increased substantially.

The knowledge base of staff in the majority of cases has had to increase. More reading and research has to go in to preparations for debates and legislative committees. A huge amount of work goes into developing ideas for LCOs and Measures. As AMs work longer hours than their staff are expected to do the same.

As stated earlier, it would seem that this case has already been made and accepted in many ways, and the question now is how that should be reflected in staff salaries and structures.

The decision to standardise staff salaries was welcomed by most of us who had been subject to the rather hit and miss system in place previously. Likewise the additional half member of staff given to each AM has helped spread the burden. However, there are still inadequacies and anomalies within the system as it stands

Following consultation with all Welsh Liberal Democrat AMSS staff the following main areas of concern have been identified.

- The annual increments stop after a relatively short time – 5 years. Now whilst it may be the case that there is a high turnover amongst certain categories of staff and a shorter length of service is the norm, there are also many others who stay longer than that and who then have no means of salary progression. This may discourage some members of staff from staying.
- Because the annual increment is given automatically there is no incentive for proper performance management or for staff to engage in any professional development.
- The rule which states that AMs can only employ one member of staff on each of the three bands is fundamentally unfair. It leads to situations

where two members of staff in the same office can be doing jobs which are equitable but because the first one to be employed may have been hired at the higher band rate then the second person in has to be placed on a lower band. The system can lead to a culture of secrecy and mistrust amongst friends and colleagues.

- It also means that people doing the same job for different AMS are on different pay scales as a result of some of them having to take up the only pay scale available. So a PA / Researcher working for AM A may be on band 2 whilst somebody doing the exact same job for AM B in the next office, within the same political grouping, could be on band 3. For instance we have two staff members currently working as researchers. By May 2011 if they both stay here, one will be earning £2000 more than the other even though the lower paid worker has nearly 2 years more experience.
- It is worth noting that the salary structure for Westminster staff does not operate in this way. They are given a monetary limit for staff and strict pay range for each type of job, but do not operate a banding system, so that staff can be paid more equitably. However, there is no automatic uplift each year for Westminster staff, it is up to the individual MP whether they grant an increase.
- Bonuses are a major bone of contention, and again a cause of unease amongst many staff. There is absolutely no rationale it seems behind the way in which they are given out. Nobody monitors what conditions have been met in order to earn a bonus payment. Some AMs appear to distribute them merely to use up what is left in their staffing allowance at the end of the year, others use that money elsewhere.

Moving on to actual rates of pay, again as AMs responsibilities have grown then so have those of their staff. I doubt that any AM would argue with the fact that without the backing of their staff they would struggle to meet the many demands of their job.

The rates of pay of Westminster staff are way above the rates paid for Assembly staff. Would the panel not agree that the work of both is equally important and the level of responsibility as high?

As a concrete example of this, an Office Manager role according to the Westminster guidelines is on a salary range between £21,320 and £40,052. The job description is comparable with my own, although mine is actually broader and includes more HR responsibilities amongst other things. My own salary is paid on a Band 2 scale, and having been here for more than four years I am approaching the top of that scale.

Then there is the comparison with other jobs in the public sector and elsewhere.

To begin with the Assembly itself. Amongst recent jobs advertised there have been:

Higher Research Officer – Finance and Statistics Team. To provide high quality parliamentary research and advice, with particular reference to public finance and numerical analysis and briefing to Assembly committees and to individual Members from all parties in the National Assembly. The post holder will be a member of the Finance and Statistics Team of five researchers. Salary range £25,000 to £32,100.

Senior Research Officer - Education, Culture and Governance Team. The Members' Research Service (MRS) wishes to appoint a specialist researcher to provide high quality parliamentary research, briefing (oral and written) and information services to Assembly Members from all parties and to Assembly committees. Salary range £32,200 to £41,000

Freedom of Information and Records Co-ordinator. To play an important role in implementing the APS' approach to meeting its obligations under the Freedom of Information Act 2000, the Assembly's Code of Practice on Public Access to Information and the Data Protection Act 1998. **Salary range £19,300 to £24,500.**

We would agree that all of these people play a vital role in the running of the WAG and the NAW, and certainly would not dispute their worth. However, AMSS surely play as important role not only in ensuring the democratic process is best served but in providing help and advice to constituents. Should their efforts be not recognised to the same extent?

Cardiff Council are advertising for a basic administration assistant to "provide general administrative support to the office, including filing, copying, receiving and communicating messages, maintaining office diaries and supporting the Councils meeting requirements" at a salary of £15,000.

Rhondda Cynon Taff want an Admin Assistant for their project construction team at a salary of £16,941 - £18,882. This is a starting point higher than a researcher employed on Assembly Band 3 level would receive.

We employ staff at graduate level, as we believe the demands of that job are such that we require that level of ability and maturity. The salary should be commensurate with the responsibility of the role.

In summary then there are four main issues we would like to see addressed:

- The overall salary levels
- The unfairness of the banding system
- The question of bonus payments
- The five year ceiling on increments