

Minister investigated for spending taxpayer cash on Tory campaigns

Paul Maynard was confronted by a local Conservative activist over misuse of funds. Now the expenses watchdog has stepped in

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Rishi Sunak's new pensions minister has systematically breached parliamentary expenses rules by using taxpayers' money for political purposes, it can be revealed today.

The expenses regulator has referred Paul Maynard for investigation after he claimed back money from the public purse for Conservative Party business.

The breaches include producing overtly political materials promoting the party and his re-election. Since his election in 2010, Maynard has spent £106,000 on printing and related costs — more than any Tory MP on record.

The Blackpool North and Cleveleys MP has also claimed rent for an office that serves as his local party headquarters. The Conservatives have freely used it to organise campaigns in the constituency — a key marginal seat in the northwest.

An MP can claim expenses to fund their work supporting constituents and representing them in Westminster. However, they must not spend taxpayers' cash on their party or political campaigns — a principle that lies at the heart of the system created after the expenses scandal.

Maynard's conduct has saved the Conservative Party money and potentially given him an advantage over his opponents at the next election. If found guilty of breaches, he could be referred to the parliamentary standards watchdog.

His abuse of the system has come to light thanks to the determination of a local Tory member. In July 2022, Milly Skriczka raised concerns at a meeting of Maynard's local Conservative association. A recording reveals that he angrily responded: "Why are you trying to solve a problem we don't have?" He said it was not a "good use" of party cash and "made no sense" to create a separate office for political activity, as required by the rules. His aide added that it would be "money coming out of our account".

Maynard accused the activist of challenging his authority, saying: "All I'm hearing is you want to abolish me. You want to stop me doing anything." His chief of staff incorrectly claimed that the expenses regulator — the [Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority](#) (IPSA) — knew of the situation and was "happy" with it. Skriczka would not give up. The Tory party asked Sir Robert Atkins, the former MP and father of [health secretary Victoria Atkins](#), to investigate. He cleared Maynard after speaking to him, telling her: "He assures me that all and everything has been cleared by [IPSA]."

He later said the MP had denied wrongdoing and would be "wholly entitled to be angry at his word at being challenged". The other option, he told her, was to "report him to the House of Commons authorities with all the implications that follow — as much to you as anyone else".

Less than 24 hours after being challenged by Skriczka, Maynard sent a "one-off" £150 repayment to IPSA. It became suspicious and made inquiries, and ultimately forced him to enter into a formal agreement for the Tory party's use of his office. It was never told of his use of printing equipment.

This weekend IPSA said: “In light of the additional information provided by The Sunday Times, we will be referring this to the compliance officer for IPSA”

The compliance officer is responsible for investigating potential breaches of the rules. Following an inquiry, the officer can demand repayment, refer an MP to the standards watchdog, or refer them to the police. IPSA’s rules state: “MPs are legally responsible for all money claimed and for managing their budgets and their staff.” If a member is found to have provided deliberately misleading expenses claims, they can face criminal prosecution.

Maynard said: “I have financial agreements in place with IPSA over the ad-hoc use of my constituency office by the local Conservative association. I believe that these arrangements are appropriate, but will be seeking clarification from IPSA to ensure this is the case. I will, of course, abide by any findings they make and ensure that any payments deemed necessary can be made promptly”.

It is difficult to specify the amount Maynard appears to have misused as he uses the same goods and services — such as printers, ink, paper and rent — for permitted and banned activities. But he has claimed £106,036 on printing and related stationery costs since his election in 2010. The average amount claimed by MPs is £25,000.

The only MP of any party to have claimed more for the similar printing and stationery is Labour’s Margaret Hodge (£135,460) and the nearest Conservative is Andrew Selous on £99,000 although there is no suggestion they breached rules. Sunak has claimed £170 in total. Maynard’s rent and utilities over the same period totalled £134,000. As there is no record of the party’s use of the premises, it is impossible to say how much the taxpayer is owed.

Today, Maynard faces serious questions about his conduct. As an MP and member of the government he is bound by the Nolan principles, which include

accountability, openness, and honesty. The disclosures are also awkward for Sunak, who already [faces a by-election in neighbouring Blackpool South](#) after the MP there was found to have brought parliament into disrepute over a lobbying scandal.

Suspensions raised

In the spring of 2022, Skriczka, a veteran party activist, was elected as an officer of the Blackpool North and Cleveleys Conservative Association.

Skriczka, 75, had spent years leafleting and door-knocking in the run-up to elections. The former school bursar and owner of a B&B from Oswaldtwistle, Lancashire, had devoted countless hours to the party, the National Trust and TaxPayers' Alliance — a pressure group that gave her a keen appreciation of the potential misuse of public funds.

As the new deputy chairman for fundraising and membership, she was responsible for galvanising the grassroots in a constituency that the Tories had held since its creation in 2010 but which the polls suggested remained marginal.

She would be sorting out coffee mornings, committee meetings and fundraising raffles — and campaigning for local elections and the coming general election.

It was a role that brought her into close contact with the MP. Maynard, 48, born in Crewe, studied history at Oxford and worked in management consultancy before serving as a speechwriter for William Hague and aide to Liam Fox.

After being added to David Cameron's "A list" of candidates, he became the first MP for his newly created seat. He mostly flew under the radar during the coalition government, save for an episode in which he apologised for saying people may visit food banks out of "habit". He was put on the government payroll under Theresa May, serving as a whip, and was a transport minister under Boris Johnson. In December 2019, buoyed by pro-Brexit sentiment, he received a 8,596 majority.

In March 2022, Skriczka became concerned. The Conservative Association of which she had just become an officer had little public footprint. She was writing a letter to local members but realised she did not have a return address to include. As far as she could tell, it had no office, no website and no social media page. In its most recent accounts filed to the Electoral Commission, the association stated: “Currently, the association has no dedicated office premises.” It did not have a bank account either. If donors wanted to give money, they had to deposit money in Maynard’s own bank account or that of his chief of staff.

She also noticed that misleading information appeared publicly. On his website, and in filings to regulators, Maynard still said that the association was based at the Bispham Conservative Club in Red Bank Road. Skriczka knew it had not been used as the party’s office for years. Despite its name, it was used mostly as a social venue offering darts, bingo and cut-price pints. She visited it to confirm. Providing false information on a political leaflet is an offence that can lead to an Electoral Commission investigation and a fine of up to £20,000.

Skriczka asked Maynard what she ought to do. He told her to enter a PO Box, which, she discovered, led to his constituency office at Blackpool Technology Management Centre (BTMC) in Faraday Way, a business park on the outskirts of town.

A short time later, Skriczka received an email invitation to an “emergency general meeting” to select Tory candidates for the local election in May 2023. It said the event was “taking place in the boardroom of the Blackpool Technology Management Centre (BTMC), Faraday Way” — Maynard’s office. In filings to the returning officer and external bodies, the party and its candidates gave the office as their address.

The information confirmed what she had suspected: the Tory Association was based at Maynard’s IPSA-funded office. Its owners charged rent of £8,220

annually, granting him use of an office and boardroom. He submitted invoices to IPSA, which paid the rent. Quietly, the party had used the same premises for Tory party board meetings, local campaign headquarters and the production of political material since 2016. Skriczka recalled: “I knew it wasn’t allowed to use the constituency office for political purposes. It rankled with me. Regardless of which political party, I’m a Conservative, it was still not right, it wasn’t acceptable.”

Skriczka was correct about the rules. IPSA allows MPs to claim taxpayers’ money as expenses for costs incurred in their work for constituents. This means they can claim money to, for example, rent an office, employ a team of administrative staff and send leaflets advising residents of their weekly surgery. The underlying principle is that, without such a budget, MPs cannot be expected to fulfil their job description of “representing [their constituents’] interests and concerns”.

MPs cannot claim a penny for “anything party-political or containing campaigning statements” or any “explicitly self-promotional content”. To do this, MPs and parties can raise money from private donors, trade unions or companies: a separate regime largely regulated by the Electoral Commission.

An MP must use their IPSA-funded office, staff and equipment for constituency work alone. Their local party office must be in a separate location and political communications must be done on different IT systems and printers. All of it has to be funded by the Conservative party.

Skriczka was alarmed. She was convinced that the association was using IPSA-funded office equipment for its own party political purposes. Maynard’s expenses claims for printing and related equipment exceeded £100,000, eclipsing any Tory MP since his election. “I felt there was no easy explanation,” she said. “I thought it was wrong. And I thought Labour could’ve picked all this up.”

Her suspicions grew when she examined leaflets put through her letterbox. Many were emblazoned with pictures of Maynard's face, and the Conservative Party logo. They included explicitly political messages, telling voters to "vote Conservative", not to let "Labour take [the local area] for granted", and to "support a Conservative council which costs you less and delivers more".

One, a "crime survey" produced last year, contained the party logo and a picture of Maynard smiling. It asked recipients for information for their views on crime and the NHS, their voting history and current voting preference. It ended with the question "Can you help Paul stand up for our area?" and invited them to tick a box if they were happy to help the Conservative party in a number of different ways, from "displaying a poster" and "delivering leaflets" to "joining the party" or "voting by post". The smallprint on most of the leaflets said that they were printed at the taxpayer-funded constituency office: "Printed by the Blackpool North and Cleveleys Conservative Association at Blackpool Technology Management Centre [BTMC], Faraday Way."

If, as she suspected, taxpayers' money was being used to help Maynard, that gave him an undisclosed and undue advantage over rival candidates. She resolved to speak up.

Rules 'made up'

On 19 April 2022, Skriczka approached Simon Renwick, Maynard's chief of staff, to raise her concerns. She told him that she was uncomfortable about the Tory party's use of the constituency office. She did not wish to send letters to members that gave BTMC as the address. Renwick texted her a day later, claiming: "The association uses the office out of office hours, which is allowable, or during the day as they pay a small amount each year to IPSA for the use of the office for meeting purposes ... etc."

Skriczka knew neither claim was true. MPs could not run their political operation out of a constituency office. The exception was for the dozen or so MPs who had entered in an IPSA-agreed contract allowing their party to sublet a desk or defined area of the premises. Maynard had not.

The only other carve-out applied to general elections, when, with parliament dissolved, MPs standing for re-election could continue to use their publicly funded office and computers, if they reimbursed IPSA after the campaign. Maynard had made one such payment: £150 in December 2019.

As for party political use of office equipment, there was no way of reimbursing IPSA. If a party uses an IPSA-funded printer or ink to produce a political leaflet or a document containing a party logo, it is a breach of the rules. That alarmed Skriczka, who, by then, had found an email in which Renwick told activists to “print [leaflets] on the Riso” — a Japanese digital printer — “ultimately saving us printing costs”. Maynard had submitted invoices to IPSA claiming thousands of pounds in printing and rental costs for a machine of the same name.

On July 18, 2022, Skriczka resolved to challenge Maynard and Renwick at a party meeting at the constituency office. She submitted an agenda item beforehand saying she understood “parliamentary offices are not to be used for political purposes” and proposing they fund a new local headquarters. She suggested they return to the Bispham Conservative Club, the bingo and darts venue.

Maynard, dialling in by Zoom, dismissed her idea as soon as it was read out. He said: “Well, it takes us back 20 years? There’s a reason why we’re not there. There’s no room to meet in.” The MP also sought to draw a distinction between the office itself and the boardroom, which was included as part of the rental agreement. He said: “Can we also be clear, the meeting room you’re in is not my parliamentary office?”

Skriczka reminded Maynard of the rules and asked if a subletting arrangement was in place. Renwick responded by repeating rules that did not exist: “No. Because we do it occasionally, because it happens more frequently at election times ... and also if it’s out of office hours, it’s not covered by the IPSA ‘use of’ rules.” He said that, if they were to rent a separate office for the association, it would be “money coming out of our account”.

Skriczka said she could find a donor to fund the new premises. Maynard responded angrily: “Why are we trying to solve a problem we don’t have? ... Why do you want to marginalise me in my own association?” He continued: “Obviously it’s for the association to decide whether it wishes to replicate what it’s, already paying for, um. I’d raise my eyebrows if the money which I’ve, you know, donated the association down the years is then used to replicate what is already being funded by the association via IPSA, that seems to make no sense. I understand you want a dedicated address. I don’t see why Faraday Way can’t be that address.” The MP added: “Milly would you like to call a vote of confidence in me? Is that what this is about?”

Renwick told Skriczka: “Everything we do has a reason, Milly,” adding: “We can even set up a post office in the office so it doesn’t look like it’s going to Paul’s office, it looks like it’s going to 11a which is a post box.” She said that would be deception. Maynard intervened, saying, if she wanted to complain, he would speak to “my contact at CCHQ”. He said: “I don’t think it’s a good use of the association’s money to rent a second office somewhere in the constituency, maybe on the off-chance that someone might walk in. People that need to come to Faraday Way come anyway ... All I’m hearing is you want to abolish me ... You want to stop me doing anything.”

The next morning, Renwick texted Skriczka: “We pay IPSA for use of the office. And as it is occasional use and not a permanent presence they are happy with the repayment.” IPSA confirmed last night that it had never agreed this.

Renwick was contacted for comment.

Investigations launched

Skriczka refused to be cowed and contacted Sir Robert Atkins, a former minister who had served as the party's Lancashire chairman, to investigate.

In a detailed letter, Skriczka set out her concern that “we are using a taxpayer-funded office for political purposes” and attached detailed evidence. On July 25, 2022, Atkins responded to the complainant: “I have now investigated most of your concerns. I am entirely satisfied that the constituency office arrangements as they pertain to the IPSA rules are satisfactory.”

Skriczka responded with more evidence. On August 24, 2022, Atkins wrote back: “I have spoken at length to Paul Maynard MP about the IPSA situation. He assures me that all and everything has been cleared by them as to his activities and procedures. I must accept his word in that regard.”

He added: “I do know that Renwick can be difficult — we have clashed on more than one occasion in the past. But he does get things done for the MP and I am loath to interfere for that reason.”

Unbeknownst to Skriczka or Atkins, IPSA had developed concerns of its own. On July 19, 24 hours after the meeting where Skriczka had raised concerns, Maynard made a single £150 payment to IPSA for “rent”. The authority's finance team noticed the anomalous transaction and contacted Maynard. In an email, IPSA said it had never requested a refund and asked why the money had been transferred without the usual “repayment form”.

On August 18, Renwick responded: “I followed this up with a letter at the time, but must not have arrived. Basically, every so often the local party use the office for ad-hoc evening and weekend meetings, and sometimes during the [week] for

admin tasks, so this is to cover a small portion of the rent to cover the use of the office.”

He continued: “There is no formal arrangement with them as there is no permanent presence ... as I say, it is very ad hoc with no set times ... Most meetings happen outside office hours.”

IPSA referred the matter back to its finance team, which, on August 25, said the status quo was unacceptable. The regulator told Maynard there “should be a written agreement between the MP and the local party”. It would need to be authorised by IPSA, which would send a chartered surveyor to value the property and ensure the Tory party was paying an “appropriate rate”.

More than two months later, Renwick followed up, proposing an agreement in which the Tory party would pay £5.50 a day for use of the office and £3.50 an hour for the boardroom.

IPSA said this was insufficient. It wrote back last February saying the agreement needed a start date, written permission from the landlord and confirmation that it “does not include use of IPSA-funded office furniture or equipment”.

Renwick appeared irritated, saying: “When we first talked about this, I tried to make the point that this isn’t a sublet in a traditional way in as much as the local party only use the office occasional for evening meetings, occasional daytime use, like stuffing envelopes, and as a meeting point at the weekend for campaign activity.” He said of Maynard, himself and the landlord: “I can secure written permission, but I am not sure they or we see this as a sublet as there is no permanent presence.”

IPSA wrote back, saying there was no room for negotiation. Maynard did not reply for two months then said: “Hopefully the attached satisfies the requirements.”

IPSA said it did. The agreement was backdated to June 2022, but did not include

any reimbursement for the previous five years. IPSA has confirmed that no such payments have ever been made. Nor did Maynard address or provide any repayment for use of printing equipment.

Atkins wrote to Skriczka last May saying she had “two choices: You report him to the HoC [House of Commons] authorities with all the implications that follow — as much to you as anyone else”.

“The second: I take the matter up directly with Maynard, despite his earlier assurance that all had been cleared by IPSA. He would be wholly entitled to be angry at his word being challenged and would want to see all your evidence and reasons for pursuing him.”

Convinced that no one would listen to her concerns, Skriczka contacted The Sunday Times: “If I hadn’t done anything about it, I was condoning their behaviour. My conscience, I just couldn’t. It took me a year. No one else was saying it. But it was just getting worse, they weren’t listening to me, they weren’t hearing me.”

This weekend, Atkins said Maynard had “assured me several times that all his political office arrangements had been cleared and accepted by IPSA”. He said that, as he had no authority to investigate further: “I had to accept his assurances. I have never heard of any suggestion that he is less than an honourable man and likely to tell me lies.”

He said he had tried to warn Skriczka “there could be personal implications for her and that she would probably incur some local unpopularity, given that Maynard’s explanation was at least plausible and that he was popular locally.”

Responsible for reforms

In November, Sunak appointed Maynard [pensions minister](#), marking his return to government after almost four years.

He is responsible for sweeping reforms to the pension system and the administration of a multibillion-pound budget. Yet as a result of today's disclosures, Maynard is likely to face awkward questions over his own financial affairs.

Under powers granted following the expenses scandal, IPSA can refer rule-breakers to the parliamentary commissioner for standards, which can propose sanctions leading to a by-election.

The minister's invoices said one thing. The WhatsApps show another

Paul Maynard was referred for investigation after we exposed his use of public money for politics

[Gabriel Pogrand](#)

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The pensions minister has been found to have submitted invoices containing false information to the expenses regulator.

Paul Maynard was referred for investigation last week after [The Sunday Times revealed](#) he had systematically breached expenses rules by using taxpayer funds for political purposes.

The breaches include using public money to print political leaflets and allowing the Conservative Party to use his office as its campaign headquarters in his marginal seat. A cornerstone of the rules set up after the expenses scandal of 2009 is that MPs must not use public funds for party political purposes. The Blackpool North

& Cleveleys MP has charged the taxpayer £106,000 for printing, more than any other Conservative.

After a Conservative Party member raised repeated concerns about the local association using Maynard's office free of charge, his chief of staff eventually struck a deal with the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority (Ipsa), the expenses regulator, which ordered him to enter into a formal tenancy agreement if a political party was using his office. He reluctantly agreed.

Under its terms Maynard can let part of his publicly funded office to the Tories on an ad hoc basis. He has to submit invoices detailing the number of hours the party has used his premises and reimburse the taxpayer accordingly, using cash sent to him by the party.

But even since then Maynard has under-reported the association's use of his office.

Last summer the MP's office submitted his first time sheet, repaying Ipsa £270.50. The form said the party had used his premises for nine working weeks over the previous year.

Simon Renwick, Maynard's right-hand man, who completed the form, said that in December 2022 and January 2023 there was no use, entering £0.00 for both months.

However, leaked WhatsApp messages show the party did use Maynard's space during that period. On November 30, 2022, Renwick had contacted activists to say he had printed off political leaflets and needed people to help distribute them. Two days later, on December 2, activists were told the survey was "now all ready thanks to those that came in and stuffed the envelopes". Jane Warne, a Tory council candidate, replied saying she would "come and get two rounds to start off on Tuesday". On January 31 Renwick told activists that a new leaflet was ready to print and invited "any volunteers" to help distribute them locally.

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The evidence suggests the association uses the office full-time, for instance as a postal address, as a storeroom for political leaflets and material and as a venue for regular board and candidate meetings.

Tony Williams, the former leader of the Tory group on Blackpool council, told The Blackpool Gazette: “I think we always used Paul’s office for councillor meetings, selections and campaign activity etc.” Maxine Callow, another former councillor, told us the same.

Ipsa’s rules state: “MPs are legally responsible for all money claimed and for managing their budgets and their staff.”

Asked why he had provided false information to the regulator, Maynard would not comment.

The local Tory party’s financial statements also show evidence of irregularities.

In its latest accounts the Blackpool North and Cleveleys Conservative Association (BNCCA) stated that in 2021 and 2022 it paid £3,745.96 as a “contribution to office costs”. Yet during this period the BNCCA did not make any such contribution to Maynard. This is confirmed by official expenses data, which confirms Maynard did not reimburse Ipsa for the party’s use of his office until 2023.

Richard Rendell, the local Tory party chairman, said he had “investigated” the matter. He claimed the phrase “contribution to office costs” actually referred to “general administration” and would not say who deposited the money in whose account.

He refused to address a separate claim in the party's accounts up to 2019, filed to the Electoral Commission, in which it said the party had conducted printing using its "own" Riso printer.

The state-of-the-art Japanese printer is leased to Maynard's parliamentary office by a local supplier and paid for solely by the taxpayer. The MP claims about £3,700 a year for its use.

A Tory source in the area confirmed the party had freely used the Riso to produce political leaflets championing Maynard and local Tory candidates for years. The source suggested the party paid for its own paper and ink, but did not dispute that the taxpayer had footed the bill for the use of the machine and said the party was already considering whether and how to reimburse the regulator. Unlike the use of a tenancy agreement to cover the use of physical premises, there is no exemption under the rules allowing a party to use Ipsa-funded equipment.

The use of public funds for political campaigning has given a possible advantage to Maynard, whose seat, to which he was first elected in 2010, is considered a marginal despite the large majority he won in Boris Johnson's December 2019 election victory.

[Maynard](#) would not address the latest evidence of wrongdoing, instead reissuing a statement he provided last week. It said he believed his "arrangements are appropriate" but he was seeking clarification from Ipsa. "I will of course abide by any findings they make and ensure that any payments deemed necessary can be made promptly."

Ipsa has already referred the matter to its compliance officer, Brigadier Jonathon Blair-Tidewell, a retired army officer. After investigating, he can demand repayment and refer potential wrongdoing to the parliamentary standards commissioner or the police.

Rishi Sunak said last week that Maynard — who was appointed to his post as pensions minister in November — should not be suspended for the time being, as that was “not the normal approach”.