

Review of a determination by IPSA and subsequent appeal decision

Review conducted at the request of Steff Aquarone MP

Member of Parliament for North Norfolk

Author and Review Officer

Matt Walker

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Introduction

1. This review has been conducted following a request made by Steff Aquarone MP for the Compliance Officer for IPSA to review a decision made by the IPSA Validation team not to approve funding and reimbursement claims made for the cost of a Christmas meal out for the MPs staff.

Background and timeline

2. Steff Aquarone MP has been an MP since 4th July 2024, and has since election, been establishing his team and their office facilities.
3. On the evening of Thursday 12th December 2024, Mr Aquarone took his team out for a Christmas meal. The cost of this meal for 8 people came to £362.69 including a discretionary 12.5% service charge of £40.19.
4. This cost is for food only. No drinks (alcoholic or not) are subject to this review.
5. Steff Aquarone MP has submitted a claim through IPSA for the cost of this meal (minus his own meal cost) to be paid by IPSA.
6. This was claimed in two parts, £240 paid at the time on the IPSA payment card, with the balance paid by the MP personally. The total amount the MP has claimed is £317.69 (this being the total cost minus £45 for the MPs own meal).
7. These claims were rejected by IPSA on the basis that this is outside the scheme.
8. Steff Aquarone MP requested an appeal of this decision internally by IPSA. The appeal reached the same conclusion, and the decision was signed off by the Head of Policy.
9. On 19th February 2025, Steff Aquarone MP made a request to the Compliance Officer for IPSA to review this decision.

The Scheme

10. The 17th edition of The Scheme of MPs Staffing and Business Costs is the relevant scheme for the purpose of this review.
11. The below inserts from IPSA online set out the Scheme position relating to this subject:

Festive and celebratory claims

We have provided some answers to frequently asked questions about the use of budgets for celebrations to support MPs and their staff in conducting their parliamentary activities during the festive season.

The answers give broad guidance about what is allowable under the Scheme.

There is discretion within budgets for some items, but we would remind MPs that claims:

- should represent value for money, especially in the current economic climate*
- must be expressly parliamentary in nature*
- should not be party-political, campaigning, or self-promotional*

All claims will be published in the usual manner.

Can MPs claim the cost of food and drink for a festive office event for employees?

Yes, MPs can claim the costs of food and refreshments for an office festive event under the discretion allowed as “hospitality”.

As with all claims, value for money should be considered and all claims will be published in the usual manner.

No claims are allowed for alcohol.

Can MPs claim the cost of food and drink for a festive event or gathering within the constituency?

Any event or gathering must be explicitly within a parliamentary context.

If this meets the criteria, then refreshments can be provided as they would be for any other event.

Organising a purely social event within the constituency is not claimable under the rules.

Hospitality costs

MPs may claim for hospitality costs from their office costs budget.

This can include things like tea and coffee to offer visitors to the constituency office or refreshments at a meeting or event.

It is not intended to cover routine meal costs for the MP, staff members or others.

Subsistence costs can be claimed by MPs and staff members where they are travelling and staying overnight in line with the Scheme rules on using the travel budget.

Read more about [Travel & subsistence](#).

As always, MPs are expected to consider value for money in their spending. IPSA funding cannot be claimed to cover tips or for the purchase of alcoholic beverages.

12. There are four fundamental principles under which MPs are expected to manage the public funds made available through IPSA. Where there is any perceived ambiguity in the scheme, these fundamental principles must be at the forefront of the MP making their decisions. These are:
- i. **Parliamentary** – MPs may only claim for expenditure for Parliamentary purposes.
 - ii. **Value for money** – MPs must have regard to value for money when making claims.
 - iii. **Accountability** – MPs are legally responsible for all money claimed and for managing their budgets and staff.
 - iv. **Probity** – When making claims, MPs must adhere to the MPs' Code of Conduct, including the seven principles of public life.

Actions undertaken

13. To consider this case, I requested from the MP any further information which he had not previously sent to IPSA in his appeal request to them. The MP provided me with the details of the team away day on 12th December 2024, and confirmation that the event was a Christmas meal out for the team.
14. Mr Aquarone provided me with the details of those who had gone for the meal. There were 8 people at the meal, this was made up of the MP, 6 staff (IPSA funded roles), and a contractor providing bought-in services.
15. I requested full disclosure from IPSA for the details pertaining to these claims at each stage of the process. I also requested confirmation as to information held on Engage as to any conversations held where this subject has been discussed either before or after the claim has been made.

Parliamentary Standards Act 2009

16. Paragraph 6A PSA 2009 sets out the legal requirement on me as Compliance Officer. My duty is set out in Para 6 (2) The Compliance Officer must –
- (a) Consider whether the determination (or altered determination) is the determination that should have been made, and
 - (b) In light of that consideration, decide whether or not to confirm or alter it.

Procedures for investigations by the Compliance Officer for IPSA

17. Page 12 of the procedures sets out how as Compliance Officer I must handle the review.

The basis of the review from Steff Aquarone MP

18. Mr Aquarone made the claims for the cost of this festive meal with the honest held belief that this is a cost claimable through IPSA. Mr Aquarone has quoted in his emails to IPSA and myself, the relevant sections of the IPSA online guidance relating to festive claims.

Mitigating factors

19. In correspondence with Mr Aquarone specific to these claims, IPSA have conceded that the guidance at that point was not clear enough, stating in email: *The festive guidance was intended to allow MPs a reasonable amount of discretion to claim for light/modest refreshments (e.g. mince pies/cakes/finger food) for a festive gathering at the constituency office which was organised purely for parliamentary, work-related purposes. Please also see the guidance under 'Can MPs claim the cost of food and drink for a festive event or gathering within the constituency?'. We understand, however, that there has been some confusion over this guidance and so we will be updating it shortly to be clear that team meals out are not considered reasonable/parliamentary hospitality costs under this guidance.*

20. Mr Aquarone has stated that his constituency office was not a suitable venue for a gathering and that the meal was at the conclusion of an 'away day', the first time his team had gathered together in person.

21. When the claim was rejected by IPSA, Mr Aquarone updated the claim to clarify that it was not a social meal, but the conclusion of the 'away day'.

Findings

22. I find that IPSA applied the policy correctly in rejecting the claim made by Staff Aquarone MP for the cost of his office Christmas meal out.

23. I am satisfied that the purpose of the 'away day' was parliamentary and was not party political.

24. I find that IPSA took into account the information provided by Steff Aquarone MP to consider their appeal, and that the information Steff Aquarone provided to me as review officer has no fundamental difference to that he provided to IPSA.

25. I find that this team meal for staff was a 'festive meal' and the fact it was on conclusion of a staff 'away day' is of no relevance.

26. Therefore – in accordance with PSA 2009 Para 6A (2)(a) my first finding is that the determination made by IPSA is the determination that should have been made.
27. I find that the meal out had no parliamentary purpose.
28. I find that the discretionary service charge of £40.19 should not have been claimed as the Scheme explicitly states that ‘IPSA funding cannot be claimed to cover tips . . .’

Conclusions

29. Mr Aquarone is the Member responsible for compliance with ‘the scheme’. Mr Aquarone had an honest held belief that he was acting within the rules of ‘the scheme’ in booking a festive meal for his team on 12th December 2024.
30. Prior to the event, Mr Aquarone did not seek any advice from IPSA as to whether IPSA would fund this meal out. Had he or his proxy made an enquiry with IPSA beforehand, then Mr Aquarone would have been informed that this was not claimable.
31. The team away day was held at their new constituency offices which, although they occupied, had not been appropriately fitted out or equipped with facilities to hold a social gathering there.
32. The away day and the meal out were two separate events. The agenda for the away day showed this was scheduled from 11am until 4.30pm. The meal out was booked for 7pm until 11.30pm. The messages relating to this meal clearly show that a decision was made to hold the two on the same day due to the fact that everybody was together.
33. The consideration itself is, whether public money can be spent to pay for a meal out for the staff of the Member of Parliament.

Decision

34. In accordance with PSA Para 6A (2)(a), my decision is, that I consider that the determination made by IPSA is the determination that should have been made.
35. I am satisfied that IPSA conducted an appropriate appeal of their decision at the request of Steff Aquarone MP to reconsider their decision not to cover the cost of this staff meal out.
36. The further information provided by the MP to explain the details of the away day and the meal out have demonstrated that they were separate events, and there was no parliamentary purpose to the meal out.

37. If any one of the fundamental principles is not met by the MP, then the cost is not claimable. In this case, albeit the away day had a Parliamentary purpose, the meal out for the team had no Parliamentary purpose.
38. Having considered this review request by Steff Aquarone MP, I find that IPSA applied the correct policy, and I uphold the decision made by IPSA to reject this claim. Under PSA Para 6A(2)(b) I confirm that decision.
39. PSA 2009 Para 6A (6) provides that an MP requesting a review may appeal the decision of the Compliance Officer made under subsection (2)(b) to the First-tier Tribunal. (7) the appeal must be brought before the end of the period of 28 days beginning with the day on which notice of the decision is sent to the member (unless the Tribunal directs that it may be brought after the end of that period).
40. In accordance with the Guidance on the Conduct of Reviews by the Compliance Officer for IPSA, para 13, the details of this review will be published in such a manner as the Compliance Officer sees fit.

Matt Walker
Compliance Officer
1st April 2025