

Compliance Officer for IPSA

Summary of investigation and findings

Ms Ann Coffey MP
Member of Parliament for Stockport
(IN/0011/310311)

11 October 2011

Martyn Taylor
Compliance Officer for IPSA
PO Box 68209
London SW1P 9TZ

Investigation summary

1. The Compliance Officer for the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority carried out an investigation into whether Ann Coffey MP was paid an amount under the MPs' Expenses Scheme (the Scheme) that should not have been allowed.
2. The investigation was conducted in accordance with section 9(1) of the Parliamentary Standards Act 2009 (as amended by the Constitutional Reform and Governance Act 2010) (PSA).
3. The investigation was initiated by the Compliance Officer, as he had reason to believe Ms Coffey may have received funding for a claim relating to a website (www.anncoffeymp.com) that did not comply with the rules of the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority (IPSA) as set out in the Scheme.
4. On 11 April 2011 the Compliance Officer notified Ms Coffey that she was the subject of a preliminary investigation and on 14 July 2011 the Compliance Officer opened a substantive investigation into this matter.
5. On 30 August 2011, the Compliance Officer issued a Statement of Provisional Findings. This statement provides full details of the investigation. The findings are summarised below.

Findings

6. The Compliance Officer found:
 - a. that, in contravention of the rules of the MPs' Expenses Scheme, Ms Coffey received reimbursement for a claim she submitted for costs relating to her website at a time when the website contained a party political logo;
 - b. that Ms Coffey acted swiftly to rectify the contravention;
 - c. that IPSA was in part at fault as its validation procedures should have prevented reimbursement being made;
 - d. that seeking a repayment for this contravention would be neither proportionate nor reasonable; and
 - e. that IPSA had strengthened its validation practices.

Resolution

7. On 1 September Ms Coffey wrote to the Compliance Officer advising him that she accepted the findings.

8. No further action was required either of Ms Coffey or of IPSA and on 21 September 2011 the investigation was closed.

Martyn Taylor
Compliance Officer for IPSA

11 October 2011

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Statement of Provisional Findings

Ms Ann Coffey MP
Member of Parliament for Stockport
(IN/0011/310311)

30 August 2011

Martyn Taylor
Compliance Officer for IPSA
PO Box 68209
London SW1P 9TZ

A. Introduction

1. The Compliance Officer¹ for the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority has carried out an investigation into whether Ann Coffey MP was paid an amount under the MPs' Expenses Scheme (the Scheme) that should not have been allowed. This investigation was conducted in accordance with section 9(1) of the Parliamentary Standards Act 2009 (as amended by the Constitutional Reform and Governance Act 2010) (PSA).
2. The investigation in respect of Ms Coffey was initiated by the Compliance Officer, as he had reason to believe Ms Coffey may have received funding for a claim relating to a website (www.anncoffeymp.com) that did not comply with the rules of the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority (IPSA) as set out in the Scheme.
3. This statement sets out the Compliance Officer's provisional findings in respect of this investigation.
4. Ms Coffey and IPSA may make representations in writing to the Compliance Officer in respect of the provisional findings in this statement within fifteen working days of the date of this statement.
5. If representations are received, the Compliance Officer will consider these and may prepare a Statement of Findings.

B. Summary of the investigation

6. In December 2010 a member of the public made a complaint to the Compliance Officer about the use of party political logos on the website of an MP, the costs of which were claimed through the Scheme.
7. Sections 10.6 of the Second Edition of the Scheme, which was in effect at that time, stated that "*[expenditure] may not be claimed for (a) funding any material that contains a party political logo or emblem; or (b) publishing any material which could be construed as election campaign expenditure within the scope of the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000*". Both the First Edition and the current (Third) Edition of the Scheme stated the same under sections 10.6 and 6.6 (d) and (f) respectively. The Scheme, therefore, does not provide for reimbursements of the costs of material that contains a party logo, no matter the size, location or purpose of the logo.

¹ For the purposes of this statement, actions of the Compliance Officer may have been carried out by the members of his staff acting on his behalf.

8. Following this complaint, the Compliance Officer carried out an inspection of all the websites of MPs where the costs of the websites had been claimed through the Scheme.
9. When Ms Coffey's website was checked as part of this inspection, it was found to contain a party political logo for the Labour Party. The logo was a link to the Labour Party website. A snapshot was taken of the site and retained as evidence.
10. This inspection gave the Compliance Officer a reason to believe that Ms Coffey may have been reimbursed for a claim under the Scheme that should not have been allowed, and on 11 April 2011 a Notice of Preliminary Investigation was issued to the MP and IPSA in respect of the claim set out below.

Claim Number	Date	Category	Expense Type	Amount Paid
16196	21/07/10	General Admin	Website - Design/Production	£402.50

11. Ms Coffey contacted the Compliance Officer by telephone on 26 April 2011 to advise him that the logo had been removed. On 28 April 2011, Ms Coffey confirmed this matter in writing, explaining that she had bought a template website that included the logo as a link.
12. Upon request, IPSA supplied all original invoices and supporting documentation held on its files relating to the above claim.
13. On 14 July 2011, following an analysis of the documentation from IPSA and the correspondence with Ms Coffey, the Compliance Officer notified Ms Coffey of his decision to carry out a Substantive Investigation, on the grounds that he was satisfied that Ms Coffey may have been paid an amount under the Scheme that should not have been allowed. IPSA received a copy of the Notice of Substantive Investigation on 21 July 2011.
14. Section 9(4) of the PSA provides that the Compliance Officer give the MP and IPSA an opportunity to make representations in respect of the substantive investigation.
15. Ms Coffey made representations in writing on 18 July 2011. IPSA submitted representations to the Compliance Officer in writing on 28 July 2011.
16. During the investigation, the Compliance Officer considered, in addition to Ms Coffey's website, IPSA's validation practices and IPSA's policy position in respect of the presence of party logos and emblems on MPs' websites. He also considered the representations submitted to him.

C. Provisional Findings

17. Following an assessment of the evidence in this case and having given consideration to both Ms Coffey's and IPSA's representations, the Compliance Officer has made the provisional findings set out below.

- i. The rules of the Scheme are clear that reimbursement may not be sought for the costs of material that contains a party political logo or emblem. IPSA has clarified that websites are covered by "material".
- ii. Ms Coffey submitted a claim for costs relating to her website, and received reimbursement for these costs from IPSA, despite the website containing a Labour Party logo, which acted as a link to the Labour Party website.
- iii. Ms Coffey therefore contravened the rules of the Scheme and received reimbursement for a claim that should not have been allowed. The Compliance Officer has decided not to apportion a particular amount to this contravention on the grounds that it is not necessary in this case to disaggregate the costs of designing party logos from the other costs of designing Ms Coffey's website.
- iv. Notwithstanding the fact that it is not possible retrospectively to check the content of Ms Coffey's website at the time the claim was submitted, IPSA's validation effort in respect of this claim fell short. It did not meet its validation standards, which include provision that the front pages of websites for which claims are being made are checked for party political logos or campaign material, and which should have resulted in the claim being turned down for reimbursement. Although MPs alone are responsible for the accuracy of the submission of their claims, IPSA is in this case in part at fault as it could, by following its validation procedures, have prevented a reimbursement being made to Ms Coffey for the amount that was not allowed under the Scheme.

18. When considering whether a repayment or penalty is appropriate in the case of a contravention of the Scheme, the Compliance Officer must consider a range of factors in order to ensure he adopts a proportionate and fair approach. The nature of the contravention, the nature of the claim that has been investigated, the context of the submission of the claim, and Ms Coffey's response are therefore relevant factors, and the Compliance Officer has provisionally found the following in respect of these:

- i. The contravention itself was minor in scale. With the exception of the presence of the party logo, Ms Coffey's website was compliant with the Scheme. It is hard to envisage any personal financial, political or other particular advantage to Ms

Coffey resulting from the presence of a party political logo on her website, particularly at this time in the electoral cycle. Were a similar contravention to occur in the run-up to a General Election, it is possible that a different finding would be made.

- ii. The claim that has been subject to this investigation was for paid-for services sought by Ms Coffey in pursuit of her parliamentary duties, rather than material goods that could more readily be exchanged or returned.
- iii. The claim in this case was made within three months of the 2010 General Election, following which the new Scheme came into effect. IPSA has stated in its representations in respect of this case that during this period it took time for both MPs and IPSA itself to become fully familiar with the Scheme, to the extent that for much of this early period IPSA operated a “grace period” during which it returned rather than refused claims it found to be outside the rules.
- iv. Following the notification that a Preliminary Investigation was underway, Ms Coffey took swift and welcome action to ensure the website complied with the Scheme. A recent inspection of the website confirmed that it remains compliant.

Conclusion

- 19. Under section 9(8) of the Act, the Compliance Officer may determine what amount is reasonable to request an MP repay. Taking all relevant factors, as set out above, into account, the Compliance Officer finds that in this case it would be neither proportionate nor reasonable to request a repayment from Ms Coffey. He finds the same in respect of any additional penalties.
- 20. Ms Coffey need take no further action.
- 21. The Compliance Officer further finds that IPSA has acted to strengthen its validation practices in respect of section 6.6 (d) and (f) of the Scheme and that IPSA therefore need take no additional action.
- 22. The Compliance Officer does, however, remind Ms Coffey that she alone is responsible for the correct submission of claims and that a general condition of the Scheme is that *“[i]n making any claim under the Scheme, an MP must certify that the expenditure was necessary for performance of their parliamentary functions, and that in incurring the expenditure they had complied with the Scheme”* (section 3.2).

D. Representations and case resolution

23. Ms Coffey and IPSA may make representations in writing to the Compliance Officer in respect of these provisional findings within fifteen working days of the date of this statement.
24. If representations are received, the Compliance Officer will consider these and prepare a Statement of Findings.
25. The Compliance Officer may determine not to prepare a Statement of Findings, as per paragraph 36 of the Procedures for Investigations of the Compliance Officer, if Ms Coffey accepts the Provisional Findings.

Martyn Taylor
Compliance Officer for IPSA

30 August 2011

Compliance Officer for IPSA

Investigation Closure Report

Ms Ann Coffey MP
Member of Parliament for Stockport
(IN/0011/310311)

21 September 2011

Martyn Taylor
Compliance Officer for IPSA
PO Box 68209
London SW1P 9TZ

Investigation closure report

On 30 August 2011 the Compliance Officer sent Ms Ann Coffey MP a Statement of Provisional Findings in respect of the investigation that was conducted in accordance with section 9(1) of the Parliamentary Standards Act 2009 (as amended by the Constitutional Reform and Governance Act 2010) (PSA).

The investigation was into the presence of political party logos on a website that was funded through the MPs' Expenses Scheme. The Statement of Provisional Findings sets out the details of the investigation and the Compliance Officer's reasoning for his findings.

The Compliance Officer also sent the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority (IPSA) a copy of the statement.

Section 9(5) of the PSA provides that both the MP in question and IPSA are given the opportunity to make representations to the Compliance Officer about the provisional findings.

On 1 September 2011, Ms Coffey wrote to the Compliance Officer to confirm that she accepted the findings.

On 6 September 2011, IPSA's Chairman, Sir Ian Kennedy, wrote to the Compliance Officer to confirm that he would not be making any further representations in respect of this investigation.

No further action is required of Ms Coffey or of IPSA, and the Compliance Officer will not be preparing a Statement of Findings further to the Statement of Provisional Findings.

This investigation is now closed.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'M. Taylor', followed by a period.

Martyn Taylor
Compliance Officer for IPSA

21 September 2011