

MINERA COMMUNITY COUNCIL
CYNGOR CYMUNED MWYNGLAUDD

Clerk: Mrs M Dempsey, PO Box 2305, Wrexham LL11 0FS
Tel: 01978 758530 Email: mdempsey.mcc@hotmail.co.uk

21st January 2009

Mr Chris Reading
Clerk, Independent Panel on Members' Pay & Allowances,
National Assembly for Wales
Cardiff Bay
Cardiff
CF99 1NA

Dear Mr Reading

We have reviewed the material available on the Assembly website and researched local and national media and wish to make the following observations:

Salaries

- The basic pay of the 60 assembly members until 31.03.09 is given on the Assembly website as £50,692 which seems to us to be reasonable for their attendance at Assembly meetings the other associated duties. We note that for some members the basic salary will be supplemented by £11,331 or more where additional duties of leadership are involved.
- AM's claim that they now have additional responsibilities and that this justifies increases in salary. Many "ordinary people" are also being forced to accept increased responsibilities and workloads often without additional pay. Therefore if increases are awarded they should not be excessive when compared with any given in the public sector or private sectors. AMs should not be seen to stand out as a special case.
- David Hughes, Telegraph 10th July 2008 suggests that if AMs and MPs are compared on a £/day basis AMs come off well as they sit on average only 70 days per annum as compared to MPs 149 days per annum. This works out at £740 per sitting day for AMs against £433 per sitting day for MPs. We recognize that both AMs and MPs also have constituency duties which they will fulfill with varying degrees of dedication.
- We wonder whether it is possible for AMs to be absent during debates, only appearing when a division is about to occur. We remember a televised debate in the Commons where only 13 MPs were in the chamber for the debate until the division bell, when the chamber suddenly filled.
- The Telegraph article also notes that politicians pay is often compared with top public sector pay, although the later, unlike AMs are appraised and their pay linked to performance.
- We wish our Assembly to attract able and dedicated members who are motivated by service to the people of Wales and are free of accusations that they are seeking to exploit their position for their own financial ends.

Expenses.

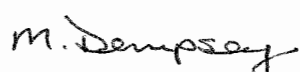
When we come to the question of expenses we have much greater concerns. The current system appears to be very lax and open to what seem to us to be abuse even when operating within the rules.

Cont'd

- An area of particular concern is the Additional Costs Allowance, £4,100 lower level, £13,000 higher level. The lower level should be sufficient to cover overnight stays at reasonable, less than luxury hotels, but we feel that the higher level can be used effectively by an AM for property investment at tax payers' expense even when claimed within the rules. The rules are very lax, over generous and open to abuse. For example the BBC reported that Mike German makes a claim close to the £12500 limit despite living in Cwmbran 17 miles from Cardiff. The Western Mail reveals that two other AMs, Huw Lewis and wife Lynne Neagle claimed £22,000 between them for a second home – this really stretching the rules surely. Is a second home really necessary? As AMs only sit approximately 70 days a year and thus presumably live elsewhere for at least some of the other 290+, it would surely be better to build or buy a building specifically to accommodate AMs for their use and available to their successors when they lose their seats. Such a building could be close to the Assembly and serve it for many years and, if later sold any capital gain would accrue to the taxpayer rather than provide a capital gain to an AM.
- The Assembly website reveals some surprising items claimed for second homes: a £2000 settee for our AM Lesley Griffiths, with other AMs claimed £2 for a Pyrex bowl and £4 for a salt and pepper set and The Western Mail states that an AM has actually claimed for coat hangers. The Welsh Communists claim that Mr. Bourne claimed £120 for a trouser press and £5000 on a bathroom refit. Many of the basics could be provided as standard if the accommodation was owned by the assembly rather than the individual AM as suggested above.
- Food bills too seem excessive. One would eat whatever his/her employment and it is ludicrous that these individuals should be free to eat very well at our expense. Lesley Griffiths claimed £2819.80 for meals/subsistence for the period 25th May 2007 to 8th April 2008. 41 days runs to about £68 per day of the claim; almost the weekly income of a pensioner on a basic pension.
- We feel too that the £15,000 Office Costs Allowance + £2,000 safety precautions and improving office access allowance are open to abuse. Who owns the desks, filing cameras, SatNavs, Blackberry's, bookcases etc at the end of the AM's term? Are these allowances available to an AM who works from home close to Cardiff? If bulk purchased for the Assembly discounts could be obtained and opportunities for potential abuse minimized.
- Allowances for staff need to be reviewed to avoid abuses such as those uncovered in the house of commons where family members were paid for work they did not perform at taxpayer's expense.
- The Resettlement Allowance whereby a member who does not stand for re-election or stands but is not re-elected is paid 50% of salary seems to be us more than generous and should be reviewed.
- The pension of 1/40th salary for each year of service, and the proportions paid to widows/widowers and children seem the most generous we have ever heard of and would make most taxpayers extremely envious as would the lump sum of 4 years salary.

We approve of the Assembly Commission's decision to appoint an independent panel to review the salaries and allowances of AMs. It is important that the citizens of Wales can be proud of their Assembly and that it is seen to perform its duties effectively and efficiently with a fair, transparent reward of AM's skills, whilst still providing value for money.

Yours sincerely



Mrs M Dempsey
Clerk to Minera Community Council