

Office and Communication Funding: International Comparison Executive Summary

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In many political systems around the world, constituency work is a recognised part of parliamentarians' work. Financial support to cover the costs of running a constituency office and to engage with constituents is therefore a common feature in many of the legislatures reviewed for this paper. The scope, scale and model of this support differs significantly, however.

Direct comparison of the monetary value of the support provided in the international examples is challenging, as each parliament will be making decisions related to the economic context in which they operate. This comparison however, can support discussions about the model of support that Members of the Senedd may require in the Seventh Senedd and the principles on which such support should be designed and reviewed.

While the full paper provides a more detailed summary of each legislature, a summary of the key themes is provided below.

What is commonly funded and the model of this support

Most of the examples reviewed for this paper provided support for members to have a constituency office and to engage with their constituents. The exceptions were the Nordic nations – Norway, Denmark and Finland – where no information could be found on the respective websites about constituency focused budgets or allowances. Based on the literature, it seems that constituency work in the form undertaken in the UK is not a part of the political tradition in some of these nations.

Those legislatures that do provide support do so in a number of different ways.

- Some provide a single budget to cover the costs of operating an office and undertaking engagement activity similar to the Senedd - UK, Ireland, and New Zealand.
- Others have two budgets, one for office costs and another to cover engagement activity – Scotland, Northern Ireland and Canada. Although Canada differs slightly in that a proportion of a budget can be spent on “advertising” (20%).
- Some legislatures provide offices to members that are leased and maintained by parliamentary services, with a budget provided to members to cover office costs and communication activity – Australia and Victoria.
- Some legislatures provide a single budget from which members can claim reimbursement of all costs incurred – Austria and Germany.

The Senedd is unique in that Members may commission some research activity using the OCLF. This is not provided for in any of the other examples reviewed.

In terms of how financial support for constituency offices and communications operates, many are based on the reimbursement of claims for actual costs. Some do this on a monthly basis others annually. Ireland takes a different approach. TDs set a budget at the start of each year setting out how much of their annual allowance they require per month. TDs are paid their allowance on a monthly basis, with any unspent money repaid.

Differences in multi-member constituency systems

From the examples reviewed, the presence of multi-member constituencies does not necessarily mean significant differences in the type of support provided to members. Of relevance ahead of a reformed Seventh Senedd however may be the consideration by some legislatures of the geographic size and/or number of registered voters when the level of support Members receive is calculated. In Canada, Australia, New Zealand and Victoria the number of offices a member may claim costs for or be provided with, and the budget available to them, are linked to the size and/ or voter density of their constituency. There are different electoral systems in operation in all of these examples.

Balance of support between Members’ budgets and parliamentary services

The balance of support between Members’ budgets and parliamentary services support varies significantly across the examples considered in the paper. In the UK examples, it appears that members are largely responsible for establishing and maintaining their offices, including sourcing any necessary legal advice. In New Zealand, parliamentary services provide all members with a standard set of office furniture and equipment. In

Australia and Victoria, members are provided with offices that are leased and maintained by parliamentary services. Each office has a standard set-up, and if an office already exists in a member's constituency they are allocated this on election.

Level of prescription applied to office leases and set-up

There are varying levels of prescription and standardisation applied to office leases and office spaces. In the UK and Canada, MPs are required to negotiate the inclusion of particular clauses in their leases. For example, UK MPs must negotiate a clause to allow them to give two months' notice in the event of a change in circumstances, e.g. leaving parliament. In Canada, MPs must include mandatory clauses pertaining to lease termination and assignment, method of notice and receipt of notice and accessibility requirements.

In Canada, MPs are also required to ensure that their chosen office has a number of key features, including a reception area, private office for the Member and for employees, a bathroom, accessibility features and telecoms services. In Northern Ireland, strict requirements for office signage are outlined in the Determination.

Mitigation for high rental costs in some areas

Two of the examples considered seem to have mitigating action for areas with high rental costs. For the UK Parliament, this is addressed through a different budget level for London-area MPs. In Scotland, if a member can demonstrate that local market variations make it impracticable for them to establish and run a suitable office they can apply for an increase to their maximum annual budget up to £2,500.

ICT equipment provision

Many parliaments provide a basic set of kit to members and their staff with the ability to purchase additional equipment using constituency office funds, but purchased from parliamentary services to ensure security. Some apply a cap on the number of sets provided (Canada, 5 sets), while others have a budgetary cap (New Zealand, \$3,000).

Members of the Senedd are provided with a maximum of six sets of ICT kit by the Senedd Commission, one for themselves and up to five sets for their staff, with the cost of any additional kit required to be paid from their Office and Constituent Liaison Fund.

Level of prescription applied to communications and engagement

There is quite significant variation in the level of prescription applied to communication and engagement activity. Some parliaments provide a set of general principles and rules against which members can use their own judgement to determine what is eligible – UK Parliament, Senedd, New Zealand and Canada. Others set out quite comprehensive lists of what is permissible – Ireland, and Australia.

Reporting and accountability

Most systems involve some form of certification or declaration by members that spend was within the rules and many publish expenses online. Ireland also include an independent audit. All members are eligible for selection for audit, with at least 10% chosen on an annual basis. All members must retain receipts and proof of payment for a period of five years to enable audits to occur (this does not include monthly unvouchered spend for incidental costs). Reports by the independent auditors are published on the Oireachtas website.

Measures to support Additional Office Holders

Australia is the only example to make specific provision for additional office holders to enable them to access a ministerial office within their constituency. Given the focus on hybrid working going forward, including for Members, the question of office space for ministerial work within constituencies may become more significant in the Seventh Senedd.