Ms Bridget Prentice MP: Resolution Letter

Letter to Mr Mark Morris from the Commissioner, 4 December 2008

I am writing to let you know my conclusions on the complaint you sent me on 31 July about the content and circulation of a newsletter from Mrs Bridget Prentice MP paid for from the Parliamentary Communications Allowance.

In essence, your complaint is that Mrs Prentice's Parliamentary Report was circulated outside her current constituency and that it gave undue prominence to the logo of her political party. You complained also about the invitation for people to join Mrs Prentice's Supporters Network.

I have carefully considered your complaint, consulting Mrs Prentice and the House of Commons authorities.

I have concluded that Mrs Prentice was not in breach of the rules of the House in respect of the Communications Allowance in her use of her party logo on her Parliamentary Report. The rules allow the proportionate and discreet use of party logos and I consider—as do the House authorities—that Mrs Prentice's use of one party logo was in accordance with the rules as they have been interpreted for all Members of the House.

I have considered also the form on the final page of Mrs Prentice's report which included an invitation to join her Supporters Network. The House authorities raised this with Mrs Prentice's office before they approved the content of the report. They were told that the Supporters Network was a non-political group of people supportive of Mrs Prentice's work as a constituency Member of Parliament. There were no meetings for supporters, nothing was asked of them and they engaged in no campaigning. Mrs Prentice has confirmed to me that nothing was to be asked of those who joined the Network and they were under no circumstances to be asked to join the Labour party. It was intended as a way of sending non-partisan parliamentary news to constituents with an interest in events at Westminster. In the event, the returns were such that Mrs Prentice decided that there was little appetite in Lewisham East for such a network and that collating news from Westminster for such a small network would not be an efficient use of office time. On that basis, I accept the views of the House authorities that the inclusion of the reference you complained of in the form at the end of Mrs Prentice's Parliamentary Report was not a breach of the rules in respect of the Communications Allowance since it did not promote Mrs Prentice's political activities.

I have concluded, however, that it was a breach of the rules of the House for Mrs Prentice to use the Communications Allowance in order to communicate with constituents outside her current constituency boundary through the article on the front page of her Parliamentary Report (East meets West) and through its circulation to people outside her constituency. This was caused by a misunderstanding between the House authorities and Mrs Prentice's office. Mrs Prentice produced two versions of her Parliamentary Report—one which included her article "East meets West" which was for circulation outside her constituency—and she believed that the House authorities had approved both for dispatch.

Mrs Prentice has, however, fully accepted that she inadvertently breached the rules of the House in using the Communications Allowance to fund a special edition of her Parliamentary Report and dispatching it outside her constituency. The breach was unintentional since she believed she had received approval for this Report from the House authorities. I am satisfied that she could not have known that in fact they had not approved it since, due to an oversight, they had not reviewed that version of the Report. Mrs Prentice has offered to meet the cost of printing the copies of the Report which were delivered outside her constituency by volunteers1. She has apologised for the error and has given an assurance that the mistake in distributing her Report outside her constituency boundary will not be made again.

Mrs Prentice has, therefore, accepted that she has breached the rules of the House in the circulation of her Parliamentary funded Report outside her constituency boundaries. She has offered to repay the cost of those reports and she has given her assurance that the mistake will not be made again. She has apologised. I consider that Mrs Prentice has taken satisfactory action to rectify this matter and I therefore regard your complaint as now closed. I will be reporting the outcome to the Committee on Standards and Privileges.

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1 £316.20.
Thank you for raising this matter with me.

I am copying this letter to Mrs Bridget Prentice MP.

4 December 2008
Ms Bridget Prentice MP: Written Evidence

1. Letter to the Commissioner from Mr Mark Morris, 31 July 2008

I would like to make a formal complaint about the use of the Communications Allowance by Bridget Prentice MP, who is MP for Lewisham East.

The enclosed newspaper was delivered to my home at about midday on the 29th July. It was not delivered in any envelope.

My complaints, which I hope will be fully investigated are:

1. I am a resident of Lewisham West constituency and my MP is Jim Dowd, yet the newspaper was delivered to my house and I assume to many thousands of households in Rushey Green ward in Catford. I expect the newspaper has also been delivered in Catford South ward, which, like Rushey Green ward, is moving into Lewisham East constituency at the next General Election after the next boundary changes.

My basis for believing that the newspaper has been delivered to possibly thousands of households who are not constituents of Bridget Prentice MP is that article ‘East meets West’ where it states “If Jim Dowd used to be your MP but you’ve received this report through your door then your address is now in the Lewisham East constituency”. This is an inaccurate statement and confusing to local residents. However, most importantly I believe that the Communication Allowance exists solely to support the communication between an MP and his/her current constituents. Using the Communications Allowance to communicate with people who might possibly be future constituents (subject to the outcome of the electorate deciding who they elect as their MP) is surely a blatant breach of the rules of the Communications Allowance and a serious misuse of public money.

2. The newspaper contains a Labour logo—is this permitted under the rules set out for the use of the Communications Allowance?

3. The newspaper appears to be seeking supporters to the Labour Party. On the back pager there is an invitation for people to join “Bridget Prentice’s Supporters Network” and also to deliver newsletters from Bridget Prentice? Again, is this permitted under the rules set for the use of the Communications Allowance.

I trust all these issues will be properly investigated and that I will receive a full explanation of any investigations and actions you will be taking in this matter.

31 July 2008
2. Mrs Bridget Prentice MP’s Parliamentary Report

Bridget Prentice MP
ON YOUR SIDE

Welcome to my latest report for the people of Lewisham East

Proud of Lewisham’s Doctors & Nurses

The NHS turns 70 this year and it remains one of our most cherished public services. A lot has changed in 70 years, but the NHS remains as vital today as it was in 1948. I am very proud of our hospital and I’ll do my very best to support services.

I’m going to be fighting for the maintenance of an A&E service capable of dealing with most cases, the retention of the excellent regional paediatric unit and the retention of doctor led maternity care while also seeking to improve care for patients. I am always happy to meet you and support a community campaign that will put people first.

Any of you will already be aware that boundary changes at the next election mean that Lewisham West is changing. If you doubt this you can be sure but you’ve received this report through your door or postman address to it now in the Lewisham East constituency.

In my pledge to all of you it is made by this change is that I’ll remain as dedicated to 70th year of the creation of the NHS as I did when in Lewisham East. I will be talking to local people over the coming weeks and want to hear about your hopes for our area. Please contact me with any ideas or concerns you may have.

East meets West

More than one in five accidents reported in Lewisham in the first months of the year. In that time, figures show 46 incidents in the area, compared to 52 in the same period last year.

In this issue: • Bridget – working for you across Lewisham East • Keeping Lewisham Safe • Celebrating Lewisham’s Young Talent • Action on Climate Change • My Pledges to You
A Better Lewisham

Safer Neighbourhoods - Keeping Lewisham Safe

London has embarked on a policing revolution with restructured police teams in every neighbourhood and tackling crime. At the same time, the Metropolitan Police Service has had to cope with the biggest counter-terrorism challenges in its history. I will always fight to ensure that the Met receives the resources it needs to keep Lewisham safe.

Out and about in Lewisham

I visited Heather Close to celebrate Black History Month with the residents and enjoy some salsa lessons!

I was delighted to go to the Dacre Arms to lend my support to Proud of Pubs week.

The Grove Park Nursery do tremendous work and my visit there was a real joy.

Celebrating Lewisham's Young Talent

Unlocking the potential of all our young people is something I believe in passionately. Whenever I visit schools and colleges I frequently mention my desire for a country where one's talents can take you as far as your ambitions.

When the Prime Minister recently invited me to Downing Street he asked me to invite someone from Lewisham who I thought best represented young people in our constituency. I asked the Head Girl of an excellent local school to come with me and tell the Prime Minister about her plans for her future.

Please visit my website at: www.BridgetPrenticeMP.Org.Uk
Complaints rectified 2008-09
Any problems? Let me know!

Do you have any local problems or issues that you would like Bridget Prentice to follow up? If so please let her know using the space below and return to:

________________________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________________________

☐ I am interested in joining Bridget Prentice’s Supporters Network.

☐ I can help to deliver newsletters from Bridget Prentice MP in my local area.

Name: ___________________________ Address: ___________________________

Phone: ___________________________ Email: ___________________________

Bridget Prentice MP may use the information you provide to contact you again. If you would prefer not to be contacted please tick this box ☐
3. **Letter to Mrs Bridget Prentice MP from the Commissioner, 5 August 2008**

I would welcome your comments on a complaint I have received from Mr Mark Morris about the circulation of issue 2 of your Parliamentary report.

I attach a copy of Mr Morris’s letter of 31 July, together with a copy of the report about which he complains. In essence, his complaint is that the Parliamentary report was circulated outside your current constituency and that it gave undue prominence to the logo of your political party, contrary to the rules for the funding of Parliamentary reports from Parliamentary allowances.

The Code of Conduct for Members of Parliament provides in paragraph 14 as follows:

> "Members shall at all times ensure that their use of expenses, allowances, facilities and services provided from the public purse is strictly in accordance with the rules laid down on these matters, and that they observe any limits placed by the House on the use of such expenses, allowances, facilities and services."

The rules in respect of the use Parliamentary allowances for funding reports and newsletters are set out in a booklet entitled the Communications Allowance and the use of House Stationery published in April 2007.

Appendix 1 provides a new section of the Green Book on the Communications Allowance. Section 6.1.1 provides:

> "The Communications Allowance (CA) is available to meet the cost of Members engaging proactively with their constituents through a variety of media. It can be used for the production of unsolicited communications within the parameters set out in this Section."

Section 6.2.1 provides (in part) that:

> "Members are encouraged to submit the content of newsletters to DFA for consideration in advance of publication."

Appendix 2 provides rules and guidance on producing newsletters and other publications from the Communications Allowance. Paragraph 10 of Appendix 2 provides:

> "Parliamentary newsletters and other publications can be distributed to all constituents or a targeted local grouping, for example local head teachers, or residents affected by a development scheme."

Paragraph 16 deals with party emblems/logos as follows:

> "The use of party logos, whilst not disallowed entirely, is restricted to proportionate and discreet use; alternatively you may prefer to use the House emblem (the crowned portcullis) as this reflects the Parliamentary nature and purpose of the material being circulated."

On 6 November 2007 Mr Speaker made the following statement in the House:

> "As Members, we are aware that the Boundary Commissioner is looking constantly at constituency boundaries. All Members have a duty to look after the constituents who elected them. Those boundaries do not change until the next election, so we must obey the convention by not involving ourselves with another Member’s constituency until that time."

I would welcome your comments on this complaint, taking account of the Rules and Mr Speaker’s statement. In particular, it would be helpful to know:

1. What arrangements you made for the distribution of your Parliamentary report outside your current constituency.

2. How many copies were distributed outside your constituency; where they went to; whether the printing costs of these copies of the report were met from Parliamentary allowances; and whether any distribution costs were met
from Parliamentary allowances.

3. The reasons for the statement in your report “East meets West” in particular your statement that: “Mr Jim Dowd used to be your MP but if you’ve received this report through your door then your address is now in the Lewisham East constituency.”

4. Whether you consider your deployment of the Labour party logo is in accordance with the rules of the Communications Allowance.

5. Whether you at any time discussed the content of your Parliamentary report and its distribution with the Department of Resources?

I would welcome any other comments you may wish to make.

I attach a note which sets out the procedure which I follow. I am writing to the complainant to let him know that I have written to you about the complaint. I appreciate we are in the recess, but if it were possible to let me have your response within the next 6 weeks, I would be most grateful. If there is any difficulty about this, do let me know. In any event, if you would like a word about any of this, please contact me at the House. I would welcome your help on this matter.

5 August 2008

4. Letter to the Commissioner from Mrs Bridget Prentice MP received 15 September 2008

Thank you for your recent letter regarding the complaint about issue 2 of my Parliamentary report.

First and foremost, I am able to confirm that both I and my office followed due process in twice submitting my Parliamentary report to the Department of Resources. I attach a sequence of emails between my Office Manager and Department of Resources staff.2

I would particularly draw your attention to the first email from my office which asks the Department for Resources to:

“note that due to constituency boundary changes the front page will be slightly different in two wards”

The above sentence is a reference to the “East meets West” story at the centre of this complaint and the two wards—Catford South and Rushey Green—that will become part of Lewisham East at the next general election.

Although reference was made to this story by my Office Manager, no change was asked for and he understandably assumed the report was ready to go to print. It is unfortunate that this now appears not to be the case.

The existing boundaries have been complicated for some time and I think it is fair in this case to remark upon the ability of rules surrounding boundary changes to confuse a relatively newly appointed Office Manager. Under existing arrangements in the London Borough of Lewisham, there is a considerable mingling of constituency and local government boundaries. For example, part of Catford South is already part of Lewisham East, although all of Catford South will become part of Lewisham East at the next general election. I attach a copy of existing and recommended boundaries as an aid. Moreover, under the Parliamentary Constituencies (England) Order 2007 the boundary changes come into force on the 27th June 2007. Of course, and as you know, the changes do not apply until the next general election. However, a look at the Lewisham East map of recommended boundaries shows them to be far easier to remember and digest than the existing boundaries and it is perhaps understandable that this sort of lapse has occurred. This same confusion also led to the incorrect wording regarding Jim Dowd MP that is noted in the complaint by Councillor Morris. It would have been far better if the report had read, “If Jim Dowd has been your MP but you’ve received this report through your door then your address will be in the Lewisham East constituency at the next election”.

2 WE 5 to WE 8
As the “East meets West” story suggests, this version of the report was distributed by volunteers to all households within Catford South and Rushey Green. The costs of the printing of this report were met by the Communications Allowance.

I do consider the use of the Labour Party logo on the front page to be in accordance with the rules of the Communications Allowance and its use was checked with the Department of Resources. The Department of Resources clearly paid attention to the use of party logos as they refer to it in point 4 of their recommended changes to the original report (page 2 of my attachment):

“We normally, following a decision by the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards, only allow the use of one logo; your newsletter has two, so could one please be removed”.

Page 3 of my attachment reproduces an email from my office to the Department for Resources in which it is claimed that the requested changes have been made (as well as clarifying the function of the ‘Supporters Network’). On page 4 of the attachment these changes are confirmed as being acceptable to the Department of Resources:

“I can confirm that these changes are acceptable and the report conforms to our rules”.

The logo itself, at the bottom corner of the page, measures 0.7in x 2in on an A3 newspaper. I submit that this conforms to the “proportionate and discreet use” called for within the rules.

In relation to the ‘East meets West’ story, there was absolutely no intention to use the communications allowance outwith the rules but lack of experience coupled with acceptance by the Department of Resources, may have led to what might appear to be a breach. Nevertheless, I would argue that the fact that people in Rushey Green and Catford South arrive at my advice surgeries and approach me at events suggests that they are becoming familiar with the impending changes. With regard to the other matters raised, I believe we are absolutely within the rules and it is only on this issue where there is arguably some confusion.

I am more than happy to assist should you have any further questions regarding this matter and for you to discuss this response with the Department of Resources.

Received 15 September 2008

5. E-mail to the Department of Resources from the office of Mrs Bridget Prentice MP, 26 March 2008

Please find attached a 4 page parliamentary report for Bridget Prentice MP. I would be very grateful if you could confirm that the report abides by communication allowance guidelines and is suitable for publication. Please also note that due to constituency boundary changes the front page will be slightly different in two wards and I attach this amended front page also.

I have sent this in two emails because of the size of the attachments.

26 March 2008

6. E-mail to the office of Mrs Bridget Prentice MP from the Department of Resources, 28 March 2008

Thank you for sending Ms Prentice’s Report for review. I attach our formal response which does ask for some amendments to be made. If I can be of any further assistance please do not hesitate to contact me.

The comments below are produced in good faith and in accordance with the rules and guidance agreed by the Members Estimate Committee and applied by the Department of Resources. We would remind you that it remains your responsibility to ensure that the content of any publications meet the criteria contained in our published guidance, ‘The Communications Allowance and the use of House stationery’, a copy of which can be found on the DFA website http://dfaweb.parliamentuk/members/publications/pubfacts.htm

We reviewed your publication on 28 March 2008 and make the following observations and recommendations:
1) Page two: Celebrating Lewisham’s Young Talent—The rules state that the Communications Allowance cannot be used “to advance perspectives or arguments with the intention of promoting the interests of any person, political party or organisation you support …” The first paragraph does promote actions of both the Government and the Prime Minister. If this could be altered to reflect Ms Prentice’s priorities and opinion this would be preferable.

2) Page Three: There are two captions which need amendment in this page. The Riverside Wing opening:—Could the quote be modified to remove the reference to government money—for example ‘It is good to see that increased funding for the NHS is being used directly for patient care’.

Bridget meeting pensioners piece—Please remove the reference to Labour.

3) Can you confirm the Supporters Network is not a Party organisation which could be linked with Party Campaigning?

4) We normally, following a decision by the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards, only allow the use of one logo, your newsletter has two, so could one please be removed.

If you wish to use the Communications Allowance to fund this publication we will need to see an amended version before it is sent for printing, or at the time an invoice is presented for payment; failure to make suitable amendments may result in payment being withheld.

We are very happy to discuss any part of this advice, or deal with any other queries or questions you may have about the use of the Communications Allowance.

28 March 2008

7. E-mail to the Department of Resources from the office of Mrs Bridget Prentice MP, 28 March 2008

Thank you for the feedback. I believe I have made all the changes required. I will attach the files again and would be grateful for written confirmation if they are acceptable.

I can confirm that the supporters network is a non-political group for those supportive of Bridget’s work as a constituency Member of Parliament. There are no meetings for supporters, nothing is asked of them and they engage in no campaigning.

28 March 2008

8. E-mail to the office of Mrs Bridget Prentice MP from the Department of Resources, 28 March 2008

Many thanks for your quick response. I can confirm that these changes are acceptable and the report now conforms to our rules.

28 March 2008

9. Letter to Mrs Bridget Prentice MP from the Commissioner, 16 September 2008

Thank you very much for your letter dated 15 August in response to this complaint. I received your letter on 15 September and I suspect the date is a typo.

As I mentioned when I wrote to you on 5 August, I will now be seeking advice from the Department of Resources on the basis of your letter. There was one point, however, which is not explicitly covered in your letter, and that is the number of copies of the newsletter which were sent outside your current constituency. If you could let me have an estimate for that, that would be most helpful.

I will be in touch again when I have the Department of Resources’ response. Thank you for your help with this.
10. Letter to the Director of Operations, Department of Resources, from the Commissioner, 16 September 2008

I would welcome your comments and advice on a complaint I have received about the content and circulation outside her current constituency of a recent newsletter.

I enclose a copy of the complainant’s letter of 31 July 2008 together with a copy of the newsletter —Issue 2 “On Your Side”. I enclose also a copy of my letter to Mrs Prentice of 5 August with which I attached the complaint, and of her response dated 15 August (which I suspect is a typo for 15 September, the date when it reached this office).

As you will see, Mrs Prentice’s office appears to have agreed with the Department the text and perhaps the circulation of this newsletter in advance. Nevertheless, in the light of the current complaint and the information now available, I would welcome your comments in particular on: the logo; the article headed “East meets West”; the reference to joining Mrs Prentice’s supporters network on the back page of the newsletter; and its circulation outside Mrs Prentice’s current constituency boundary. Any other comments you wish to make would of course be very welcome.

As you will see, distribution of the report was by volunteers, but the costs of the printing were met from the Communications Allowance. Mrs Prentice has not estimated the number of copies of the newsletter which were circulated outside her constituency and I am writing to ask her for this information.

I would very much welcome your advice on this complaint, if possible within the next three weeks.

16 September 2008

11. Letter to the Commissioner from Mrs Bridget Prentice MP, 24 September 2008

Thank you for your letter dated 16 September regarding the number of copies of my newsletter that were delivered outside my current constituency boundary.

Volunteers were asked by my Office Manager to deliver my newsletter to all properties in Rushey Green and Catford South. Assuming all the deliveries were made this would amount to approximately 9000 newsletters.

I apologise for the delay in replying which was due to me being out of the country. I hope this letter properly answers the question raised and, of course, I am very happy to help with any further questions should they arise.

24 September 2008

12. Letter to the Commissioner from the Director of Operations, Department of Resources, 22 October 2008

Thank you for your letter of 16 September concerning the complaint by Mr Morris against Mrs Prentice and for the additional material from Mrs Prentice attached to your letter of 2 October.

I can confirm that a copy of Mrs Prentice’s report was received by this Department on 26 March 2008. It was reviewed by my staff against the rules for the Communications Allowance and changes to some of the content and clarification about the ‘Supporters Network’ were sought. A revised version of the report was agreed on 28 March 2008. Mrs Prentice would therefore have reasonably considered that she had assured herself that the publication conformed to the House’s rules.

If I may first respond to the second and third elements of Mr Morris’s complaint, namely about the use of the Labour Party logo and the invitation to join a supporters network. On the former, the Department was content that the

With this letter, which is not included in the evidence, the Commissioner forwarded Mrs Prentice’s letter of 24 September.
single Labour Party logo was acceptable as it was both discreet and proportionate in respect to the rest of the publication. The copy we saw was A4 in size but the actual publication appears to have been reproduced as A3, but this does not alter our opinion on acceptability. The House has decided to prohibit the use of party logos from April 2009 and new guidance about this will be issued shortly. Until that time the extant guidance is in force.

Concerning the standing of ‘Bridget Prentice’s Supporters Network’, the Department asked for clarification about its role and received the following assurance from Mrs Prentice’s office:

“I can confirm that the supporters’ network is a non-political group of those supportive of Bridget’s work as a constituency Member of Parliament. There are no meetings for supporters, nothing is asked of them and they engage in no campaigning.”

Given this assurance and the fact that we have seen and approved similar references to nonpolitical networks in reports of other Members, my staff were therefore satisfied that the invitation in the report did not breach the rules associated with the Communications Allowance.

Turning now to the boundary change article, having investigated the matter it appears that, unfortunately, the member of staff who approved the report did not have sight of all the relevant material, including the additional, alternative page mentioned by Mrs Prentice and the e-mail which referred to it. This was due to an administrative oversight. Thus, we seem to have approved a version without reference to the alternative front page submitted. This limitation would not have been readily apparent to Mrs Prentice or her staff.

You will be aware that the distribution of newsletters by Members to areas subject to constituency boundary changes was considered by your predecessor and discussed with this Department. Ultimately, a decision was made which put in place a rigid but clear rule. Mr Speaker’s statement on 6 November clarifies the position, which we now apply to publications paid for from the Communications Allowance.

So, it is strictly the case that the distribution of a newsletter by Mrs Prentice to wards outside her current constituency boundary breaches the House’s rules; and that the inclusion of the article ‘East meets West’ could be interpreted as seeking to promote Mrs Prentice in an area which she does not represent, but will likely be a candidate at the next General Election. The Department should have brought this to Mrs Prentice’s attention, but we failed to do so.

It is, of course, Mrs Prentice’s responsibility to ensure her use of the Communications Allowance is in accordance with the rules. However, you may consider that Members cannot reasonably be conversant with the many detailed rules and that by submitting the report to the Department for approval (which she was not required to do) Mrs Prentice was taking a sensible precaution against any inadvertent error.

Finally, you should be aware that the internal process by which material submitted by Members is distributed to Departmental staff reviewing publications was amended over the summer when we recognised that there was the potential for important information to be missed. We aim to provide speedy approval and on this occasion, in the absence of these new administrative processes, this haste meant, regrettably, we failed to provide Mrs Prentice with a full response.

I hope this is helpful. If you require any further assistance please do let me know.

22 October 2008

13. Letter to Mrs Bridget Prentice MP from the Commissioner, 3 November 2008

I have now received a response from the Director of Operations at the Department of Resources about this complaint in respect of your newsletter.

I attach a copy of the Director’s letter of 22 October. As you will see, the Director’s advice to me is that your use of the Labour Party logo and the invitation to join the supporters network was not, in his view, a breach of the rules of the House. He accepts also that the text of your report was approved in advance by staff in his Department, but the alternative front page referred to in your e-mail was overlooked.
Before I consider this further, I would welcome some additional information about your Supporters Network. Could you first confirm what your office told the Department of Resources, as quoted in the letter of 22 October from the Director of Operations? Since it would appear that nothing is asked of the Supporters Network, could you help me on what is its purpose? Could you also give me some idea of the size of the network; give me some examples of any communications which have been sent to the network and let me know how those communications were funded. Could you also met me know whether the database provided by the network has been used to invite people to join the Labour party?

As you know, the rules in respect of the content of newsletters funded from the Communications Allowance do not permit: “party political activities, including fundraising or membership drives” (paragraph 5 of Appendix Two of the April 2007 rules for the Communications Allowance and the use of House stationery). I have of course noted the conclusions of the Director of Operations on this matter, but it would be very helpful to have your own view on whether you consider your invitation to invite constituents to join your Supporters Network is consistent with these rules and, if so, why you have formed that conclusion.

It would be most helpful to have your comments on this, if possible within the next two weeks. If there is any difficulty about this, do let me know.

3 November 2008

14. Letter to the Commissioner from Mrs Bridget Prentice MP, 10 November 2008

Thank you for your letter dated 3rd November regarding the Supporters Network mentioned in my last Parliamentary Report.

I can confirm that the email exchange between my office and the Department of Resources is exactly as described in the letter you attached from the Director of Operations. Constituents who joined the Supporters Network were to have nothing asked of them and were under no circumstances to be asked to join the Labour Party.

The Supporters Network was intended as a way of sending non-partisan parliamentary news to constituents with an interest in events and Westminster. My office received just one reply to the report (which I enclose) (not included in written evidence) with the appropriate box ticked to join the Supporters Network in Lewisham East and that collating news from Westminster for such a small network would be an efficient use of office time.

I do believe, for the reasons set out above, that had the Supporters Network established itself it would have been within the rules for the Communications Allowance. I hope this reply satisfactorily explains the circumstances surrounding the Supporters Network and I am, of course, more than happy to assist should you have any further questions regarding this matter.

10 November 2008

15. Letter to Mrs Bridget Prentice, 17 November 2010

Thank you for your letter of 10 November about the Supporters Network referred to in your last Parliamentary Report.

I need now to consider the way forward. If I accept the Director’s conclusions, it would appear, subject to any comments you may wish to make, that there was a breach of the rules in circulating your Parliamentary Report paid for from Parliamentary allowances outside your current constituency boundary. But in the Director’s view there was no breach of the rule in respect of the use of your Labour party logo, nor from your invitation to join your Supporters Network.

I need to come to my own conclusion on this matter, taking account of the additional information you have given me in your letter of 10 November and to decide whether this is a matter which I should submit to the Committee on Standards and Privileges by way of a formal Memorandum, which the Committee would consider and then publish alongside their Report, or whether it might be appropriate for me to resolve this matter through use of the rectification procedure. This procedure allows me to resolve a complaint informally when the Member agrees,
accepts that there has been a breach, where any identified misuse of Parliamentary allowances have been repaid, the breach was not intentional and the Member has apologised and taken appropriate action to rectify the error. In such cases, I write to the complainant to inform them of the action taken and report the outcome informally to the Committee.

In this case, it would helpful to me in deciding on the way forward to know whether you accept that you breached the rules of the House in using the Communications Allowance to fund a special edition of your Parliamentary Report and dispatching it to constituents outside your current constituency boundary; whether you can confirm that the breach was unintentional (in view of the clearance you believe you had received from the Department of Resources); whether you accept also the Department’s advice that there has been no breach in respect of the logo and reference to your network; whether you wish to offer to meet the full cost of the printing of the Report circulated by volunteers outside your constituency (which I take to be the 9,000 newsletters referred to in your letter of 24 September); and whether you wish to give an assurance that there will no repetition. It would also be helpful to know if I may record that you have apologised.

I am aware too that you may be taking on constituency casework from those who are outside your current constituency boundaries, in agreement with the other Members concerned. That may be part of the reason, as you say in your letter of 15 August, that people approach you from the wards which are not yet part of the constituency. While this is not, I believe, a matter which goes to the Code of Conduct for Members, the practice would appear to be contrary to the statement made by Mr Speaker on 6 November 2007 which I referred to in my initial letter to you of 5 August. You may also have seen Mr Speaker’s statement in response to a Point of Order on 27 October 2008 (at col. 565/566). It would be helpful for me to know, therefore, whether you are intending to change your casework arrangements in the light of Mr Speaker’s statements particularly as such casework can all too easily raise problems in the use of Parliamentary allowances.

If you would like a word about any of this, please contact me at the House. Otherwise I look forward to hearing from you. It would be particularly helpful to have a response within the next two weeks.

I am copying this letter to the Director of Member Liaison Services in the Department of Resources who if you agree would arrange for an invoice to be raised to enable you to meet the cost of the circulation.

17 November 2010

16. Letter to the Commissioner from Mrs Bridget Prentice MP, 24 November 2008

Thank you for your letter of 17th November regarding how I might assist in helping you arrive at your decisions in this case.

I do accept that there was a breach of the rules of the House in using the Communications Allowance to fund a special edition of my Parliamentary Report and delivering it to constituents beyond my constituency. I can confirm that this breach was entirely unintentional and arose because of the clearance I received by the Department of Resources. As a result, I do wish to meet the cost of the edition of my report that was delivered beyond the constituency boundary and would be happy for the Department for Resources to raise an invoice to enable repayment.

I do accept the advice of the Department of Resources that there has been no breach in respect of the party logo and no breach by my invitation to join a ‘Supporters Network’.

I would like to offer you my assurance that the mistake made in distributing a report to areas outside the Lewisham East boundary will not be made again and that I am happy for you to record that I have apologised.

In relation to your closing comments on constituency casework; I am able to confirm that I am immediately reviewing my casework arrangements to ensure they are in accord with the statements made by Mr Speaker. I will be contacting Mr Speaker myself to ensure that the practices of my office are appropriate.
I hope I have responded fully to the points you raise in your letter. If there is anything further I can do to help, please do not hesitate to contact me. I would also like to thank you and your staff for the professional and appropriate way with which you have dealt with this matter.

24 November 2008