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Summary

I investigated a complaint of misuse of House-provided stationery. On receipt of the allegation, the Member acknowledged his breach of House rules, apologised and offered to refund to the House authorities the value of the misused stationery. The
5 Member said that the mailshot should not have been sent and that over enthusiasm and lack of supervision had been contributory factors.

The breach of the rules on the use of House-provided stationery was also a breach of paragraph 15 of the Code of Conduct. However, given that the breach was at the less serious end of the spectrum, I considered the Member's response provided an
10 appropriate outcome.

I concluded the inquiry using the rectification procedure available to me through Standing Order No 150.

Mr Neil Coyle MP: Resolution letter

Letter from the Commissioner to Mr Paul Scully MP, 10 April 2018

I wrote to you on 27 February to tell you that I had begun an inquiry into your allegation of misuse of House provided stationery by Mr Neil Coyle MP.

5 When I put that allegation to Mr Coyle, he responded promptly. He immediately recognised that the letter should not have been sent using House-provided resources; apologised; and offered to refund the value of the stationery and postage involved. He explained the circumstances which had led to the breach of the rules, accepting that he was accountable for the “over enthusiasm” and “lack of
10 supervision” that had led to it.

I consider Mr Coyle’s acknowledgement and apology for a breach of the Code of Conduct, and the refund to which he has agreed, be an appropriate outcome and the matter is now concluded, by way of the rectification procedure available to me under Standing Order No 150. I will notify the Committee on Standards in due course of
15 this outcome.

10 April 2018

Written Evidence

1. Letter from Mr Paul Scully MP to the Commissioner, 22 February 2018

I was concerned to see a letter from Neil Coyle MP dated 12 February 2018 which appears to be an unsolicited letter to an EU citizen living in the UK seeking to
5 influence their vote in the upcoming local elections on 3 May. As you will see from the letter and envelope included, House-provided stationery including a postage-paid envelope was used.

I believe that this is a clear breach of the stationery rules as outlined by Parliament in March 2015. The principles section states that Members 'must not exploit the
10 system ... to confer an undue advantage on a political organisation'. I believe that this can also be construed as a breach of rule 3 excluding using stationery or postage 'in connection with work for or at the behest of a political party or supporting the return of any person to public office'. Although candidates or party were not explicitly mentioned, the very fact that there is reference to the election in May and
15 a call to vote against the Prime Minister is purely to gain political advantage rather than offering any benefit to the constituents in receipt of the letter.

I would be grateful if you would investigate this matter as a matter of urgency, given the short time remaining until the main election campaign starts and apply an appropriate sanction so this abuse of House-provided stationery is not repeated.
20 The recipient of the letter has asked for their name not to be put in the public domain.

22 February 2018

Enclosure: text of letter from Mr Neil Coyle MP, dated 12 February 2018¹

As someone from an EU member state, you have a vote in the local elections on 3 May 2018. This will be a major chance to send Theresa May's Government a clear message about her disastrous Brexit policy and how it affects you and our whole
5 community.

In the EU referendum I wanted you and younger people to have a vote. The Government prevented it sadly. The result was very close and the extra voters could have changed the outcome.

I campaigned against Brexit and remain opposed to leaving the European Union. It
10 will cause untold damage to this country, to people's opportunities, to the economy and to our international standing.

I campaigned against leaving the EU, voted against triggering Article 50, and rejected the EU Withdrawal Bill in Parliament at every chance. My voting record is online if you wish to see my consistent position and how [I] have fought for your rights here.

15 I would like to hear your views and concerns on this issue. I also hope you will support my position when you have a chance to vote. You can send a clear message to Theresa May on 3 May that we remain opposed to Brexit here!

If you wish to let me know your views or contact me about this (or any other matter), or if you would like to receive my EU updates, please email me at [details redacted].

¹ A second-class postage paid envelope was also enclosed

12 February 2018

2. Letter from the Commissioner to Mr Neil Coyle MP, 27 February 2018

I would welcome your help with an allegation I have received from Mr Paul Scully MP about your compliance with paragraph 15 of the House of Commons Code of Conduct for Members. I enclose a copy of Mr Scully's letter and the enclosures he sent with it.

The scope of my inquiry

The scope of my inquiry will be, in essence, to establish whether you have used parliamentary resources to confer an undue advantage on a political organisation, by using House-provided stationery in connection with work "for or at the behest of a political party".

The relevant rules and guidance

Paragraph 15 of the Code of Conduct (copy of Code enclosed) says that:

"Members are personally responsible and accountable for ensuring that their use of any expenses, allowances, facilities and services provided from the public purse is in accordance with the rules laid down on these matters. Members shall ensure that their use of public resources is always in support of their parliamentary duties. It should not confer any undue personal or financial benefit on themselves or anyone else, or confer undue advantage on a political organisation.

The Rules for the use of stationery and postage-paid envelopes provided by the House of Commons, and for the use of the Crowned Portcullis (enclosed) say, at paragraphs 2 and 3:

5 “2. The rules cannot be expected to cover every eventuality; Members should therefore always behave with probity and integrity when using House-provided stationery and postage. Members should regard themselves as personally responsible and accountable for the use of House-provided stationery and postage. They must not exploit the system for personal financial advantage, nor (by breaching the rules in
10 paragraph 3 below) to confer an undue advantage on a political organisation.

3. House-provided stationery and pre-paid envelopes are provided only for the performance of a Member’s parliamentary function. In particular, this excludes using stationery or postage:

15 — In connection with work for or at the behest of a political party (including fund-raising for a political party, advocating membership of a political party or supporting the return of any person to public office;

—”

Paragraph 8 of the same rules gives examples of permissible uses of House-provided
20 stationery, among which is

Correspondence with constituents, including contact by Members about a specific issue with people who have not previously contacted them and

questionnaires and surveys (but not newsletters, annual reports or general updates on a range of issues”; “

Next steps

5 I would welcome your comments on the allegation that your letter amounts to a breach of the House’s rules and the Code of Conduct for Members. In particular it would be helpful to have the following information:

- how many letters were distributed as part of this mailing;
- how it came about that this letter was sent in a House-provided postage
10 pre-paid envelope;
- whether you consider this letter could reasonably be construed as being “in connection with work for or at the behest of a political party”; and
 - if you do not, the reason(s) for that belief;

I would be glad to receive any other information you consider relevant to my
15 inquiry.

I enclose a copy of the *Commissioner’s Information Note*,² which sets out the procedure I follow. I am writing to Mr Scully to let him know that I have decided to begin an inquiry into this matter. I will shortly update my parliamentary web pages to show the fact that I am conducting an inquiry into an allegation into an alleged
20 breach of paragraph 15 of the Code of Conduct. My office will not comment further

² <http://www.parliament.uk/documents/pcfs/New%20Website%20Documents/PCS-Information-Note.pdf>

on any aspect of the inquiry to third parties. They will, however, confirm that I have begun an inquiry if asked before this information is posted on my webpages and they will answer factual questions about the processes I follow and the standards system more generally.

5 As you will be aware, my inquiries are conducted in private. This letter and any subsequent correspondence between us is protected by parliamentary privilege. Until such time as a final report is published, I must ask that you respect that confidentiality and do not disclose the contents of our correspondence to any third party. I have made a similar request of Mr Scully.

10 My decision and all the relevant evidence, including our correspondence, will be published at the end of the inquiry.

As a matter of courtesy, I should say now that I may make enquiries of the relevant House authorities in due course. If I do so, I will share that correspondence with you. While I do not, at this stage, know whether it will be necessary to interview you
15 about this matter, it would be open to you to be accompanied at any such interview. I am, of course, very happy to meet with you at any stage if you would find that helpful.

I would appreciate your help and co-operation, and welcome your comments on the allegation, together with any evidence you feel may assist my investigation, as soon
20 as possible and no later than 14 March 2018.

27 February 2018

3. Letter from Mr Neil Coyle MP to the Commissioner, 7 March 2018

I am replying to your letter dated 27 February regarding the complaint made about a letter received by a constituent of mine on the matter of EU membership.

Conservative MPs have suggested my letter was part of a 'weaponisation' of anti-
5 Brexit feeling as part of a strategy to do them electoral harm in the May local
elections. No such strategy exists to the best of my knowledge and there are no
Conservative councillors in my constituency, nor have there been for many years. I
suspect some people are seeking to find excuses for predicted losses and have
sought to use my letter as part of their rationalisation sadly.

10 That said, the letter that was received by the anonymous constituent should never
have been sent. I have managed to track back what has happened, with some
difficulty. My constituency office often hosts a range of work experience, interns and
volunteers. They range in their views and their interests.

On this occasion, it appears an over-enthusiastic volunteer printed an early draft
15 copy of a letter designed to go out to survey views of certain constituents. That
version was not signed off by me. It should not have gone out and was inadequately
supervised by my staff and, ultimately, me for which I apologise and fully expect to
cover all costs involved.

In answer to your specific queries:

20 120;

Human error, as outlined above; and

The wording used should never have been printed or distributed.

I hope this letter clarifies the unfortunate circumstances. Please let me know if you have any further questions or require any information from me.

7 March 2018

5 **4. Letter from the Commissioner to Mr Neil Coyle MP, 20 March 2018**

Thank you for your letter of 7 March 2018. I am sorry it has taken a little longer than usual to reply. The information you have provided is helpful.

Decision

10 When investigating allegations of misuse of House-provided stationery, I would usually seek the advice of the House authorities about the advice they would have given had the Member approached them before the letters were sent. However, I see no benefit in delaying matters on this occasion. I agree with you that the House-provided stationery should not have been used for the mailshot of 12 February 2018, which was very clearly sent in "*connection with work for or at the behest of a*

15 *political party*".

I appreciate that over-enthusiasm on the part of a volunteer and lack of supervision were contributory factors but, as you have already acknowledged, in such circumstances, the Member is nonetheless accountable for the breach of the rules. I am grateful to you for your prompt acknowledgement and unequivocal apology for

20 this.

Next steps

Under Standing Order No 150 I may conclude an inquiry without making a referral to the Committee on Standards in certain circumstances, using the “rectification” procedure. I would be willing to use that procedure in this case.

5 You have already acknowledged the breach of the rules, apologised and offered to refund the House authorities for the cost of the misused stationery. The refund can be made either by electronic transfer or using the following details by sending a cheque payable to [details redacted] to my office. The refund (based on 120 single sheets of headed notepaper and 120 second-class postage paid envelopes) should be for the sum of £76.54.

10 As you will be aware, this is the second occasion on which you have found yourself in breach of the rules about the proper use of House-provided stationery. To help avoid another recurrence, I suggest you arrange for one or more of your staff to meet my Complaints Manager, [redacted], to go through the rules. She can be contacted on [redacted].

15 Assuming you are content to conclude this matter by way of the rectification procedure, I would write to Mr Scully to inform him of my decision and, in due course, notify the Committee on Standards of the outcome. The written evidence pack (enclosed) would be published on my webpages³ and your name removed from the list of current inquiries.

³ <http://www.parliament.uk/mps-lords-and-offices/standards-and-financial-interests/parliamentary-commissioner-for-standards/complaints-and-investigations/allegations-the-commissioner-has-rectified/>

The content of my letter to Mr Scully is, of course, a matter for me but you are invited to comment on its factual accuracy. The draft text of that letter is shown as the first item after the summary in the enclosed evidence pack. I would be pleased to have any comments you wish to make on the draft letter as soon as possible and no later than 30 March 2018.

Our correspondence continues to be protected by parliamentary privilege. Until I send you and Mr Scully letters concluding this inquiry, this matter should remain confidential.

20 March 2018

10 **5. Letter from Mr Neil Coyle MP to the Commissioner, 9 April 2018**

Apologies for the delayed reply to your letter.

I completely accept the outcome of your inquiry and will settle the £76.54 but have no cheque book. You asked that I make a payment payable to [details redacted]. but my bank no longer issues cheque books and I am concerned that I need to make the payment as soon as possible.

I can make a payment online or can bring a payment to your office if this would help settle the matter?⁴

Apologies again for the delayed reply.

⁴ Arrangements made for electronic transfer

9 April 2018