

# Mr Adam Price MP: Resolution Letter

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## Letter to Dr Alan Williams from the Commissioner, 29 October 2008

I am writing to let you know the outcome of my consideration of the complaint you made via Mr Speaker's office on 27 June against Mr Adam Price MP about his use of House of Commons stationery and postage for communications he sent out inviting constituents to public meetings about the potential closure of local post offices.

I have carefully considered your complaint, consulting Mr Price and the House authorities.

My conclusion is that Mr Price was in breach of the rules of the House of Commons in sending these invitations using House of Commons provided notepaper and House of Commons pre-paid envelopes, given that this allowance is intended to be used to reply to constituents who have first contacted their Member of Parliament. Nor would it have been acceptable under the rules for Mr Price to have paid for these communications from his Communications Allowance, which allows Members to communicate proactively with their constituents, because of the party political content of the letters.

Mr Price has accepted the basis of the complaint unreservedly, and he has apologised for the errors made, which were not intentional on his part. He had not conceived the meetings and the associated invitations as party political in nature, but he recognises that the language used in the invitation letter, which he had not seen in advance of its dispatch, was not acceptable for a communication funded from Parliamentary allowances. Accordingly, he has met from his own resources the full cost of this dispatch. He is amending the references to his party's advice centre in all written communications to refer to it instead as his constituency office; and he has taken action within his office to prevent a recurrence, including plans to arrange tailored training for his staff on the use of the Communications Allowance.

Mr Price has, therefore, apologised unreservedly for the breach of the rules of the House in this case. He has met fully the costs involved<sup>1</sup> and he has taken action to avoid a recurrence. I believe that this is an appropriate response to this matter and, on that basis, I regard the complaint as closed. I will report the outcome to the House of Commons Committee on Standards and Privileges.

Thank you for raising this issue with me.

I am copying this letter to Mr Adam Price MP.

*29 October 2008*

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<sup>1</sup> £1,558.99

## Mr Adam Price MP: Written Evidence

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### **1. Letter to the Speaker, passed to the Commissioner from Dr Alan Williams, 27 June 2008**

Last week I received the letter enclosed from Adam Price MP inviting me to a public meeting concerning the closure of the local post office. The letter was unsolicited—I have never written to my MP about the post office nor any local or national issue. The letter is on House of Commons paper and in a House of Commons envelope sent Second Class with postmark 16.06.08 for the meeting on 19th June. It struck me immediately that this was an abuse of the free stationery and free postage provided to Members of Parliament. I wish then to record a formal complaint and ask for it to be investigated by the House authorities.

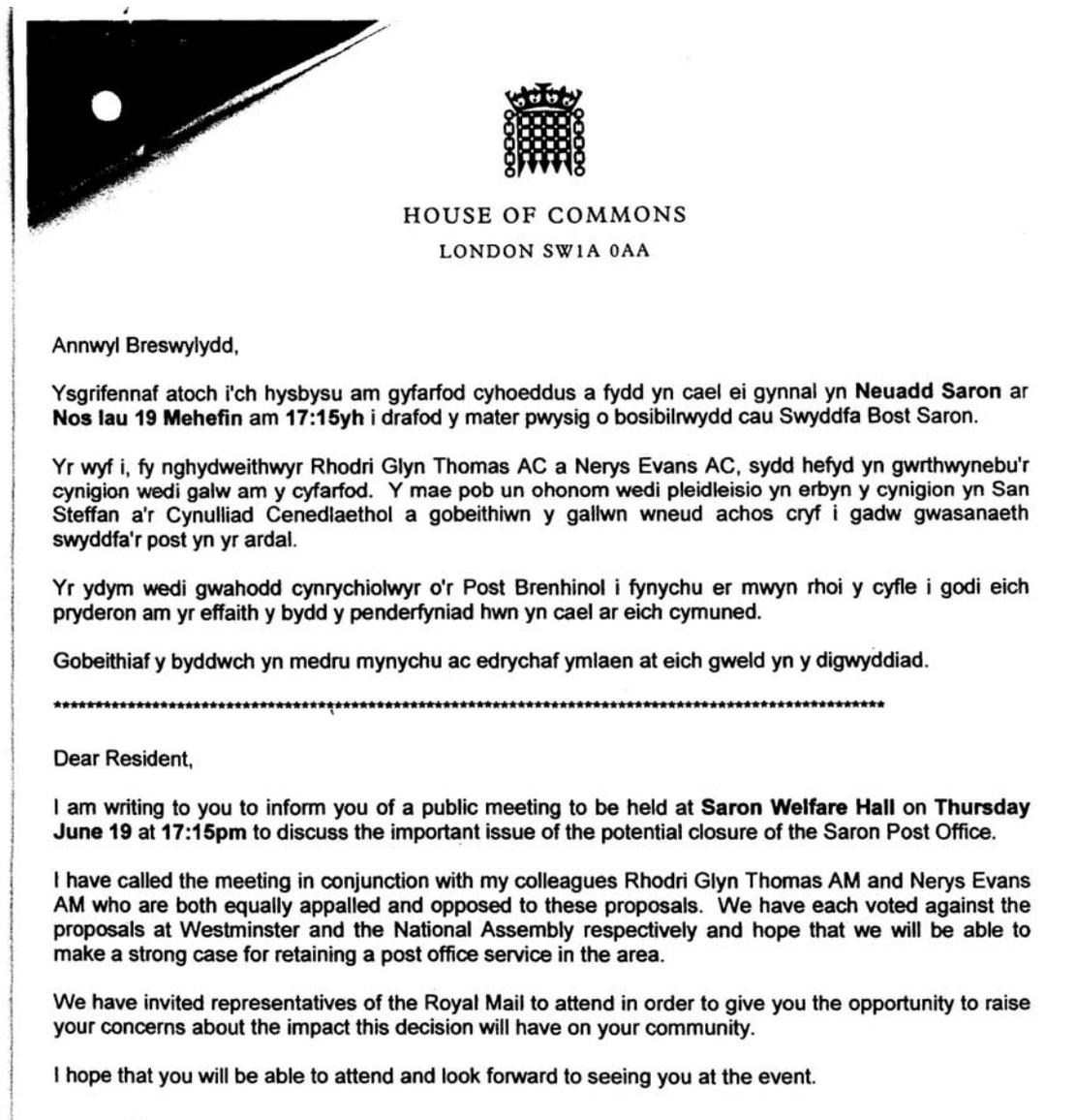
If you read carefully the Adam Price letter, you will find that the named colleagues—Rhodri Glyn Thomas AM and Nerys Evans AM are also colleagues in Plaid Cymru and the address at the bottom of the letter reveals that this is a public meeting called by Plaid Cymru. I enclose also an article from the Carmarthen Journal (18th June) describing a series of public meetings organised by Plaid Cymru about post office closures.

I have no objection whatever to convening public meetings on whatever is of immediate public concern—but a Member of Parliament should not use House of Commons stationery and the free postage system to publicise such meetings. It is my understanding that the entire local village (about 1,000 houses) was sent a copy of the letter enclosed concerning the meeting in Saron. Informal discussion leads me to suspect that the same is true for other public meetings listed in the article.

I would ask you to conduct a formal inquiry into my complaint, to make an assessment of the extent of the abuse and that you take appropriate action. I would be grateful if you would keep me informed of the progress of my complaint.

*27 June 2008*

## 2. Letter to Residents from Mr Adam Price MP



## 3. Letter to Mr Adam Price MP from the Commissioner, 16 July 2008

I would welcome your comments on a complaint I have received via Mr Speaker's office in respect of your alleged use of House of Commons pre-paid envelopes and stationery to invite several of your constituents to public meetings about the potential closure of local post offices.

I attach a copy of the complainant's letter, together with the information on which he relies. In essence, his complaint is that you used House of Commons pre-paid envelopes and House of Commons stationery to write to constituents for party political purposes and on matters on which they had not contacted you, in breach of the rules for the use of such stationery.

Paragraph 14 of the Code of Conduct for Members provides 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 relation to the use of House stationery are included in a booklet on the Communications Allowance and the use of House stationery published in April 2007. The provisions for House of Commons and pre-paid envelopes are set out in Appendix Four to that booklet.

The rules on the use of original House stationery are set out in paragraph 6 and 9 of Appendix Four as follows:

*“In the course of a financial year, a Member is entitled to be provided free of charge with original House stationery to a value of up to £7,000. This includes the cost of both the stationery itself and the cost of postage on pre-paid envelopes. Members may also purchase original House stationery (but not pre-paid envelopes) using their Incidental Expenses Provision.”*

*“If you wish to use original House of Commons stationery to send to people on issues on which they have not previously contacted you, you must purchase it from the suppliers. Alternatively, you may photocopy stationery which includes the crowned portcullis and the words ‘House of Commons’.”*

The use of pre-paid envelopes is set out in paragraph 10 as follows:

*“In broad terms, the pre-paid envelopes are designed to enable you to reply to letters received and to write to individuals and organisations in pursuit of your parliamentary business. They should not be used to send mail to people on issues on which they have not previously contacted you. You should refer to the guidance note on publications funded from the Communications Allowance (such as annual reports) for help with the costs of mail to inform your constituents about, for example, news about your work as a Member.”*

The rules for the use of the Communications Allowance are set out in a new Section 6 of the Green Book included in Appendix 1 of the April 2007 publication. Paragraph 6.14.1 gives examples of expenditure allowable under the Communications Allowance, including:

*“Targeted correspondence relating to issues of importance locally, including*  
*—Contact with local groupings*  
*—Circulars*  
*—Questionnaires or surveys*  
*— Petitions”*

Paragraph 6.15.1 gives examples of expenditure not allowed under the Communications Allowances, including:

*“Party political activities”*

In the light of the complaint and this summary of the rules, I would welcome your comments. In particular, it would be helpful to know:

1. the circumstances which led you to write your letter to the complainant inviting him to a meeting;
2. how many such letters you sent out using parliamentary notepaper and pre-paid envelopes announcing that meeting and any similar meetings;
3. whether you consider that you breached the rules in using pre-paid House of Commons envelopes for these communications;
4. the source of the crested House of Commons stationery you used for your letter, and whether you consider there was any breach of the rules in respect of the use of that stationery;
5. your view, with reasons, on whether it would have been permissible to have funded your communications from the Communications Allowance, or whether you accept the complainant's view that these were party political activities on behalf of your party.

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

I enclose a copy of a note setting out the procedure I follow in considering complaints. I have written to the complainant to let them know that I have accepted their complaint. If you would like a word about any of this, please get in touch with me at the House. I would be very grateful if it were possible to let me have a response within the next three weeks, although if you do need longer, please let me know.

*16 July 2008*

#### **4. Letter to the Commissioner from Mr Adam Price MP, 29 August 2008**

I am writing in response to your letter of the 16th July informing me of the complaint against me by Dr Alan Williams. In the first instance may I thank you for agreeing to meet me when I was able to provide you with some of the answers to the questions you raise which I am now able to confirm formally in writing.

May I say at the outset that I accept the basis of the complaint unreservedly, apologise for the errors made, for which, albeit some were made inadvertently, I take full responsibility and for which I have taken immediate steps to rectify. Equally importantly, I have also instituted changes in the management of my office which are designed to prevent any further reoccurrence. I am acutely conscious of the fact that this is the second occasion on which my actions have given rise to a complaint in relation to parliamentary communications. I am genuinely concerned about the damage done not just to my own reputation for integrity but to that of the House, and politics in general. This was never my intention, but this has, I fear, been the result.

The background to this case lies in Post Office Limited's announcement on the 3rd June 2008 of a six-week consultation period with regard to fourteen Post Offices proposed for closure in my constituency. Seeing as this represented a full third of the Post Offices in my constituency I felt that it was my responsibility as the local Member to attempt to gauge local opinion in as many as of the affected communities as possible. Time constraints and other factors prevented me from holding a public meeting in every case but I did attend 11 meetings in total by the end of the Consultation period on 14th July. Eight of these meetings were advertised via written invitation to households within the relevant catchment areas. A total of 4,161 households were affected by the proposals, including that of Dr Williams. We used pre-paid enveloped and House of Commons stationery to inform people of these meetings.

The events advertised were local public meetings organised and, in most cases, chaired by myself as the local Member of Parliament but also attended (with one exception) by a representative of the consumer watchdog (Postwatch) and in five of the meetings by a representative of Post Office Ltd. The format of the meeting would involve some introductory remarks by the chair followed by a brief presentation by P.O.L/Postwatch. The meeting would then be opened to the floor for comments/questions.

In every meeting the non-political nature of the meeting would be stressed by myself and/or other members of the panel. The purpose of the meeting was to respond to the specific proposals in relation to that locality rather than to discuss the merits or otherwise of Government policy. This did not prevent some participants wishing to make political points but the meetings did generally concentrate on pertinent arguments as to why the local Post Office should be offered a reprieve. Two of the meetings were attended by the local Labour Party Prospective Parliamentary Candidate [...] who distributed Labour Party literature in relation to the Post Office closure programme (this was the only overtly party political campaigning at any of the meetings) and spoke at one of the meetings, as did a number of Labour, Plaid Cymru and Independent councillors. The notes of the meetings were then written up by a member of my staff and used as a basis for my written submission to Post Office Ltd. in relation to the Post Office in question. We also held a number of face-to-face meetings with Post Office management to reinforce the concerns raised by my constituents.

It should be clear from the above that the meetings, and the associated invitation, were not conceived as party political in nature but as forming part of the legitimate work of a Member of Parliament in seeking to represent his constituents. My office manager, [...], spoke to [...] of the Department of Resources on June 24th who confirmed to her that it was legitimate to write to constituents in areas affected by a post office closure to inform them of a public meeting. This was done using pre-paid House of Commons envelopes. I accept that there is an argument this should have been done using the Communications Allowance though this was not made clear to us when we asked about permissibility. I would appreciate your guidance in this matter and have asked my staff to organise a meeting with Department of Resources to clarify the rules for future reference.

The substance of the complaint is, regrettably, borne out by the injudicious use of language in the invitation letter and the reference to other elected Plaid Cymru politicians.

I have to confess, that due to the time constraints involved in the organisation of such a large number of public meetings at such short notice and the high-trust management style operated within my office, the text of these letters was only brought to my attention when I received the complaint. To use parliamentary resources to gauge local feeling in relation to a particular local issue is I feel legitimate but this letter went much further in making clear my own opposition to the plans. This is not an acceptable use of parliamentary resources and I concur entirely with the complainant in that regard. The reference to the local Plaid Cymru Assembly members may have been excused by the fact that they offered to chair meetings in the event that parliamentary business were to prevent me from being present (as it happens

I succeeded in attending all but one meeting, in which a local councillor deputised for me. The reference to their own position on the matter was nevertheless unnecessary and could reasonably give rise to the impression that the letter was seeking to gain political advantage. After my previous experience with the use of the Communications Allowance, it is fair to say that my heart sank when I read the text of the letter. It should not and would not have gone out in this form if I had seen it in advance. For that I must take full responsibility.

In response to the complaint I have taken the following immediate action:

- i. I have informed all staff that any items of expenditure involving the Communications Allowance, including the proposed text of any letter or circular, and any other items of expenditure over £250 must be personally approved in advance by myself.
- ii. References to the Plaid Cymru Advice Centre on all written communication should be amended to Constituency Office.
- iii. I have undertaken, without prejudice, to repay the costs incurred through the mailing immediately. This involved 18 boxes of House of Commons letterheads, 12 boxes of second-class pre-paid envelopes, 6 boxes of first-class envelopes. The cost of 5 boxes of envelope labels will also be reimbursed by myself (approximately £80.00). The House of Commons authorities have estimated the full cost to be £1558.99 (incl. VAT) and I have arranged to repay this sum in total this afternoon.
- iv. I will convene an away-day for my staff in September in which we will attempt to identify the lessons learned from this experience. Any further changes in procedure will be implemented by the end of the Summer recess and I will happily inform you of these if you deem it useful.
- v. As already mentioned, we have asked the Department of Resources for some tailored training on the use of the Communications Allowance.

I hope this answers most of the questions you raised with me. Please do not hesitate to contact me if you require anything further.

*29 August 2008*

## **5. Letter to the Director of Operations, Department of Resources from the Commissioner, 11 September 2008**

I would welcome your advice on a complaint against Mr Adam Price about his use of Parliamentary funded stationery and postage to invite constituents to meetings on proposed Post Office closures in their area.

I attach [relevant material].

As you will see, Mr Price accepts that he should not have used stationery and pre-paid envelopes from his provided allowance for these communications. I am copying this letter to the Head of Client Services and would be grateful if she could confirm that that is the position. Mr Price has arranged to repay the full sum of the cost of this mailing, which he says the House authorities have estimated to be £1558.99. Again I would be grateful if the Facilities Department could confirm that this estimate is correct and that the payment has been made.

Mr Price has suggested that, had the invitation been differently worded, it would have been legitimate to use notepaper and postage met from his Communications Allowance. I would be very grateful if you could let me have your comments on this suggestion and for confirmation that the terms of the letter as sent would not have been appropriate for funding from the Communications Allowance. I would welcome any other points you or the Facilities Department would wish to make.

I am copying this letter to the Head of Client Services in the Facilities Department and would welcome her views on the issues I have identified and, indeed, on any other matters which might be helpful in resolving this complaint.

*11 September 2008*

## **6. Letter to the Commissioner from the Accommodation Manager, Department of Facilities, 25 September 2008**

[..] is currently away from the office, on annual leave, before he left, [...] asked me to respond to you on his behalf concerning Mr Adam Price MP (in copy correspondence to [Director of Operations] dated 11 September sent to [...] on 12 September). The issue concerned a payment for stationery.

I can confirm that an invoice was sent from the Department of Facilities finance directorate, to Mr Price, for the sum of £1558.99 on 28 July 2008; to recoup the cost of the stationery. The Department of Resources have confirmed that Mr Price paid this amount by credit card on 28 July settle an invoice which relates to stationery.

I can also confirm that the Head of Client Relations has nothing further to add to the comments which Mr Price himself made accepting the situation.

*25 September 2008*

## **7. Letter to the Commissioner from the Director of Operations, Department of Resources, 14 October 2008**

Thank you for your letter of 11 September 2008 in which you ask for comments about the content of a letter sent by Mr Price to his constituents concerning Post Office closures. I apologise for the delay in responding.

Mr Price has already accepted that by using House of Commons stationery and prepaid envelopes for an unsolicited mailing he has breached the relevant House rules. He has also accepted that the content of his mailing falls outside of the rules of the Communications Allowance (CA). You have asked if I will confirm that the content of the letter does indeed fall outside of the CA rules and, if it had been redrafted, whether it could have been an acceptable use of the allowance.

The question of the use of House stationery is, of course, for the Facilities Department to determine. The question as to whether CA could be used instead would appear to turn on the following factors:—

- the letter appears to be written in conjunction with other Plaid Cymru elected representatives;
- the contact address for this particular piece of correspondence is shown as the 'Plaid Cymru Advice Centre' which gives the appearance of it being organised by the Party;
- there appear to have been a series of meetings organised by Plaid Cymru on the subject of Post Office closures (news article); and
- the correspondence was unsolicited.

Taken individually, the factors above may not have prevented the costs from being met by the CA. Advertising consultation meetings is allowable under the rules of the CA (invariably by unsolicited communication); organising such a meeting in conjunction with other elected representatives is permissible and offering a contact address is also within the rules. However, in this case I would suggest that taken as a whole the letter gives the distinct impression of a party political communication.

The address at the bottom of the letter is the same as Mr Price's constituency office, but I would contend that using the title of Plaid Cymru Advice Centre links the letter specifically to the Party and not necessarily to the role of the Member of Parliament.

This is a matter of judgement, and one could argue to the contrary. It follows, though, that if the invitation letter had been worded differently the cost could legitimately have been met from the CA. Consultation meetings of the sort described by Mr Price in his letter of 29 August 2008, provided they are not organised in a partisan fashion, are an acceptable use of the CA.

It would seem that the clear intention of Mr Price was to organise a non-partisan event. It is, perhaps, regrettable that the execution of this has inadvertently given a different impression. I personally welcome his commitment to approach the Department for tailored training on the use of the CA. We stand ready to provide whatever assistance we can.

I hope this covers the points you raised but should you have any further questions please do not hesitate to contact me.

*14 October 2008*

## **8. Letter to Mr Adam Price MP from the Commissioner, 21 October 2008**

I am writing to let you have copies of the responses I received from the Facilities Department and the Department of Resources about this complaint in respect of your use of House of Commons stationery and postage for the invitations you sent to constituents for your meetings on post office closures; and to set out the options for resolving this matter.

You wrote to me on 29 August responding to this complaint and, when I wrote to you on 11 September, I said I was consulting the House authorities. I have now received their responses. I attach a copy of a letter of 25 September from the Accommodation Manager in the Facilities Department confirming that you have met the cost of the stationery used for this correspondence - £1558.99. I attach also a copy of a letter of 14 October from the Director of Operations in the Department of Resources addressing whether these communications could have been funded from the Communications Allowance if the content had been redrafted.

I need now to consider the way forward. I believe you have accepted that you were in breach of the rules of the House of Commons in sending these invitations using House of Commons provided notepaper and House of Commons pre-paid envelopes given that this allowance is intended to be used to reply to constituents who have first contacted their Member of Parliament. Nor would it have been acceptable under the rules for you to have paid for these communications from your Communications Allowance, which allows Members to communicate proactively with their constituents, because of the party political content of the letters.

You have accepted the basis of the complaint unreservedly, and have apologised for the errors made which were not intentional on your part. You had not conceived the meetings and the associated invitations as party political in nature, but recognise that the language used in the invitation letter, which you had not seen in advance of its dispatch, was not acceptable for a communication funded from Parliamentary allowances. Accordingly, you have met from your own resources the full cost of this dispatch. You are amending the references to your party's advice centre in all written communications to refer to it instead as your constituency office; and you have taken action within your office to prevent a recurrence, including an initiative to arrange training for your staff on the use of the Communications Allowance.

In the light of your response – if I have summarised it correctly – and taking account of the nature of your breach of the rules, it is open to me to decide that the matter can properly be resolved through the use of the rectification procedure. This would allow me to resolve the complaint informally, writing to the complainant to let them know your response and the actions you have taken, as summarised in the previous two paragraphs, and, on that basis, to close the complaint. I would report the outcome informally to the Committee on Standards and Privileges.

Before deciding whether I should resolve this complaint in this way, or whether it ought to be reported formally to the Committee by way of a Memorandum, which the Committee would consider and publish together with their Report on the complaint, it would be helpful to know whether you would be content for me to proceed on this basis and if you could confirm my understanding of the position as summarised in the preceding paragraphs.

It would be most helpful if you could let me have a response within the next week or so.

*21 October 2008*

## **9. Letter to the Commissioner from Mr Adam Price MP, 28 October 2008**

Thank you for your letter of 21 October 2008. I can confirm that I am happy for you to proceed in the way you suggest.

Once again, I do apologise for adding unnecessarily to your workload in this way. I sincerely hope that a further reprimand will not prove necessary.

*28 October 2008*