

# Independent Expert Panel

Chair, Rt Hon Sir Stephen Irwin

Rt Hon Sir Lindsay Hoyle MP

Speaker

House of Commons

25 March 2024

Mr Speaker,

As you will be aware, the Independent Expert Panel (IEP) published its report on the [Appeal by Scott Benton on Tuesday 20 February](#). In the preceding 24 hours there were three publications that suggested that there had been one or more unauthorised disclosures of information relating to the contents of the report and its publication. I therefore authorised the secretariat to conduct a leak inquiry. This letter summarises the findings of that inquiry. A copy of this letter will be sent to the Committee on Standards and Scott Benton MP and published on the IEP's website.

The IEP's report was published at 11am on Tuesday 20 February. Mr Benton was informed of the publication date on Friday 16 February. A small number of House staff involved in the publication of the report were also informed the week before publication. On the evening of Monday 19 February, Politico contacted the media office asking for confirmation that the report on Scott Benton's appeal would be published tomorrow. The media office did not confirm as the time of publication is confidential as are the contents of the report. On Tuesday morning, Politico reported that they expected that the report would be published that day, stating they had been informed by "Senior Tory sources". That same morning, at 9.28 am, Aubrey Allegretti, a journalist at The Times tweeted that he had been told that the report on the appeal would be published that day and it would dismiss Mr Benton's appeal. At 10am that morning, an embargoed copy of the report was sent to Mr Benton and House of Commons officials. At 10.45am, the Guido Fawkes blog posted a story headlined 'Scott Benton loses appeal' and included two paragraphs from the report, before it had been published. The report had been formally laid before the House at 10.30 am.

The secretariat liaised with the Parliamentary Digital Service (PDS) to ascertain whether the report could have been accessed online before 11am given the report was uploaded to the

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# Independent Expert Panel

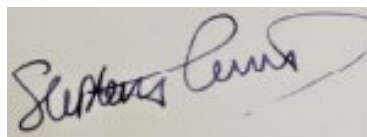
Chair, Rt Hon Sir Stephen Irwin

website prior to publication in the normal way. PDS analysis suggests, with a high degree of confidence, that the report was accessed for the first time at 22 seconds past 11 am. Additionally, the secretariat wrote to all House of Commons staff and Members who had access to information about the publication date or decision in the report as well as those who received an embargo copy of the report. The secretariat asked if any information had been shared and if so, with whom. Nobody responded that they had shared any information with journalists or anyone without a business need to know the information. During this process, an email sent from the secretariat to Mr Benton's email address was published on the Guido Fawkes blog under the caption 'LEAK OF PARLIAMENT'S 'LEAK INVESTIGATION' INTO LEAKED REPORT'.

The IEP takes leaks very seriously. Leaks risk undermining the integrity of, and eroding trust in, the standards system that the House has put in place. They can also harm the welfare of those involved in cases. However, none of these leaks were capable of compromising the fairness of the outcome of Mr Benton's appeal against the Committee on Standards' finding that he had breached the Code of Conduct and the corresponding sanction of 35 days suspension, which he is currently serving. The leaks occurred significantly after the sub-panel had concluded its consideration and therefore could not have influenced it. The most serious leak, of contents of the report, only occurred after embargos had been sent and after the report had been laid.

I have written to you on this matter, in the interest of transparency in the work of the Panel.

Yours Sincerely,



**Rt Hon Sir Stephen Irwin**

**Chair, Independent Expert Panel**

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