

Neil Hamilton AM: I write in support of the Remuneration Board's proposal to amend the current Determination to enable Members whose main home is outside Wales to be reimbursed the cost of overnight accommodation necessarily incurred on Assembly business in Cardiff.

Wales is part of the United Kingdom and UK law provides no main-residence-within Wales test as a condition of election to the Senedd.

The eligibility map currently assumes that all AMs' have their main home in Wales and this has been the case hitherto. I do not own any land or buildings. For family and other reasons, my main home for the last twelve years has been 30 miles east of the Severn Bridge, in a house owned by my wife.

I do intend to acquire a residence (perhaps more than one) in Wales as soon as practical but this (or these) would not be my main home and I could not describe it (them) as such, even though I understand that the Board applies no objective test of a 'main home'. You kindly warned me that my request would probably require public consultation. However, I prefer to be open and transparent, even at the expense of triggering some partisan political controversy.

I am aware that some people have tried, for political reasons, to organise a lobby against the proposed change. Sadly, this includes people with axes to grind inside my own party. I could easily counteract this by organising a lobby of my own. I have not done so, on the basis that the Board will decide the issue in the public interest on the weight of the arguments and not a preponderance on one side or the other in the relatively small numbers likely to respond in writing.

Parliament decided, in the public interest, that those with a main home in England are not disqualified from election to the Senedd and the electors of Mid & West Wales have freely invested me with that trust. My home address appeared on the ballot paper and was widely publicised during the election campaign.

The Board has responsibility for putting in place financial resources to enable all AMs to carry out their work as elected representatives. This includes an allowance for overnight accommodation in Cardiff where reasonably necessary for that work.

Political arguments about whether the law should permit AMs to have their main home outside Wales are irrelevant to this Consultation. In my opinion, the public interest is served by giving the Welsh people a wider choice of candidate than if those with a main home in England were excluded.

The location of my main home is totally irrelevant to my commitment to Wales, the Assembly and my constituents. I willingly accept being away from home for most of the week in order to do my job to the best of my ability. It makes no difference to a constituent in Porthmadog whether I live in Pembroke, Brecon, Welshpool or junction 17 on the M4, which is five minutes drive from my home. It is as easy for me to represent Mid & West Wales from Hullavington as from

Cardiff, where I spend an average of four days a week. This is no hardship to me as I am greatly enjoying my return to Wales and working in the Senedd.

My personal circumstances are unlikely to be replicated very often and AMs are always likely to have their main home in Wales at the time of their election. I have been obliged to spend my working life outside Wales, although my home has never been more than an hour or so from the Border. But I feel 100% Welsh and am giving my all to Wales and the Senedd. I am in my element. Being an AM is no mere badge of convenience for me, as I hope any objective observer of my contribution to political life inside and outside the Senedd would agree.

My main home is 61 miles from Cardiff, exactly the same distance as Ammanford, where I grew up and went to school within my region of Mid & West Wales. That is why I asked the Board to use its exceptional powers to designate my main home for eligibility purposes as though it were within Mid & West Wales.

Despite being 61 miles from Cardiff, Hullavington's proximity to an M4 junction means that the journey usually takes only an hour. However, at peak times, congestion can stretch this to two hours or more and regular overnight stays in Cardiff are a practical necessity.

I take my duties to the Assembly extremely seriously. As the record shows, I have missed no sittings and participate in the proceedings frequently, with vigour. Outside of sittings, I have many meetings in Cardiff and elsewhere both in the day and in the evenings. As UKIP Group Leader and a policy spokesman, I also have wider responsibilities than most AMs. Unlike other opposition party leaders, I have also chosen to sit on Assembly Committees, viz. the Public Accounts Committee and the Culture, Welsh Language and Communications Committee. This means that I am in Cardiff an average of four days a week. I spend other days in my region and elsewhere in Wales. It is not practical for me to carry out my duties conscientiously without overnight stays in Cardiff. It makes little sense for me to travel home at the end of a busy day and rise again at 0600 to ensure that I can get to Cardiff Bay by 0900.

The rationale of funding overnight accommodation in Cardiff on Assembly business is to reduce unnecessary wear and tear from excessive travelling and the associated unproductive use of AMs' time. It is reasonable and in the public interest for this to be funded modestly at the public expense.

As the maximum which can be claimed for overnight accommodation is £8820, the potential cost to the taxpayer is very small. It would be unreasonable to penalise AMs whose main home is some distance away by imposing significant cost upon them for carrying out their duties in Cardiff. We moved to Hullavington in 2004 because our work required us to be based somewhere easily accessible to London and other parts of the UK. AMs are elected for five years,

with no certainty of re-election. Given this inherent uncertainty, it is not reasonable to compel an AM to relocate his main home.

It makes no difference to my work in Cardiff that I occasionally sleep in Hullavington. Nor does it adversely affect my work in my region. Whilst I remain an AM, I do not expect to see very much of my main home.

Being an AM is much more than just a job and I have willingly subordinated the rest of my life and interests to it. I am totally committed to doing the best job I can in the interests of the people of Wales. It is not unreasonable for me to be given the tools to do that job as effectively as possible.