

Agreed summary of oral submission – Hon Peter Walsh MP

Agreed summary of oral submission to the Victorian Independent Remuneration Tribunal forthcoming Members of Parliament (Victoria) salaries and allowances Determination 2023 and review of the Members of Parliament (Victoria) Guidelines

The Hon. Peter Walsh
9 March 2023

Parliamentary Accommodation Sitting Allowance

- The Parliamentary Accommodation Sitting Allowance (PASA) supports regional Members of Parliament (MPs) to represent their constituents at Parliament on sitting days. MPs, party leaders and Shadow Ministers also undertake other Melbourne-based public duties on non-sitting days.
- The PASA enables regional MPs to access residential accommodation in Melbourne, which has advantages over short-stay commercial accommodation. These include:
 - Providing a stable base in Melbourne for MPs, particularly those with young families or other caring responsibilities. For example, MPs with young children are better able to provide care for their young families and partners from residential accommodation (as opposed to from short-stay accommodation).
 - Reducing claims from MPs for short-stay accommodation and incidentals, such as meals and laundry.
 - Being able to arrive in Melbourne the night before or stay the night after long days in Melbourne and not being forced to travel long distances early in the morning or late at night following completion of their public duties and the concomitant risk of fatigue.
- The PASA is well-understood, and is simple and easy to administer, while potential alternatives (such as the travel allowance) are more complex and require MPs to submit claims for reimbursement and for claims to be assessed and processed by parliamentary staff.

- Issues that may need to be considered in replacing the PASA with the travel allowance include the different eligibility criteria for these allowances. For example, the PASA is available for ‘public duties’ while the travel allowance has different distance criteria for ‘electorate business’ and ‘other business’ (80 kilometres and 28 kilometres respectively).
- Reforms that limit the ability of regional MPs to obtain suitable accommodation in Melbourne may:
 - affect their ability to effectively represent their electorates — for example, by deterring them from undertaking some public duties in Melbourne
 - deter prospective candidates from standing for Parliament — for example, regional MPs with caring responsibilities for young children.

Transport/travel allowances

- There are limited flight connections between regional Victoria and Melbourne, which means that most regional MPs are required to drive to and from their electorates for parliamentary sitting weeks and other Melbourne-based public duties.
- Driver fatigue may be an issue in certain circumstances — for example, driving long distances after extended parliamentary sitting days and/or extended travel times due to congestion.
- Extended travel times between regional electorates and Melbourne may also reduce the ability of regional MPs to undertake public duties.
- The Tribunal could consider reforms to travel or transport allowances — for example, regional MPs were previously able to employ a driver to drive their electorate car for long distance travel, which may be worth considering, with appropriate safeguards.

Role and functions of an MP

- MPs are experiencing a significant increase in communications from constituents via text message, email and social media platforms in addition to regular mail, phone calls and in-person visits.
- The quota for each electoral district has increased to approximately 50,000 constituents. In addition, there are significant increases in the size of some

electorates due to the lack of population growth in those regions between redistributions and substantial changes in some electorate boundaries after a redistribution.

- MPs and electorate offices experienced a significant increase in workload while COVID-19 restrictions were in place, as constituents sought advice and support on the COVID-19 restrictions and other support or advisory services may have been unavailable or difficult to access due to them being closed.
- The staff in electorate offices increased from 2.0 FTE following the 2014 redistribution to 2.5 FTE to handle the increased numbers of constituents in electorates but hasn't increased with the 2022 redistribution. This is despite another substantial increase in the number of constituents in electorates and the subsequent increase in workload.
- Online and remote working because of COVID restrictions created challenges for MPs and electorate offices, including to ensure accurate and timely responses to issues raised by constituents and to establish effective working relationships that support MPs to undertake their public duties.

MP salaries and allowances

- Adjustments to MP salaries and allowances should take account of the Government's wages policy.