



House of Commons  
Committee on Standards

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**Greg Hands**

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**Third Report of Session 2019–21**

*Report, together with formal minutes relating  
to the report*

*Ordered by the House of Commons  
to be printed 4 May 2020*

## Committee on Standards

The Committee on Standards is appointed by the House of Commons to oversee the work of the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards; to examine the arrangements proposed by the Commissioner for the compilation, maintenance and accessibility of the Register of Members' Financial Interests and any other registers of interest established by the House; to review from time to time the form and content of those registers; to consider any specific complaints made in relation to the registering or declaring of interests referred to it by the Commissioner; to consider any matter relating to the conduct of Members, including specific complaints in relation to alleged breaches in the Code of Conduct which have been drawn to the Committee's attention by the Commissioner; and to recommend any modifications to the Code of Conduct as may from time to time appear to be necessary.

### Current membership

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### Powers

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### **Committee staff**

The current staff of the Committee are James Camp (Committee Assistant), Dr Robin James (Clerk), Maev Mac Coille (Media Officer), Stuart Ramsay (Second Clerk), Laura-Jane Tiley (Second Clerk).

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# Report

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1. This Report arises from a complaint that Rt Hon Greg Hands MP breached the rules for the use of stationery and post-paid envelopes provided by the House of Commons, and in so doing was in breach of the Code of Conduct for Members of Parliament.

## The Commissioner's investigation

2. The Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards has submitted to us a memorandum setting out the background to this case and her findings. The memorandum is published as Appendix 1 to our Report.<sup>1</sup> Full details of the case are given in the memorandum; in the paragraphs that follow we summarise these.

3. In April 2019 Mr Hands sent a letter to some of his constituents, using House of Commons stationery and post-paid envelopes. The letter began, "I am writing to provide you with an update on the work I have been doing, as your local Member of Parliament, and some of the issues I feel are vitally important to securing a better future for Chelsea & Fulham."<sup>2</sup> Mr Hands then proceeded to deal with the following topics: Charing Cross Hospital; Heathrow expansion; crime and policing; local schools; and Transport for London's proposed bus cuts.<sup>3</sup>

4. The House's Rules on the use of House-provided stationery and post-paid envelopes include the following:

House-provided stationery and pre-paid envelopes are provided only for the performance of a Member's Parliamentary functions. In particular, this excludes using stationery or postage:

For newsletters (including annual reports or general updates to constituents on a range of issues); [ ... ]

Examples of the proper use of stationery and pre-paid envelopes include:

[ ... ]

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).<sup>4</sup>

5. The House's Director of Customer Experience and Service Delivery informed the Commissioner that, if he had been consulted by Mr Hands, he would have advised him that his letter fell outside the rules, on the grounds that these exclude using stationery or postage for "general updates to constituents on a range of issues".<sup>5</sup>

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1 Written evidence accompanying the Commissioner's memorandum is published on the Committee's website.

2 PCS memorandum, paras 10, 25

3 PCS memorandum, para 24

4 PCS memorandum, para 3

5 PCS memorandum, para 10

6. Mr Hands, in his initial response to the Commissioner in June 2019, stated that his letter had been sent in response to several different petitions he had been running. The five topics had either been the subject of local petitions or “opt in sign in” sheets at public meetings. He stated that:

The purpose of the mailing was to combine responses to all these petitioners and sign-in sheets and produce one letter on all the five issues, rather than have to send out separate letters to each of the five categories, which would likely have led to a greater volume of letters and envelopes overall. [ ... ]<sup>6</sup>

7. Mr Hands stated, in response to queries from the Commissioner, that he was aware of the rules relating to parliamentary stationery, he did not take advice from House authorities on this occasion, the headed paper and envelopes were House-provided stationery, and the number of letters distributed was just under 7,000. He argued that:

[ ... ] the mailing in question was in response to local issues which were covered by my petitions and/or to keep residents who attended my public meetings abreast of the issues. None of the content was political, no party or parties featured, and no candidates or any elections. In my view, this was an entirely appropriate use of resources in keeping residents informed on issues that they had raised with me.<sup>7</sup>

8. The Commissioner wrote to Mr Hands in September 2019 to inform him that she considered the mailing in question to be a breach of the rules because its content “could reasonably be viewed as a general update or a newsletter”. She further informed him that she considered the breach to be “at the less serious end of the spectrum” and invited him to agree to resolution of this inquiry by way of the rectification process available under Standing Order No. 150. That process would require an apology, an acknowledgement that the relevant rule had been breached, and reimbursement to the House of the cost of the mailing, subsequently assessed by the Commissioner to be £4,865.55.<sup>8</sup>

9. In subsequent exchanges with the Commissioner, Mr Hands expressed willingness to use the rectification procedure, but also made clear that he disagreed with the Commissioner’s decision, and considered that the relevant rule relating to stationery was “bizarre and extremely cost ineffective”, because, he claimed, complying with the rule would have led to his sending a larger number of letters to constituents dealing with each of the five topics separately, thereby increasing the cost to the public purse.<sup>9</sup>

10. The Commissioner’s response was that the relevant rule, excluding “general updates to constituents on a range of issues”, was clear and that in her judgement Mr Hands had breached that rule. She advised him that if he wished to seek a change in the rules, he should make representations to the appropriate body within the House, the Administration Committee. She repeated her offer to use the rectification procedure to deal with the breach, if Mr Hands was willing to accept the attached conditions (apology, acknowledgement of breach, and reimbursement).<sup>10</sup>

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6 WE 3 (dated 21 June 2019)

7 WE 3

8 PCS memorandum, paras 11, 12 and 16; WE 11

9 WE 12 (dated 18 September 2019)

10 WE 13 (dated 1 October 2019)



11. On 14 October 2019 Mr Hands wrote to the Commissioner in the following terms:

[ ... ] To be clear, I acknowledge that I was in breach of the rules, and I apologise for the breach. As mentioned in my previous letter, I note your comment that the breach was “at the less serious end of the spectrum”, and I have ensured that my office and I are fully aware of the latest rules for the use of stationery and postage-paid envelopes by the House of Commons.

Thank you for providing me with the details of the Clerk of the Administration Committee, [name redacted], whom I shall be contacting to point out what I believe to be a flaw in the rules.

I would be grateful if you would provide me with details of the repayment methods for the stationery that I used for the mailout in question.<sup>11</sup>

12. In further correspondence between Mr Hands and the Commissioner’s office, on 31 October 2019 he agreed the sum to be repaid and the means by which the payment should be made.<sup>12</sup> However, on 4 November Mr Hands wrote to the Commissioner to say that he did not wish to proceed with the rectification process. He stated that:

Upon further reflection of the evidence pack that you have provided, and before your enquiry is concluded, I wish to appear before the Committee on Standards to discuss what I perceive to be the lack of cost efficiency of the present rules.<sup>13</sup>

13. The “evidence pack” referred to in Mr Hands’ letter was the collection of written evidence in the case, now published on our website as an annex to the Commissioner’s memorandum. The Commissioner had invited Mr Hands to comment on the factual accuracy of the pack, which is her routine practice in the final stages of her consideration of a case. Had Mr Hands accepted the rectification procedure, the evidence would have been published on the Commissioner’s website shortly afterwards.

14. The Commissioner replied to Mr Hands the next day, noting that he had previously indicated that he would use the rectification procedure, and stating that she was “surprised” by his wish to “appear before the Committee on Standards”. She asked him to clarify the basis on which he wished to appear, noting that any discussion of the “lack of cost efficiency” of the present rules would be a matter for the Administration Committee to consider and “need not impede the resolution of this inquiry”.<sup>14</sup>

15. Mr Hands responded, briefly, on 21 November 2019, stating that “I am afraid that, upon reflection, I would prefer to go before the Committee on Standards in order to present my case in person”.<sup>15</sup>

16. The Commissioner was therefore unable to conclude the case before the general election of December 2019 using the rectification procedure. The Committee was

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11 WE 14

12 PCS memorandum, para 34

13 WE 18

14 WE 19

15 WE 20

reappointed in the new Parliament on 2 March 2020. The Commissioner had submitted her memorandum to the Clerk of the Committee on 5 February, and this was discussed by the Committee at its meeting on 10 March.

17. In her memorandum, the Commissioner comments on Mr Hands' decision to change his mind about using the rectification procedure. She states that:

Given that Mr Hands has not questioned my interpretation of the current rules, and his earlier commitment to raise his concerns about the rules with the Administration Committee, I was surprised by his decision to withdraw his acknowledgement of a breach and to ask to appear before the Standards Committee. Whilst this course of action [was] open to him, it has extended the duration of this inquiry significantly. Had the rectification process concluded, this matter could have been drawn to a close, and an outcome published, before the end of the last Parliament. Unnecessarily extending inquiries regarding conduct in public office is not in the wider public interest and is unlikely to inspire public confidence that Parliament holds itself open to rigorous and expeditious scrutiny.

It is for the Standards Committee to decide whether Mr Hands has acted appropriately in deciding to appear before the Committee to argue a point regarding a rule that he knows to be outside the gift of the Committee to amend; especially given that Mr Hands had already accepted and acknowledged his breach.<sup>16</sup>

### Mr Hands' representations to the Committee

18. On receiving the Commissioner's memorandum, we contacted Mr Hands to ask if he wished to submit written evidence to us or (as he had indicated to the Commissioner) request to submit oral evidence. In response Mr Hands sent us a letter, dated 12 March 2020, which we publish as Appendix 2 to this Report. He also indicated that he did not seek to give oral evidence.<sup>17</sup>

19. In his letter Mr Hands states that he does not dispute the findings of fact in the inquiry. He argues that:

The mailing was not political. It did not mention any political party, any other public office holder (other than the Health Secretary) or any election, present or future.<sup>18</sup>

20. Mr Hands further argues that:

I believe there to be a major flaw within the rules on Members' use of parliamentary stationery.

[ ... ] According to these rules, it seems that a constituent or constituents who raise one or more issues, cannot then receive a response which includes

16 PCS memorandum, paras 36–37

17 Email communication from Mr Hands' office, 10 March 2020

18 Appendix 2

other issues. This might make sense in theory, but in practice it can become more expensive to address multiple issues separately, thereby negating the point of the rules in the first place, namely to protect public funds.

[ ... ] Constituents wrote to me about each of the five issues or signed one or more of the public petitions. For convenience to my staff, and to save public money, rather than produce five separate mailings in response to each issue or petition, I took the decision to provide one mailing covering all of the five issues to each person. As we know, the cost of this combined mailing has now been assessed to £4,865.55. However, if I had sent five separate mailings, each covering one of the issues, to each of the recipients, the cost could have been in excess of £24,000. Clearly, not every one of the recipients had signed all five petitions, but a great many had signed more than one. Therefore, I took the decision that by combining the issues in one mailing, this would generate a significant cost saving as well as sparing many hours of time for my hard-working staff [ ... ].<sup>19</sup>

21. We have given serious consideration to Mr Hands' letter. We understand that he feels strongly about the issue of an alleged "flaw in the rules". We are not persuaded by his claim that had he written separately to each of the recipients, as he would have been entitled to do within the rules, "the cost could have been in excess of £24,000". As he himself acknowledges, a great many constituents had signed more than one of the petitions, and therefore the cost of separate mailings would certainly have been much less than £24,000. We also have some scepticism about Mr Hands' claim that "the mailing was not political". A communication sent by a Member of Parliament to 7,000 constituents dealing with issues such as crime, policing, health and transport policy is unlikely to be sent without some consideration of its political impact on potential voters. We note that Mr Hands' communication was distributed at a time when there was considerable speculation about whether the 2019 European Parliament elections would proceed.

22. Notwithstanding these considerations, Mr Hands is perfectly entitled to set out arguments in support of his contention that there is a flaw in the House's rules on use of stationery and that those rules should be reviewed. The problem is that the Committee on Standards has no responsibility for carrying out such a review. It was made very clear to Mr Hands by the Commissioner, before he took the decision not to proceed with the rectification process, that any change in the rules would be a matter for the Administration Committee, not the Committee on Standards. Mr Hands in fact undertook to approach that Committee whilst accepting the rectification process; then he changed his mind about the latter.

23. In his written evidence to us, Mr Hands provides no further information about why he changed his mind about rectification. In his earlier correspondence with the Commissioner, he only stated that this was "upon further reflection of the evidence pack that you have provided", and because he wished to discuss with the Committee "what I perceive to be the lack of cost efficiency of the present rules".<sup>20</sup> In response the Commissioner pointed out, as we have noted, that the Committee on Standards was not the appropriate body with which to discuss this matter, and that the evidence pack had

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19 Appendix 2

20 WE 18

been supplied to Mr Hands as a matter of routine for him to check for factual accuracy. As far as we are aware, Mr Hands did not subsequently draw attention to any factual inaccuracy in the pack.

24. There would therefore appear to be no obvious reasonable ground for Mr Hands to have changed his mind about rectification. However, the Committee draws attention to matters of timing. On 14 October 2019 Mr Hands told the Commissioner that he was willing publicly to acknowledge he had breached the rules (as they now stand), to apologise for the breach, and to reimburse the cost of his mailing to public funds. On 29 October the House approved a motion for the Dissolution of Parliament. On 4 November Mr Hands informed the Commissioner that he had reconsidered and was no longer willing to use the rectification procedure. It is hard to avoid the conclusion that Mr Hands may well have been motivated by a desire to avoid the embarrassment of having to make a public apology for breaking parliamentary rules during a general election campaign.

### The Committee's conclusions

25. **The facts of the case are not in dispute. We accept the Commissioner's finding that Mr Hands, by using House-provided stationery to send what on any reasonable interpretation was a general update on issues of concern to constituents in April 2019, breached the House's rules on use of stationery. By doing so, he also breached Rule 16 of the Rules of Conduct, which states 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.<sup>21</sup>**

26. In considering what sanction to recommend for this breach of the Code, we have, as is our usual practice, taken into account potential mitigating and aggravating factors.

27. **We accept the Commissioner's finding that the breach was "not at the serious end of the spectrum", and conclude that this is a mitigating factor.**

28. **We have considered whether the alleged deficiencies of the rule excluding the use of House-provided stationery for general updates to constituents should be regarded as a mitigating factor. We conclude that it is not a mitigating factor. Mr Hands has stated that he was aware of the relevant rules, and that he chose not to seek advice from the House authorities on their interpretation. Had he done so, the Commissioner has found that he would have been advised that his proposed course of action was in breach of the rules. It is open to any Member to seek changes to the rules, but it is not acceptable for a Member knowingly to breach a rule simply because they disagree with it. The lesson is that Members facing such a situation would be prudent to take advice. If Mr Hands had taken advice, this incident would have been avoided.**

29. We consider that Mr Hands' decision to withdraw his participation in the rectification process is an aggravating factor. Whatever his motivation for doing so, the outcome was to extend the consideration of this case by nearly six months, quite unnecessarily. The Commissioner has invited us to consider "whether Mr Hands has acted appropriately in deciding to appear before the Committee to argue a point regarding a rule that he knows to be outside the gift of the Committee to amend; especially given that Mr Hands had already accepted and acknowledged his breach". We conclude that Mr Hands did not, for the reasons we have set out in paragraphs 23 and 24 above.

30. *We recommend that Mr Hands should apologise to the House both for his initial breach of the rules and for insisting on a futile reference to this Committee. He should make this apology by way of a personal statement, the terms of which should be agreed in advance with Mr Speaker.*

# Appendix 1: Memorandum from the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards—Rt Hon Greg Hands MP

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## Summary

This memorandum reports on the inquiry that I commenced on 7 June 2019, concerning an allegation that Mr Hands had breached the Rules of the House by misusing House provided stationery.

When I asked the Member about this allegation, he told me he believed his letter was “...*the most cost-effective way of updating my constituents...*”. I acknowledged that a single large mailshot of a letter covering several different topics may have been more cost-effective than writing several separate letters to each of the recipients. However, the stationery rules state unambiguously that using House provided stationery to provide general updates to constituents, on a range of issues, is not permissible.

I therefore found that the Member acted in breach of the House stationery rules and paragraph 16 of the Code of Conduct for Members.

Given the circumstances, I intended to resolve this inquiry through the rectification procedure in line with the provisions of Standing Order No 150. However, although the Member initially accepted that offer, he has since declined to pursue this method of resolution and has said that he wishes to go before the Committee on Standards “in order to present his case in person”. It is for that reason that I now submit this Memorandum to the Committee for consideration.

## The allegation

1. I investigated a complaint concerning whether Rt Hon. Greg Hands MP had breached the Rules for the use of stationery and post-paid envelopes provided by the House of Commons in his correspondence sent, on or around, 18 April 2019.

## Relevant rules of the House

2. The Code of Conduct for Members of Parliament approved by the House on 19 July 2018 states at paragraph 16:

*“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.”*

3. The Rules on the use of stationery and postage-paid envelopes provided by the House of Commons, and for the use of the crowned portcullis state the following:

*“Principles*

*2. These rules are not 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 paragraph 3 below) to confer an undue advantage on a political organisation.*

*Rules*

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

...

*For newsletters (including annual reports or general updates to constituents on a range of issues);*

...

*8. Examples of the proper use of stationery and pre-paid envelopes include:*

...

*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);*

...

**My Inquiry**

4. I have obtained relevant information from Mr Hands and House officials during the inquiry. The inquiry itself was straightforward and an attempt was made to resolve the matter by way of the rectification procedure available to me under House of Commons Standing Order No 150, but this attempt was declined by Mr Hands.

5. I can confirm that Mr Hands has been given the opportunity to comment on the factual accuracy of this memorandum.

**Evidence**

6. On 7 June 2019 the complainant contacted my office regarding correspondence sent by Mr Hands on or around 18 April 2019, which was reportedly sent to at least some of Mr Hands’ constituents.<sup>22</sup>

7. On 13 June 2019 I wrote to Mr Hands inviting him to comment on the allegation and to address specific questions regarding this mailing.<sup>23</sup>

8. On 21 June 2019 Mr Hands replied to my initial correspondence and explained that this particular mailing had been a combined response to individuals who had responded to one or more of five separate petitions organised by his office.<sup>24</sup>

9. On 27 June 2019 I also wrote to the House's Director of Customer Experience and Service Delivery to confirm what advice would have been provided to Mr Hands, had he sought such advice, regarding the use of House stationery for the mailing.<sup>25</sup>

10. On 10 July 2019 the House's Director of Customer Experience and Service Delivery replied stating:<sup>26</sup>

*If I had been asked, in my opinion the letter falls outside the rules. Point three of the rules states "this excludes using stationery or postage... for newsletters (including annual reports or general updates to constituents on a range of issues)". Mr Hands' letter starts "I am writing to provide you with an update on the work I have been doing, as your local Member of Parliament, and some of the issues I feel are vitally important to securing a better future for Chelsea & Fulham." He then goes on to cover various topics: Charing Cross Hospital, Heathrow Expansion, Crime and Policing, Local Schools and Transport for London's Proposed Bus Cuts. I consider this to be a general update to constituents on a range of issues, and therefore would have advised that this was not an appropriate use of the budget.*

11. On 3 September 2019 I wrote to Mr Hands informing him that I considered the mailing in question to be a breach of the rules on House provided stationery on the basis that the content could reasonably be viewed as a general update or a newsletter.<sup>27</sup>

12. I informed Mr Hands that I considered the breach to be at the less serious end of the spectrum and invited him to agree to resolution of this inquiry by way of the rectification process available under Standing Order 150. I outlined the next steps in that process.

13. On 18 September 2019 Mr Hands replied that he was content to use the rectification process despite disagreeing with my decision. He said he wanted to emphasise what he considered to be a flaw in the House's stationery rules.<sup>28</sup>

14. Despite his reservations, Mr Hands apologised for the breach and said that he had ensured that he, and his office staff, were fully conversant with the House's stationery rules.

15. In his letter of 18 September 2019 Mr Hands also confirmed that 6,916 copies of the mailing had been sent out.

16. On 1 October 2019 I wrote to Mr Hands to explain that the rectification process requires both an apology and an acknowledgement that the relevant rule has been breached.

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23 Written Evidence 2

24 Written Evidence 3

25 Written Evidence 4

26 Written Evidence 7

27 Written Evidence 11

28 Written Evidence 12



I did not consider Mr Hands' letter of 18 September 2019 made such an acknowledgement. I explained that he might raise any concerns he had about the current rules by contacting the Clerk to the Administration Committee.<sup>29</sup>

17. My letter of 1 October 2019 also confirmed the total cost of the mailing to be £4,865.55.

18. On 14 October 2019 Mr Hands replied to reiterate his apology and to make the required acknowledgement of his breach of the rules. As I had suggested, Mr Hands said he would contact the Clerk of the Administration Committee to "*point out...a flaw in the rules*".<sup>30</sup>

19. Mr Hands also requested the means by which repayment of the mailing cost could be made.

20. On 21 October 2019 I wrote to Mr Hands to invite him to comment on the factual accuracy of the evidence pack that was to be published on my webpage once the rectification procedure had been concluded.<sup>31</sup>

21. On 4 November 2019 Mr Hands replied to ask that the rectification process be halted as he wished "*to appear before the Committee on Standards to discuss what I perceive to be the lack of cost efficiency of the present rules*".<sup>32</sup>

22. On 5 November 2019 I wrote to Mr Hands to express my surprise at his change of mind and to request confirmation that his earlier apology and acknowledgement were being withdrawn. I also emphasised that a concern regarding the limits placed on the usage of House provided stationery by the associated rules was a matter for the Administration Committee and not the Committee on Standards.<sup>33</sup>

23. Mr Hands replied on 21 November 2019 to repeat his preference to appear before the Committee on Standards "*in order to present my case in person*". Mr Hands also apologised for any inconvenience that this change of mind might cause.<sup>34</sup>

## Statement of Facts

24. The mailing sent by Mr Hands covers the following topics:

- a) Charing Cross Hospital,
- b) Heathrow Expansion,
- c) Crime and Policing,
- d) Local Schools,
- e) Transport for London's Proposed Bus Cuts.

25. The opening sentence of the mailing reads "*I am writing to provide you with an update on the work I have been doing...and some of the issues I feel are vitally important...*".

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29 Written Evidence 13

30 Written Evidence 14

31 Written Evidence 15

32 Written Evidence 18

33 Written Evidence 19

34 Written Evidence 20

26. The mailing was sent on House of Commons headed paper and in a pre-paid House of Commons provided envelope.

27. The recipients of the mailing were respondents to separate petitions organised by Mr Hands' office on the matters above.

## Analysis

28. It is my view, and the view of the House's Director of Customer Service and Delivery, that the mailing in question was, in the words of Mr Hands, a general update on a range of issues. This interpretation has not been disputed by Mr Hands.

29. This is because the mailing provides information on five unrelated topics. Although the recipients were respondents to petitions on those five topics, Mr Hands has not provided any evidence to show that all the recipients were respondents to all the petitions and therefore had a reasonable expectation of being contacted with an update on all five matters.

30. Paragraph 3 of the Rules for the use of stationery and postage-paid envelopes provided by the House of Commons specifically prohibits "general updates to constituents on a range of issues".

31. As a general update, the mailing was therefore a clear breach of the Rules for the use of stationery and postage-paid envelopes provided by the House of Commons.

32. However, I consider the breach of the Rules to be at the lesser end of the spectrum, despite the misuse of the House stationery being in excess of £4,000, as Mr Hands wrote to a limited group of individuals, all of whom had previously engaged with at least one of the issues covered by the mailing.

33. It is my view that breaching the Rules for the use of stationery and postage-paid envelopes provided by the House of Commons puts a Member in breach of Paragraph 16 of the current Code of Conduct, which states:

*"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."*

34. This interpretation had been accepted by Mr Hands and we had commenced the rectification process; reaching as far as to agree the sum to be repaid and the means by which payment should be made.<sup>35</sup>

35. I recognised Mr Hands' position about the current stationery Rules potentially causing unnecessary cost to the public purse by necessitating separate updates rather than a single update on a range of topics. However, I did not have the evidence necessary to

assess whether that would have been the case on this occasion. I therefore signposted him to the Administration Committee, which is responsible for the content of these rules, to raise this point.

36. Given that Mr Hands has not questioned my interpretation of the current rules, and his earlier commitment to raise his concerns about the rules with the Administration Committee, I was surprised by his decision to withdraw his acknowledgment of a breach and to ask to appear before the Standards Committee. Whilst this course of action open to him, it has extended the duration of this inquiry significantly. Had the rectification process concluded, this matter could have been drawn to a close, and an outcome published, before the end of the last Parliament. Instead this inquiry has continued across dissolution and into the new Parliament. Unnecessarily extending inquiries regarding conduct in public office is not in the wider public interest and is unlikely to inspire public confidence that Parliament holds itself open to rigorous and expeditious scrutiny.

37. It is for the Standards Committee to decide whether Mr Hands has acted appropriately in deciding to appear before the Committee to argue a point regarding a rule that he knows to be outside the gift of the Committee to amend; especially given that Mr Hands had already accepted and acknowledged his breach.

## **Conclusion**

38. I have found Mr Hands in breach of paragraph 16 of the Code of Conduct. Although the matter could have been resolved through the rectification procedure, Mr Hands has asked to appear before the Committee on Standards. I am therefore submitting this memorandum to the Committee.

**Kathryn Stone OBE**

**Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards**

**16 December 2019**

## Appendix 2: Letter from Rt Hon Greg Hands MP to the Clerk of the Committee on Standards, dated 12 March 2020

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Thank you for your letter of 5 March 2020 and attaching the Memorandum from the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards.

As outlined in my last letter to the Commissioner on 7 January 2020, I am grateful for the opportunity to put my case to the Standards and Privileges Committee in writing.

I believe there to be a major flaw within the rules on Members' use of Parliamentary stationery.

Stationery is quite properly provided to enable Members to update constituents on issues of interest to them. There are, understandably, restrictions in place on its usage, to protect the taxpayer and to protect the reputation of Parliament. In 15 years as a Member, I have not been the subject of a single complaint in relation to stationery, or indeed, anything else, and I was surprised to be contacted by the Commissioner as a result of a local Labour councillor's complaint.

I do not dispute the findings of facts in the inquiry. In April 2019, I sent out letters to a group of constituents giving them an update on five issues of interest in the constituency. The mailing was not political. It did not mention any political party, any other public office holder (other than the Health Secretary) or any election, present or future. Just under 7,000 copies of the letter were sent.

The flaw in the rules (specifically Rule 3, third bullet point: "*this excludes using stationery or postage [...] for newsletters (including annual reports or general updates to constituents on a range of issues)*") is, that a response from a Member of Parliament cannot deal with more than one issue at once, "*a range of issues*". According to these rules, it seems that a constituent or constituents who raise one or more issues, cannot then receive a response which includes other issues. This might make sense in theory, but in practice it cannot become more expensive to address multiple issues separately, thereby negating the point of the rules in the first place, namely to protect public funds.

During the period of the mailing in question, I was running more than five different public petitions on issues of local interest: the future of the Charing Cross Hospital, Heathrow expansion, crime and policing, local schools and local bus route proposals from TfL.

Constituents wrote to me about each of the five issues or signed one or more of the public petitions. For convenience to my staff, and to save public money, rather than to produce five separate mailings in response to each issue or petition, I took the decision to provide one mailing covering all of the five issues to each person. As we know, the cost of this combined mailing has now been assessed to £4,865.55. However, if I had sent five separate mailings, each covering one of the issues, to each of the recipients, the cost could have been in excess of £24,000. Clearly, not every one of the recipients had signed all five petitions, but a great many had signed more than one. Therefore, I took the decision that by combining the issues in one mailing, this would generate a significant cost saving as well as sparing many hours of time for my hard-working staff, who would otherwise have had to conduct

a complex exercise involving five separate mail merges, and stuffing up to five letters into one or more envelopes. I also maintain that my approach was not excessive: the combined mailing was one double-sided page sent in a second class envelope. In fact the mailing could not have been delivered more cheaply.

I therefore ask the Committee to consider this: there was not a single complaint from any of the recipients of the mailing. The complainant is a politician and was not a recipient of the letter. My interest at all times was to save the tax payer money and to provide a good service to my constituents, on the issues that were of concern to them. In light of this, I believe that my case should be re-considered and that the rules be re-configured.

Rt Hon Greg Hands MP

# Formal minutes

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**Tuesday 21 April 2020**

Members present:

Kate Green, in the Chair

Tammy Banks	Mark Fletcher
Jane Burgess	Sir Bernard Jenkin
Charmaine Burton	Dr Arun Midha
Andy Carter	Sir Peter Rubin
Alberto Costa	Paul Thorogood
Rita Dexter	

Draft Report (*Greg Hands*), proposed by the Chair, brought up and read.

*Ordered*, That the draft Report be read a second time, paragraph by paragraph.

Paragraphs 1 to 30 read and agreed to.

Two papers were appended to the Report.

*Resolved*, That the Report be the Third Report of the Committee to the House.

None of the lay members present wished to submit an opinion on the Report (Standing Order No. 149 (8)).

*Ordered*, That the Chair make the Report to the House.

Written evidence was ordered to be reported to the House for publishing with the Report.

[The Committee adjourned.]

## Published written evidence

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The evidence listed below will be published on the Committee's website: [www.parliament.uk/standards](http://www.parliament.uk/standards)

- 1 Email from the complainant to the Commissioner, 7 June 2019
- 2 Letter from the Commissioner to Rt Hon. Greg Hands MP, 13 June 2019
- 3 Letter from Rt Hon. Greg Hands MP to the Commissioner, 21 June 2019
- 4 Letter from the Commissioner to the Director of Customer Experience and Service Delivery, 27 June 2019
- 5 Letter from the Commissioner to Rt Hon. Greg Hands MP, 27 June 2019
- 6 Letter from Rt Hon. Greg Hands MP to the Commissioner, 9 July 2019
- 7 Email from the Director of Customer Experience and Service Delivery to the Commissioner, 10 July 2019
- 8 Letter from the Commissioner to Rt Hon. Greg Hands MP, 11 July 2019
- 9 Letter from Rt Hon. Greg Hands MP to the Commissioner, 18 July 2019
- 10 Letter from the Commissioner to the Rt Hon. Greg Hands MP, 6 August 2019
- 11 Letter from the Commissioner to the Rt Hon. Greg Hands MP, 3 September 2019
- 12 Letter from Rt Hon. Greg Hands MP to the Commissioner, 18 September 2019
- 13 Letter from the Commissioner to Rt Hon. Greg Hands MP, 1 October 2019
- 14 Letter from Rt Hon. Greg Hands MP to the Commissioner, 14 October 2019
- 15 Letter from the Commissioner to Rt Hon. Greg Hands MP, 21 October 2019
- 16 Letter sent via email from the office of Rt Hon. Greg Hands MP to the Commissioner, 31 October 2019
- 17 Email from the Office of the Commissioner for Standards to the Office of Rt Hon. Greg Hands MP, 1 November 2019
- 18 Letter sent via email from the office of Rt Hon. Greg Hands MP to the Commissioner, 4 November 2019
- 19 Letter from the Commissioner to Rt Hon. Greg Hands MP, 5 November 2019
- 20 Letter from Rt Hon. Greg Hands MP to the Commissioner, 21 November 2019

## List of Reports from the Committee during the current Parliament

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All publications from the Committee are available on the [publications page of the Committee's website](#). The reference number of the Government's response to each Report is printed in brackets after the HC printing number.

### Session 2019–21

First Report	Kate Osamor	HC 210
Second Report	Stephen Pound	HC 209