

Council leader (and wannabe MP) defends expenses claim for club class 'jolly'

By Nick Griffin

THE leader of Barnet Council has come under fire after it emerged he flew business class to America at the taxpayers' expense.

Documents obtained by The Press reveal that Mike Freer spent thousands on flights and hotel rooms to attend two leadership conferences last year.

The documentation reveals that taxpayers picked up an extravagant bill for a £2,993.20 British Airways Club World seat to San Francisco last October.

Credit card receipts show he then spent a further £879.55 on his five-night stay at San Francisco's elegant Huntington Hotel – which has picked up awards including California's best spa resort.

In April 2007 Mr Freer also jetted off on the first of the conferences as part of the BT Vital Vision Programme, spending £1,227.10 on his flights and accommodation in Boston.

The trips came after the council's chief executive, Leo Boland, formally cleared the release of £5,000 from a training budget to pay for the visits.

But when Mr Freer's total expenditure was finally totted up it came to £5,105.69.

The BT Vital Vision scheme was designed to bring together government decision-makers for a series of lectures at Harvard and Stanford universities on how lessons learned in business can be applied to the public sector.

Speaking to The Press while on a visit to the south of France, Mr Freer said: "The flight to San Francisco is 13 hours and I took the decision to fly club class because you get a place to work and it allows you to arrive fresh and ready to go straight into the classroom.

"The flight to Boston is much shorter and for that I had a premium economy seat.

"We are a billion-pound organisation, the tenth largest council in the country, and I intend to get the best out of the trips for the taxpayer. Residents will benefit from better leadership and the future shaping of the council.

Details emerge of spa hotel and luxury flight for US training course



Life of luxury: California's Huntington Hotel

"This was a year ago now and if I am lucky enough to be elected as an MP at the next election I will have been leader for three and half years."

Mr Freer said that he had paid for a scheme to offset his carbon emissions using his own money.

According to The Carbon Neutral Company he will have needed to plant three trees to cancel out the three tons of carbon created by his two return flights.

nick.griffin@nlhnews.co.uk

□ Mike Freer's column, page 11

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In training: Council leader Mike Freer

Labour group leader Alison Moore also launched a scathing attack on the America visits.

She said: "I'm shocked. Last week it was Brian Coleman's exorbitant cab bills, this week it's Mike Freer travelling club class at taxpayers' expense.

"£3,000 is more than lots of Barnet families will be spending on their annual holiday this year. Given that Mr Freer has never reported back to council on these trips, we have no way of knowing whether they represent any kind of value for money or are just another jolly."

Liberal Democrat leader Jack Cohen criticised the cost of the trips, labelling Mr Freer's spending as outrageous.

He said: "First of all I question why he had to go to America at the taxpayers' expense in the first place.

"I don't know why he couldn't fly economy – it's absolutely outrageous.

"I'm none the wiser about the trips and if you speak to my constituents I think they would say the same.

"It sounds to me like this was a junket."