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Elite trainer gets 11-year state free

EXCLUSIVE

Rob Waugh

A TRAINING provider which has enjoyed privileged access to Downing Street has been given free office accommodation in a Government department for the last 11 years, the *Yorkshire Post* can reveal today.

Common Purpose, which has run elite training seminars at Number 10, was granted free office space at the Department for Children, Schools and Families in Sheffield in 1997 and has enjoyed its use ever since.

A Freedom of Information request from the *Yorkshire Post* revealed the accommodation, which is fully serviced and includes the free use of phones, has a commercial value of £5,000 per year.

The DCSF admits it has no formal record of the decision being made and no rental or tenancy agreement of any kind. It is one of several Government departments that has paid thousands of pounds to Common Purpose to provide training courses.

A spokeswoman said the free office accommodation had been given in line with the policy of the then Education Secretary David Blunkett, a Sheffield MP, who had wanted to build better links with the local community.

But Philip Davies, Conservative MP for Shipley, has criticised the relationship between Government and Common Purpose, which is both a limited company and registered charity. He believes the organisation, whose training "graduates" include officials from a wide variety of public sector organisations, is used primarily for networking.

Mr Davies asked why Common Purpose was granted free office space when other organisations are not and is set to raise Common Purpose's charitable status with the Charity Commission in the light of the fees it charges, some of which are in excess of £5,000 per course.

"Common Purpose has all the hallmarks of a networking organisation for the top brass within the public sector in particular, and it seems to be rather shy of putting the content of its

THE CHARITY WHICH CHARGES UP TO £5,525 FOR ITS COURSES

Registered as a charity, Common Purpose charges up to £5,525 (plus VAT) for its courses and received over £5m in course fees – the bulk of its income – in its last published financial year.

The organisation, run by chief executive Julia Middleton, paid its three senior employees between £60,000 and £90,000, according to the annual report for 2006/07, but did not say who they were.

The most expensive course –

called 20:20 – is aimed at senior decision makers and has included talks delivered inside Downing Street from two former key Prime Ministerial aides – Matthew Taylor, former chief adviser on political strategy, and Ruth Turner, former director of government relations.

Common Purpose runs a course for 13 to 15-year-olds in schools and for what it calls "pre-career leaders" for small

fees. The majority of courses are for established "leaders" in the public, private and voluntary sectors, with fees mainly around £3,000 to £4,000.

Course information always states: "Ability to pay is not one of the selection criteria and each programme maintains a bursary fund to cover the costs of those who are genuinely unable to meet the full fee. However, every participant is asked to make a contribution."

training into the public domain which seems unusual for a charitable organisation.

"I think that taxpayers are entitled to know why so much of their money should be given to Common Purpose both in terms of free accommodation and in training costs," he said.

Parliamentary questions from Mr Davies directed to Government departments revealed several had paid substantial sums to Common Purpose, with the

Department for Work and Pensions paying £238,000 between 2002/03 and 2006/07.

The DCSF paid for contracts worth a total of nearly £52,000 between 2004 and 2005 and a total of £11,600 between 2006 and 2007 to send officials on training courses.

The department said the provision of free office accommodation had "no bearing" on the decision to pay Common Purpose to provide training. It said

procurement practices aimed at ensuring the provision of appropriate, value for money training would have been followed. A spokeswoman said: "Common Purpose is a charitable organisation which provides leadership development by bringing together leaders from private, public and the voluntary sectors.

"We appreciate that notwithstanding our good intentions, record-keeping could be improved, which is why we have

decided that we should now agree more formally the terms of tenancy in such cases."

Common Purpose said it was not the only charity that had use of office space in Government buildings. DCSF said it had provided a small amount of office space to an organisation called Learn to Lead at its Moorfoot building in Sheffield and to the Queen's Anniversary Prizes for Higher and Further Education in Caxton House in London. The department declined to respond when asked for details about Learn to Lead which is not a registered charity. It did confirm that neither had been paid to provide any services.

A Common Purpose spokeswoman said: "In pursuit of our charitable objects, we run educational programmes for leaders and decision-makers across all sectors and at every stage of their career. Participants (or their organisations) pay a tuition fee in order to take part. We are able to offer some bursary assistance for those applicants who do not have the means to pay the full tuition fee and otherwise

year state freebie

5 FOR ITS COURSES

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wouldn't be able to access our programmes."

She added that courses had a wide diversity of participants with around one third from the public sector and the remainder from the private and not-for-profit/voluntary sectors.

Mr Blunkett acknowledged that when he took over as Education Secretary in 1997 he had been keen to "stimulate a greater contribution to Sheffield by the Department, which is a major employer in the city".

This had taken the form of a range of activities.

He added that as part of this initiative, legitimate, non-profit, organisations that contributed to the development of the city were rented premises – although he made it clear he was not party to the detailed decision-making to offer rent-free office space.

Mr Blunkett said: "I understand that Common Purpose is a leadership organisation that would fit that criteria. If Common Purpose were not, or are not, making that contribution then they shouldn't have the offices."