

£73k to 'coach' the man with no shame

TAXPAYERS were billed more than £73,000 for consultants to help prepare beleaguered NHS chief Sir David Nicholson and two other NHS bosses for a grilling by MPs, it emerged last night.

The trio relied on the consultants' 'technical reports' to face the Commons hearing last month over the problems dogging the disastrous NHS IT system.

Tim Donohoe, the head of the IT system, hired private sector consultants charging up to £1,700 a day to help him, Sir David and the head of external affairs Charlie Massey to answer questions by MPs on the public accounts committee (PAC). The consultants were

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hired for 52 days to prepare the men for a grilling lasting just two hours, MPs were told.

Sir David has already been dubbed the man with no shame for his refusal to quit over the Mid Staffs Hospital scandal.

Tory MP Steve Barclay, who uncovered the figures, said it was 'unbelievable' officials had squandered so much money to help them answer questions on their own jobs, adding it suggested they had been trying to cover something up.

'Civil servants should not need coaching to answer questions about the work they do. This is part of a wider cover-up culture in the public sector,' he added.

The £12billion IT project,

which was planned under Labour, was formally wound down in 2011, but many elements are still going ahead.

At the hearing MPs were told the NHS would continue to press ahead with a £600million patient records system, despite warnings it is 'hopeless'.

Margaret Hodge, Labour

'A cover-up culture'

chairman of the PAC, last night branded the payments an 'outrage' and said she would be asking Civil Service head Sir Bob Kerslake to investigate.

A source close to Health Secretary Jeremy Hunt said the episode 'shouldn't have happened and won't happen again'.

The Department of Health said use of consultants on this scale 'absolutely' broke official policy but no one would face disciplinary action. It added: 'It will not happen again.'

Figures released under the Freedom of Information Act reveal the consultants, hired from February, were paid £1,714 a day for the first 29.5 days, then £1,000 a day for 23 days, at a total cost of £73,563.

Incredibly, they continued to be employed for more than a week after the June 12 hearing.

A source at the department said the consultants were hired to produce 'technical briefings on some very complex areas'.

Mrs Hodge said their use 'suggests an intention to be less than straightforward'.

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