

Business commissioner Paul Uppal leaves over conflict of interest

[James Hurley](#) Enterprise Editor

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In 2017 Paul Uppal was announced as the first small business commissioner

The Government has sacked its small business commissioner after suggestions that his involvement in a scheme to provide redress to small companies represented a conflict of interest.

It was announced last night that Paul Uppal had stepped down from the role established in 2016 to mediate on payment disputes between small and large companies. Mr Uppal could not be reached for comment.

The Times understands that Mr Uppal, 52, was told on Thursday evening that the business department felt his involvement in establishing a bank redress scheme was a conflict of interest.

Mr Uppal has been helping the banking industry and small business groups to set up the business banking resolution service. The scheme is intended to help small and medium-sized companies with unresolved complaints to get an independent view on their dispute.

It is not clear why officials felt that this represented a conflict. The department indicated that his departure was not related to performance but to an unspecified breach of the terms of his appointment.

Mr Uppal, a former Tory MP, had been taking a much more aggressive stance against late payers recently. Companies that treated suppliers poorly were “named and shamed” and his office was due to be granted powers to fine and to force late payers to engage with him. He was due to take over running the Prompt Payment Code, a voluntary scheme promoting fair practice, and was expected to take a harder line on signatories that breached its rules.

The Federation of Small Businesses said it was a “disappointing development that will put the brakes on our efforts to date”. The Association of Independent Professionals and the Self-Employed called the news “troubling”.

A spokeswoman said: “Paul Uppal has stepped down following a procedural issue with immediate effect. The important work of the commissioner’s office continues while the process to recruit his replacement gets under way.”