

Durham County Council

At a meeting of the Independent Remuneration Panel held in the Head of Legal and Democratic Services Room, County Hall, Durham on **Wednesday 24 October 2018 at 3.00 p.m.**

Present:

Members of the Panel – Joyce Drummond-Hill, John Hitchman and Kate Welch

Officers – John Hewitt, Helen Lynch and Ian Croft

Apologies for absence were received from Alan Fletcher and Ray Hudson.

1. Notes

The notes of the meeting held on 4 December 2017 were agreed as a correct record.

2 Review of Members Allowances Scheme for 2019/20

The Panel considered a report of the Corporate Director of Resources which provided information regarding the Members' Allowances Scheme.

John Hewitt, in presenting the report, highlighted the following developments which had taken place since the last Panel meeting on 4 December 2017:

- The Human Resources Committee had been discontinued due to the low level of business it had been conducting. The Special Responsibility Allowances paid to the Chairman and Vice Chairman of the Human Resources Committee represented a reduction in the allowances paid of £2,660 and £1,330 respectively.
- The number of political groups on the Council had increased to 7 from 6 due to the formation of the North East Party in May 2018. As a result there was an increase in the number of opposition group leaders who were able to claim the allowance of £3,325 per annum which was the rate where the group has less than 20% membership of the council members.

Officers had canvassed the opinion of elected members and the following feedback received:

- An allowance for Cabinet support members should be considered.
- As with other authorities, councillors be allowed free off-peak parking in council car parks, thereby reducing the paper work on expense claims for council business on those car parks, and a cost neutral benefit to councillors to make use of council facilities.
- Two councillors requested that there be no change to allowances, with one referencing that as the council was in some degree of financial crisis there should be a freeze on allowances.

Helen Lynch informed the Panel the role of Cabinet Support Member did not allow a Support Member voting or speaking rights at Cabinet meetings.

John Hitchman informed the Panel that it had considered an allowance for Cabinet Support Members previously and had been against it. At the time the Panel had suggested that a Cabinet Member may sacrifice some of their SRA to be paid to a Cabinet Support Member. John Hitchman added that at the time the Panel considered this there was very little idea of the work of a Cabinet Support Member as it was a new role at that time and requested more information on the role of a Cabinet Support Member to be provided for the next Panel meeting.

John Hitchman requested that information be sought from neighbouring Councils before the Panel met next to find out whether they had Cabinet Support Members and, if so, whether an SRA was paid to them.

John Hewitt then referred the Panel to the suggestion put forward that councillors be allowed free off-peak parking in council car parks.

Kate Welch queried how this would be done in practical terms, how it would be policed and how it would be known the Member was on council business and considered it could cost as much to administer as the current system where Members were able to reclaim expenses. John Hitchman did not consider that it was an area for the Panel to become involved in.

John Hewitt informed the Panel that information on whether neighbouring authorities operated such a system would be sought and brought to the next Panel meeting.

John Hewitt reported that two of the responses received requested that there be no change to allowances. There had been a limited response from Members when asked for their views, although the response had improved on the previous year.

Information from neighbouring authorities was being sought on what their plans were for their Members Allowance Scheme for 2019/20, however this had not yet been received. More information would be provided to the next meeting of the Panel. Finally, John Hewitt informed the Panel it may consider whether the Members Allowances Scheme should be linked to the public sector pay award, as had been adopted by some councils.

Kate Welch considered that there was a greater diversity of Members and that there was no problem seeking candidates to stand for election.

John Hitchman considered that the profile of Members did not appear as high to him, was diminishing and that council business in his opinion was more officer-led.

John Hewitt informed the Panel that there was strong political leadership and opposition.

The Panel agreed that information be sought from neighbouring authorities on Cabinet support Members, subsidised car parking and plans for 2019/20 and another meeting take place at the beginning of December 2018.

3. Parish Council Allowances

The Panel considered a report of Steve Ragg, Executive Officer, County Durham Association of Local Councils.

Steve Ragg thanked the Panel for agreeing to consider the introduction of a county wide Members' Allowances Scheme for parish councillors. Previously Town and Parish Council had relied on the judgements of IRPs from District Councils

Steve Ragg presented his report to the Panel and informed the Panel that if it agreed with the recommendation this would be sent to parish and Town Council's to be taken into consideration when setting allowances.

John Hitchman referred to paragraph 11 of the report which showed that if basic allowances had risen in line with inflation since 2009 then the allowance figure would have increased by 34.5%. However, County Councillors had not received any rise since 2009. Kate Welch considered that the proposals being put forward were more about alignment with the County Council's scheme than any increase.

In response to a question from John Hitchman, Steve Ragg confirmed that all money for the payment of Parish and Town Council allowances came from their precept and not the County Council.

Steve Ragg informed the Panel that the proposed scheme tried to tie the new allowance rate in with the County Council scheme.

John Hitchman queried why the newly formed City of Durham Parish Council did not appear on any lists in the report. Steve Ragg replied that it had not considered any allowance scheme and was awaiting the appointment of a Clerk before doing so.

Kate Welch could see logic in rationalising the scheme and it was then up to each Parish and Town Council whether to adopt the scheme and queried the Chairman's Allowance.

Steve Ragg replied that the Chairman's Allowance was not an allowance per se but was a sum of money identified, or a budget, to be spent by Chairmen on activities throughout the year.

John Hitchman asked whether a County Councillor who was also a Parish or Town Councillor could claim two allowances. Steve Ragg confirmed this would be the case because both Councils were separate legal entities.

Kate Welch considered that the proposed principal established in the report was the right one on which to base a recommendation to Town and Parish Councils. John Hitchman asked whether the role of Parish Council's changed at all when the unitary authority was established in Durham. Steve Ragg replied that the role was the same, however, because of austerity the County Council was looking to Parish and Town Councils to provide increased services.

Joyce Drummond-Hill asked whether there was any control over the wages of the Clerk. Steve Ragg replied that the Clerk was an employee of the Parish Council and there were national recommended scales for Clerks salaries. The precept was determined by the Parish Council which set a budget based on the needs of the community.

The Panel **agreed** that the suggested framework for Parish Council allowances should be recommended for adoption by Town and Parish Councils.