

Independent Remuneration Panel – 3 November 2008
6.00-8.30pm

Present

Panel – Mike Arnold, Brian Cockburn, Geoffrey Kirkness

Cllrs Boyce (Lib Dem), Herbert (Lab) and Wright (Green & Independent)

The meeting of the Panel was in two parts. Councillors were present throughout the public session (6-7.30pm). The Panel then deliberated its proposals in private.

Discussion began on an issue raised in July 2008 regarding the way in which the opposition Group Leader special responsibility allowances are calculated. Brian Cockburn introduced a proposal to address this and tabled a spreadsheet. In this possible solution rather than sharing the SRAs out from a fixed pot the new way uses a fixed base and each SRA value is calculated independently. The base is related to the Basic Allowance by a simple factor and the actual SRA is that base times the square root of the number of seats. This keeps the relativities of the SRAs, and continues to give small groups a reasonable SRA. The 'cost' of making this change is that the total of the SRAs is no longer constant. The Panel still supported a principle that the allowances scheme recognized the additional work smaller political groups or individuals faced. The Panel would recommend that the single Conservative Councillor received an SRA as a 'group of 1' despite not being a Political Group as defined in law and therefore requiring official recognition by the Council.

Cllr Wright stated that much of Cllr Howell's written submission applied to her circumstances and the same could be said of Cllr Hipkin (Independent Councillor).

Cllr Boyce stated that broadband line rental costs should be considered as part of the Basic Allowance but the Council should have in place a package of support for Councillors who do not have broadband installed. Cllr Herbert supported the view that all Councillors should have a good ICT package available to them and provided by the Council if needed. It was noted that the ICT on offer to Members, new and existing was to be reviewed.

There was debate on recording councillor workload to inform the Panel's thinking (no information was available this time). Cllr Boyce mentioned that members were dealing with emails in short bursts throughout the working day rather than necessarily always dedicating larger 'chunks' of time. Cllr Herbert supported some form of recording time but in a way which was straightforward.

Cllr Boyce raised the current SRA payable to the Licensing Committee Vice Chair. He said that these meetings were both infrequent and called on the understanding that the Chair was available, making it highly unlikely that the Vice Chair would be needed to preside. Cllr Herbert asked whether SRAs for

Vice Chairs of Scrutiny Committees were required. The Panel noted that Councillors were advising it that the need for a Vice Chair to preside is rare and the on-going workload is small. It was also advised that the exception to this was Vice Chairs of Area Committees. The Panel suggested to the Councillors that the Allowances Scheme did make provision for SRAs to transfer if a councillor took on additional responsibility. So if a Vice Chair took on the role of Chair that allowance would then apply.

Cllr Wright stated that as a newly elected councillor in May 2008 she had found the commitment of some committee work particularly demanding (Licensing Sub-Committees, Taxi Licensing Sub Committees). She made the point that there was no dedicated officer for political support which was not the case at other local authorities where she had Green Party contacts. The Panel noted that most of the points made in Cllr Howell's written submission also applied to the Green and Independent Group.

Cllr Herbert asked that consistency was brought back to the multiplier ratios attached to SRAs as it would help the public and Members understand the scheme. The Panel explained that the allowances scheme had evolved iteratively and did not disagree that it had now got to the point where it was appropriate to look again at this.

Cllr Herbert stated that the distribution of SRA between the 7 Executive Councillors compared to the remaining councillors should be looked at. The reasons for this were:

- 1) The level of Basic Allowance had perhaps been held down because of the direct multiplier relationship to the SRA and in particular the higher increases for the Executive over the years
- 2) The Council did not have a Cabinet system of Executive decision making and retained a committee led approach to taking decisions.
- 3) 25% of the total allowances budget (basic + SRA) budget goes in SRA to 7 councillors. (8% of the SRA budget goes to opposition councillors).
- 4) More than 50% of the total budget should be allocated to the Basic Allowance.

Conclusion

- The Panel noted that there would be support deleting SRAs to Vice Chairs and moving the total to the Basic Allowance.
- The Panel noted that Councillors would consider a proposal to re-distribute 10% SRA allowance for the Executive Councillor to the Basic Allowance.
- To adopt the new scheme tabled by the Panel for calculating SRA on share of seats for opposition SRAs
- Move the SRA allowance for members of Area Committees, which is all members, into the Basic Allowance to ensure transparency