

**Item 5(c) – Review of IT Allowances/Provision of Computers for Members**

**Modern Local Government Group’s Recommendations to Council**

At its meeting on 6 October 2011, the Modern Local Government Group considered the matter as follows:

**“REVIEW OF IT ALLOWANCES/PROVISION OF COMPUTERS FOR MEMBERS**

Members considered a report which reviewed whether an IT allowance should be added to the current Members’ Allowance Scheme. This issue had been considered by the Joint Independent Remuneration Panel (JIRP) following a request by Officers of Sevenoaks District Council (SDC) in July 2011 and the report included the JIRP’s recommendations. The report explained that laptops had been provided to SDC Members in 2004 under a central government funded scheme whereby funding of £60,000 was secured which equipped all 54 Councillors with a basic laptop computer. However by the time of the May 2011 elections many of the original laptops had become obsolete or required disproportionate support from the IT Department and the central government funding was no longer available.

The accessibility of information by Members had also changed in the intervening years and the Council had developed a simple approach to Members’ access to Council information and communications via a new Members’ Electronic Portal, an extranet which made it possible to have web-based access to the e-mail system and all the necessary information systems and databases. As a consequence Members could access all of the information that they required to perform their duties securely from any internet access point including a home computer. Coupled with the approximate 23% reduction in IT budgets in recent years this meant that there was little scope for the Council to supply computer equipment for all Members or to continue to provide the level of ongoing support needed.

Members discussed the background to the initiation of the review. It was noted that by the May 2011 elections only 12 Members had been active users of the Council laptops out of the much larger total number allocated. After the elections 8 new laptops had been purchased with remaining money from the original funding and had been allocated to the 8 Members who had responded to an emailed offer to be provided with a laptop. 1 Member had already returned their new laptop. There had been some concern from Members that new laptops were not available for all Members, some Members had obsolete laptops and others none at all which was considered confusing and possibly unfair. In these circumstances it was decided to refer consideration of the matter to the JIRP.

The Chairman welcomed Colin Wilby, the Chairman of the JIRP, to the meeting. Mr Wilby explained that the JIRP had carried out a full review which had included briefings from officers, meetings with Members and research into the practices of other local authorities in terms of provision of IT allowances and computing equipment for Members. Although it had been clear that few Councils currently provided a specific IT allowance and practice differed widely the Panel had concluded that the use of computer based information and communications was essential for Councillors to be able to fulfil their responsibilities. However the Panel had also recognised that other authorities paid a higher level of basic allowance which could be used by Members to meet their IT requirements if they so wished whereas Sevenoaks had previously rejected the Panel's recommended level of basic allowance in favour of a lower allowance. In view of this the Panel made a number of recommendations:

- (a) An allowance of £120 per annum should be available to councillors paid monthly and separately from the Basic and other allowances. This allowance would be available to Members who used their own IT resources to undertake their council duties;
- (b) Where a Member has been provided with a Council funded computer, no allowance should be paid;
- (c) In exceptional circumstances where a Member was unable to afford the purchase cost of a suitable computer, the Council should consider assisting the Member, possibly by advancing a lump sum which would then be recovered via repayments from this allowance;
- (d) The new allowance should replace the entirety of Clause 3.7 of the SDC Members' Allowance scheme which currently provided for fax machines and Council supplied laptops to Members; and
- (e) The allowance should be reviewed three years after adoption to evaluate relevance at that time and, in any event, the allowance should lapse once the Council was paying the appropriate level of Basic Allowance recommended by JIRP in their full review published in late 2008, this being £5754.

The Panel recognised that this was an attempt to provide a contribution towards meeting Members IT requirements rather than meeting the full costs. They had also considered it to be important that the proposed allowance could be rolled-up to allow a Member to purchase computing equipment if they were unable to afford to do so.

Members had regard to the review carried out by the JIRP and sought clarification on whether the proposed allowance could only be used to purchase computer hardware or for maintenance and consumables. Mr Wilby said that the Panel had considered that the allowance should be used for the purchase and maintenance of computer hardware rather than to meet the cost of broadband or consumables. Members also questioned how the Panel had arrived at the level of the proposed allowance and were reminded that the

allowance was to be viewed as a contribution to meeting their IT requirements and had not been determined by seeking to establish a benchmark figure for the provision of specific hardware but was considered to be realistic given the Panel members own experience of the costs of purchasing equipment.

The Deputy Chief Executive and Director of Corporate Resources reminded Members that the reason for the review was to come up with a clear and fair scheme to assist Members in accessing the information they needed in their roles against the recognition that the Council could not afford to supply computers to all Members and provide the support that those computers would require. Members also questioned the position with regard to tax payments if a Member opted for the new allowance or was provided with a laptop by the Council. The Deputy Chief Executive and Director of Corporate Resources confirmed that if a Council provided laptop was used solely for Council purposes this would not be a taxable benefit but was likely to become one if it was also used for personal use. In terms of the allowance the Council would be under a duty to tax at source but if this was used to purchase equipment solely for use on Council business it would be possible to claim back the tax or to adjust the tax code for the following year. It would only be possible to establish the position for each Member by writing to ask them about usage each year.

A Member noted the Panel's recommendation that the allowance should lapse if the level of Basic Allowance reached the level recommended by the Panel in its Review of the Scheme of Allowances in 2008 and wondered when Basic Allowance might reach this level. The Leader of the Council advised that because of the lower levels of allowances adopted by the Council this level was not likely to be reached imminently.

Members discussed the merits of the Panel's recommendation contained in paragraph 7(c) of the report and decided that it was important that this provision would be considered in exceptional circumstances. It was felt that this should be included in the proposed changes to the Members Allowances Scheme in paragraph 3.7 of the Scheme in the Constitution. It was noted that if a Member had been provided with a new Council laptop they would not be entitled to the proposed IT allowance and that the allowance should be an annual contribution towards the cost of purchasing or maintaining computer hardware. It was suggested that the recommendation in paragraph 7(a) should provide for the allowance to be paid on a yearly basis rather than monthly.

Members felt that it was important for the purpose for which the IT Allowance could be used to be clearly stated in the revised Scheme of Allowances. It was also confirmed that if the Modern Local Government Group's recommendations were agreed by the Council then the payment of the new allowance to those Members who wished to claim it would be paid in the current financial year. Members also briefly discussed the JIRP's suggestion that the increasing use of computer based communications and transmission of documents could enable the Council to make significant progress towards paperless meetings. Members had conflicting views of the merits of this, especially in areas where internet access was poor, but recognised that this

might have to be revisited during future budget discussions.

Resolved: That

**That Council in giving consideration to the Report and recommendations of the Joint Independent Remuneration Panel (JIRP) as included within Appendix A to the report, be recommended to:**

- (a) adopt the allowance as set out in paragraph 7 of the report, as recommended by the JIRP, with minor changes of wording to recommendations (a) and (c) suggested by the Modern Local Government Group, and be met from within budget for 2011/12 and as a growth item for future years;**
- (b) update Appendix G Clause 3.7 of the Constitution in its entirety as set out within Appendix B to the report incorporating the allowance as set out in (a) above; and**
- (c) formally record thanks to the members of the JIRP, Barry Cushway, Sue Holes, Simon Knott, Jean Selmes and Colin Wilby for their work in preparing the review of IT allowances and provision of computers for Members”.**

Note: Text in bold constitutes the MLG’s recommendations to the Council

