

Members' Allowances Working Group Report in response to JIRP Spring 2023 report

Governance Committee at its meeting on 6 June 2023 were asked to review the report by the JIRP. It was decided to form a working group to further consider the JIRP recommendations, in particular whether SDC should adopt these proposals or remain with the current SDC allowance scheme or adopt a different scheme.

The working group was chaired by Councillor Bayley and was formed of Cllrs Bayley, Scott and Clayton.

The key areas of difference between the JIRP and the current councillor allowances formed the basis of the discussion and are as below:

	Current scheme	JIRP
Deputy leader allowance	£13,269	£10,505
Opposition	£298 per member	5 members and above £5,529 per group
Meals / subsistence	£9.86/£12.21 Lunch / Eve	None

General considerations

- A desire to keep within existing SDC budget and concerns re cost of living.
- Understand rationale for JIRP approach and other councils' approaches.
- Limit scope of working group and recommendations to the 3 areas of difference between the current scheme and the JIRP proposals and understand JIRP's rationale for proposing change.

Summary of Views Received from Members

- The opposition party leader allowance be split between recognized opposition group leaders in proportion to their group membership as job of all to challenge - eg divide £5,529 by 20 opposition = £276.45 per members so Lib Dem 14 x £276.45 = £3,870.30, Greens £1105.80, Other £552.90 etc. Recognizes all opposition councillors have a role not just the largest party
- Deputy may have an increased role under new leadership - allowance was 60% of leaders historically.
- Dartford Allowances not stated and are higher than Sevenoaks - Deputy £18,000. Need to compare with all other authorities in Kent to see if reduction of £3,000 proposed by JIRP fair.
- Deputy Cabinet members should receive an allowance in line with or higher than Committee Chairs.
- Subsistence allowances should continue to attract widest possible spread of councillors.
- Should SDC have an automatic annual increase when other councils do not?
- Not to reduce opposition members' allowances.

Process

The working group took feedback from both the author of the JIRP report, members and compared other Kent district schemes.

Committee interviewed and took feedback from:

- Authors of JIRP report to understand the rationale for the proposed changes
- Tonbridge Wells and Tonbridge and Malling Councils
- Various SDC councillors

Key information and considerations established during process

DEPUTY LEADER

- Deputy leader role allowances vary considerably. For example Tonbridge deputy paid 75% of Leader which is exceptionally high but many councils do not pay Deputy Leaders at all.
- Sevenoaks Deputy Leader allowance is a statistical outlier within Deputy leader allowances although this was not the case historically (as it was increased in the previous review)
- JIRP had suggested decrease to bring closer in line with Kent mean (still 5% higher) and set between current level and a Cabinet member.
- The Working Group considered the report and acknowledged that the Deputy Allowance is a statistical outlier and above average.
- Whilst wanting to ensure Sevenoaks allowances are in line with the rest of Kent working group felt it was unfair to reduce the allowance mid-term.
- The Working Group felt a viable option would be freezing the allowance until such a time as it falls within 10% of the Kent Councils Deputy Allowance mean.

OPPOSITION

- JIRP suggested a move to a single fixed payment for Opposition Leader (rather than based per member as per SDC) and that the level of allowance should be set at that of the most highly compensated chair on the Council - £5,529 per annum together with a recommendation that neither a Leader nor any members of the Leader's group can serve on Cabinet/the Executive, and that their group is comprised of at least 5 councillors.
- JIRP felt a lump sum opposition payment more easily administered than per member sums.
- Working group felt that we should acknowledge the value of all opposition and therefore a per opposition member allowance was more appropriate
- Working group did not feel a cut in the allowance would be appropriate and felt we should retain the £298 figure per group member. Based on the current Council make up this would equate to £6,258 (13% higher than the fixed sum recommended by JIRP).
- This should be reviewed in advance of the next election cycle.

SUBSISTENCE

- Subsistence allowance is the least used and rarely claimed, if ever, allowance.
- JIRP had suggested it be removed as rarely claimed.
- Many councils have abolished it
- Working group felt it should be retained in order to ensure no Councillor is disadvantaged but recommended that the wording be tightened up to ensure it is only claimed when Councillors are attending council related business out of district to reflect normal working practices.

DEPUTY PORTFOLIO HOLDERS

- It was noted that JIRP suggested we review the need for allowances for deputy portfolio holders.
- It was noted that most deputy portfolio holders have other roles and allowances which negate the need for payment of this allowance
- It was agreed this should be reviewed alongside all allowances prior to the next election cycle.

GENERAL

- Group stressed importance of undertaking this review prior to new Councillors being elected and therefore recommended that allowances should be reviewed in advance of the next election cycle.
- Group did not feel the need to discuss any other aspect of allowances

Recommendation to Governance Committee

The recommendations of JIRP be agreed subject to following changes: