

REVIEW OF IT ALLOWANCES/PROVISION OF COMPUTERS FOR MEMBERS

MODERN LOCAL GOVERNMENT GROUP – 6 OCTOBER 2011

Report of the: Corporate Resources Director

Status: For consideration and decision

Also considered by: Council 18 October 2011

This report supports the Key Aim of effective management of Council resources

Portfolio Holder Cllr. Fleming and Cllr. Ramsay

Head of Service Head of Legal and Democratic Services – Christine Nuttall and
Head of Finance and Human Resources – Tricia Marshall

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

- (a) adopt the allowance as set out in paragraph 7 as recommended by the JIRP, with the exception of 7(c) 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 the Appendix B incorporating the allowance as set out in (a) above; and
- (c) formally record thanks to 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.

Background

- 1 The Joint Independent Remuneration Panel (JIRP) were requested by Officers of Sevenoaks District Council (SDC) in July 2011 to give consideration to the addition of an IT allowance to the Members' current allowance scheme.
- 2 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.
- 3 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 had ceased.

- 4 In preparation for the above changes the Council had been developing a simple approach to Members' access to Council information and communications via a new Members' Electronic Portal which is an extranet which enables web-based access to the e-mail system and all the necessary information systems and databases.
- 5 The advent of the Members' Portal means that Members are now able to access securely everything they need to perform their duties from any internet access point including a home computer. This, coupled with a background of an approximate 23% reduction in IT budgets in recent years, meant that there is little scope for the Council to supply computer equipment for all Members.

The JIRP's Recommendations

- 6 The JIRP carried out research and were briefed by Officers at SDC where it became clear that the use of computer based information and communications is now essential for Councillors to be able to fulfil their responsibilities. Their Report is set out as Appendix A to this report.
- 7 The JIRP's recommendations were as follows:
 - (a) An allowance of £120 per annum to be available to councillors paid monthly and separately from the Basic and other allowances. This allowance would be available to Members who use 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 is 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) This new allowance would replace the entirety of Clause 3.7 of the SDC Members' Allowance scheme which currently provides for fax machines and Council supplied laptops to Members.
 - (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 is paying the appropriate level of Basic Allowance recommended by JIRP in their full review published in late 2008, this being £5754.
- 8 With regard to recommendation (c) above, this would be very difficult to put into practice and evaluate as Officers have no power to means-test Members.
- 9 It must be stressed that any allowance will be subject to tax, dependent on the individual Member's circumstances.

Key Implications

Financial Implications

- 10 The JIRP states in their report that “the increasing use of computer based communications and transmission of documents should enable the Council to make significant progress towards paperless meetings and in due course there will be cost savings in staff time, printing, photocopying and postage which will help to offset the cost of this allowance.
- 11 In the light of these comments Members may wish to give consideration to reducing the level of paper Agendas and Reports that are produced.
- 12 In reality the adoption of the proposal will have an immediate financial impact of some £7,000 including oncosts. This could be met from within budget in 2011/12 and be considered as a growth item for future years.

Legal, Human Rights etc

- 13 Section 20 of The Local Authorities (Members’ Allowances) (England) Regulations 2003 requires each authority to establish an Independent Remuneration Panel.
- 14 Section 19 of the 2003 Regulations state that before an authority make or amends a scheme, the authority shall have regard to the recommendations made in relation to it by the Independent Remuneration Panel.
- 15 Section 16 of the 2003 Regulations places a duty on the Council to publish as soon as reasonably practicable after making any amendments to the current Members’ Allowance Scheme a notice in one or more newspapers circulating in its area. The Council must also ensure that copies of the scheme are available for inspection by members of the public at the principal office of the authority, at all reasonable hours.

Equalities

- 16 Equality Impact issues have been considered as part of the proposals. The scheme applies equally to all Members and, for this reason, it is not considered appropriate to complete a full Equality Impact Assessment.

Impact on and outcomes for the Community

- 17 The changes envisaged will enable Members to use computer based information and communications in order to fulfil their responsibilities as Councillors.

Risk Assessment

- 18 Remuneration for Members is intended to ensure that there are not available obstacles preventing Members from taking part in the work of the Council.

Conclusions

- 19 The funding that initially allowed the Council to provide a laptop to each Member in 2004 was a one off Government funding initiative where £60,000 was secured which equipped all 54 Councillors with a basic laptop computer. 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 central government funding had ceased. This was against a background of an approximate 23% reduction in IT budgets in recent years.
- 59 The recommendations of an allowance would compensate Members who use their own IT resources to undertake their council duties. Where a Member has been provided with a Council funded computer, no allowance should be paid and no provision will be made to purchase any additional computers for Members. The few remaining computers have been allocated to Members that either do not have personal IT equipment, access to other IT equipment or the ability to obtain such equipment.

Background Papers:

The Local Authorities (Members' Allowances) (England) Regulations 2003

JIRP's Report for Sevenoaks District Council Re: IT Allowances/Provision of computers for Members

Members' Allowance Scheme (2011/12) set out in the Council's Constitution

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