

Joint Independent Remuneration Panel

Report for Sevenoaks District Council

Re: IT Allowances/Provision of computers for Members

Summary

We understand that access to computer-based communications and information systems is now an essential requirement for the role of an elected councillor at Sevenoaks District Council.

The current system of Council-provided laptops is no longer tenable due to the withdrawal of central government funding and reduced capacity in the Council's IT Department to support them. The new web-based Members' Portal enables councillors to access all the necessary internal systems via standard domestic computer equipment.

The Panel recommends that Sevenoaks District Council adopt a supplementary allowance of £120 per annum payable to elected Councillors as a contribution towards the costs of purchasing and maintaining suitable computer hardware to enable them to access the Council's systems via the Members' Portal.

Background

The Panel was requested by Officers of Sevenoaks District Council in July 2011 to give consideration to the addition of an IT allowance to the Members' current allowances scheme.

A background paper highlighted that laptops were provided to SDC Members in 2004 under a central government-funded scheme called *Implementing Electronic Government*. At that time funding of £60000 was secured which equipped all 54 Councillors with a basic laptop computer with the expectation that Members would increasingly utilise electronic information and communications to carry out their council responsibilities. These laptops had to be specially configured to enable secure access to a number of separate council systems in compliance with corporate IT security policies and the *Government Connects* code.

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. In preparation for this the Council had been developing a simpler approach to Members' access to Council information and communications via a new Members' Portal. This is an extranet which enables web-based access via one log-in to the e-mail system and all the necessary information systems and databases.

Against a background of c.23% reduction in IT budgets in recent years there is little scope for the Council to supply computer equipment for all Members. Besides, the advent of the Members' Portal means that specifically-configured equipment is

unnecessary and Members will be able to securely access everything they need to perform their duties from any internet access point including a home computer.

Evidence & Research

The Panel were briefed by Officers and given a demonstration of the Portal. We met with Councillors Bracken, Parkin and Gaywood and a subsequent telephone meeting was held with Cllr Fleming in his capacity as Cabinet lead for IT. The Panel met separately to consider their findings and to agree this recommendation.

For background and guidance we consulted the Councillor Commission Report on *Members Remuneration* (2007). However, it is clear that there is no consensus on the provision of information technology to Councillors: *“Panels are increasingly being asked to provide advice upon such matters. The current guidance gives little help”*

A review of other Council allowances schemes in the South East again gave few pointers. Very few councils currently pay an allowance specifically targeted at information technology and those that do have adopted different approaches specific to their circumstances.

We are advised by SDC Officers that the indicative purchase cost of a basic laptop with the necessary software (basic anti-virus, Microsoft Office Home Use Program) would be in the region of £550 at current prices. From our own knowledge it is clear that the cost of computer consumables such as printer ink differ widely, as does the cost of domestic broadband (which is often tied in with other supply i.e. satellite TV).

Panel Recommendation

On the basis of our briefings from Members and Officers at SDC it is clear that the use of computer-based information and communications is now essential for Councillors to be able to fulfil their responsibilities. There are facilities available for Members at the Council offices in Sevenoaks, but these are only accessible on working days and are not convenient for Members who live some distance from the town. Therefore, personal access to a computer is a pre-requisite of the role.

We recommend an allowance of £120 per annum to be available to councillors, paid monthly and separately from the Basic and other allowances.

The above allowance would be available to 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. As with all allowances, Members can choose to opt out of receiving the allowance if they so wish. It is important to stress that this is intended as a contribution towards the cost of computer equipment and clearly does not cover the full cost, given that it would be available for private use.

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.

We consider that the increasing use of computer-based communication 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.

This new allowance would replace the entirety of Clause 3.7 of the SDC Members' Allowances scheme which currently provides for fax machines and Council-supplied laptops to Members.

The Panel recommends that this 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 the Panel in our full review published in late 2008.

Joint Independent Remuneration Panel

The Joint Independent Remuneration Panel (JIRP) for Tonbridge and Malling Borough Council, Tunbridge Wells Borough Council and Sevenoaks District Council was originally established in 2001 and now operates under the Local Authorities (Members' Allowances) (England) Regulations 2003. The function of the panel is to make recommendations to Council in accordance with Statutory Instruments (primarily 2003 No.1021 and No.1692).

The JIRP is appointed jointly by the three Councils but considers each Council individually and makes separate recommendations for each according to the particular structures and requirements of the organisation.

Panel Members are:

Barry Cushway
Sue Holmes
Simon Knott
Jean Selmes
Colin Wilby

1 September 2011

