

REPORT OF THE INDEPENDENT REMUNERATION PANEL (MEMBERS' ALLOWANCES) TO STROUD DISTRICT COUNCIL

Introduction

1. The Local Government Act, 2000 required local authorities to produce a Scheme in respect of councillors' allowances. Under the Local Government (Members' Allowances)(England) Regulations 2003, Councils have to set up an independent remuneration panel to make recommendations on members' allowances.

2. The following Panel was appointed in February, 2020 :

Wynn Bartlett
Chris Markley (Autumn 2020)
Graham Russell (elected as Panel Chair)

3. In the early part of 2020, the Panel commenced a detailed review of the Members' Allowances Scheme with a view to reporting recommendations to the Council later that year. There was significant engagement with Stroud District Councillors many of whom were interviewed by the Panel and very useful evidence received. In addition, all members were invited to complete a survey relating to their roles as councillors.

4. Unfortunately, the Panel's review was suspended as a result of the pandemic. In consultation with the Council, the Panel has agreed to delay its report until later in the year. This will also enable the Panel to take into account any relevant issues following the planned Council elections.

5. The Panel would wish to point out to the Council that the main review so far has already identified a number of issues and anomalies within the Scheme which would have been the subject of specific recommendations.

6. In addition, the Panel remains committed to recommending a Scheme that (a) reflects the important, voluntary work that all elected councillors perform on behalf of their communities; and (b) does not seek to create barriers to anyone who might wish to stand as a councillor or to take an active part in the governance of the Council.

7. This interim report however addresses the issue of members' ICT allowances and provision which is particularly relevant and timely in the context of the pandemic and its impact on councillors. The Panel has worked closely with the Member Working Group on Members' ICT provision and has greatly valued the engagement with its Chair, Councillor Ken Tucker.

Members' IT provision

8. The current Scheme makes provision for an IT allowance of up to £390 to be claimed by each member, for each 4 x year period of their term of office. This allowance has remained at this level since it was agreed in 2010 – and the Working Group has recorded that its value in terms of purchasing power has effectively been reduced to £290 because of inflation.
9. The purpose of the allowance is to enable members to purchase computer equipment to be owned, maintained and used by the member for Council and personal use.
10. In its own evidence received from councillors, the Panel acknowledged a body of opinion that stated the current allowance was inadequate to meet the requirements of members and of the Council. *(A specific example being the need for all equipment to have web cam provision to facilitate effective remote working during/post Covid-19)*. Also, there was no clear view as to the extent to which the allowance provision should be replaced by the direct provision of equipment by the Council to all members.
11. The Panel recognises the importance of members' ICT and other support for the democratic process in a post-Covid environment and the impact that this may have on councillors in all of their roles. It is particularly mindful of
 - the need for flexibility in approach to cater for all councillors' needs – including special needs;
 - the balance that will need to be struck between flexibility to meet members' needs and the effective delivery of member support;
 - the ability of the Council (i.e. Democratic Services and ICT Departments) to give full and effective technical and operational support as appropriate to members in their ICT needs;
 - the need for any future arrangements to be cost effective in their administration and delivery and
 - the need for robust member training on ICT issues.

12. The Panel has received a report from the Members' Working Group with its recommendations for the future. The Panel fully supports the conclusions of the Working Group that a single approach to this issue is unlikely to be appropriate at the present time. If members are to be given the choice of an allowance or the direct provision of a Council managed device, both arrangements must be robust enough and clear enough to ensure, as far as possible, members choosing either option are not disadvantaged in what they can access to meet their needs.
13. Using the findings of the Working Group, the Panel is recommending an increase in the allowance in order for members to purchase and claim for specific items of equipment they may need as follows:

Item	Maximum amount members can claim per item:	Condition for claim
Laptop or tablet	£500*	A Device purchased with the allowance can be used for personal use but will not be supported by ICT
Anti-virus protection	£25	
Printer	£50	Members who have claimed for this allowance will not be provided with committee reports in paper format unless the printer is not working. <i>Note: the Members Basic Allowance provides for costs towards paper and ink cartridges.</i>
Monitor	£90	
HDMI Cable for monitor	£7	
Keyboard	£20	
Mouse	£10	
TOTAL	£702	

**the indicative cost of a Council provided device + maintenance*

14. Based on these figures, the maximum allowance for those members choosing the allowance option, would be £702 over a 4 x year period. As can be seen from the table, this is structured on the basis of up to £525 covering the device (plus maintenance) and anti-virus package and up to £177 for the ancillary equipment described in the table.
15. The Panel has agreed that those members not taking up the ICT allowance provision and instead receiving a Council –managed device (indicative value £525) should still be entitled to claim for such ancillary equipment as is consistent with the Council’s policy on information management for members.
16. The Panel believes this increase is justified in order to put in place ICT arrangements that are robust enough to meet the requirements of councillors and of the Council as it moves forward to a post-Covid style of working and the role that ICT will play in that.
17. In all cases, claims against the allowance should be processed on the basis of receipted expenditure and conditions set out alongside. Also, arrangements should be put in place to meet special needs, including any adjustment in allowances, where an individual’s exceptional circumstances dictate.
18. Accordingly, the Panel **RECOMMENDS: That**
 - (1) the ICT allowance be set at a maximum of £702 per member, for those members opting not to receive a Council-managed device, with effect from May, 2021;**
 - (2) the allowance be based on the indicative values at para 13 relating to the purchase of a device and ancillary equipment;**
 - (3) those members who opt to receive a Council – managed device instead of the ICT allowance, be entitled to claim for approved ancillary equipment, up to the maximum of £177;**
 - (4) The Strategic Director of Resources be delegated authority to agree variations in the allocation of the allowance at his discretion to meet any special requirements of councillors; and**
 - (5) the Panel keeps this matter under review, as part of each fundamental review of the Members’ Allowances Scheme.**
19. In conclusion, the Panel wishes to pay tribute to the work of the Council’s Member Working Group in tackling this issue and for initiating the core groundwork of evidence which we have used in justification for our recommendations.

Graham Russell, Chair of Panel
February, 2021