

Report of the Independent Remuneration Panel, July 2025

The current Members' allowances scheme was adopted by Full Council in 2023 and remains in place until 1 April 2027. When the Council resolved to adopt this scheme, it committed to undertake a midpoint review on the scheme. West Oxfordshire District Council's Independent Remuneration Panel (IRP) met on 27 January 2025 to carry out this review.

Members of the Council were invited to make representations to the Independent Remuneration Panel prior to the meeting and one such representation was made, which related to ICT allowances.

The basic allowance paid to all members is indexed on a flat rate (based on officers' pay increases). The Panel considered this effective, and the Panel has not proposed changes to the value of the basic allowance or the index used to uplift its value annually.

The Panel considered a report from the Head of Democratic and Electoral Services and allowances data for the South East England Region. In doing so, the Panel focused on the following specific areas;

- Vice-Chair of Council's allowance
- Co-optees' allowance
- ICT allowances

As this was intended to be a midpoint review, it was not considered appropriate to carry out a comprehensive review of the scheme at this time. The Panel therefore did not focus in detail on other areas of the scheme or the levels of special responsibility allowances.

Vice-Chair's allowance

The officer report highlighted that some members have certain roles on the Council which attract a special responsibility allowance (SRA). SRAs are paid in addition to the basic allowance in recognition of the additional roles that these members undertake and the extra time, commitment and responsibility that comes with these roles. SRAs are calculated as multiples of the basic allowance and will therefore increase in proportion to the basic allowance when uplifts are applied to the basic allowance.

The report stated that following a change in the structure of a Committee, Council agreed that the Vice-Chair of a single Overview and Scrutiny Committee be paid a Special Responsibility Allowance (SRA) of 0.5x the basic allowance, reducing to 0.25x basic allowance if there is more than one Overview and Scrutiny Committee. The Vice-Chair's role involves presiding at meetings in the absence of the Chair and assisting with leading the function and supporting the smooth running of the Committee. While no other Committee Vice-Chair position currently attracts an SRA, the IRP considered whether the Vice-Chair of Council should be paid an SRA in recognition of this role.

The Vice-Chair of Council is responsible for presiding at full Council meetings in the absence of the Chair and supporting the Chair in presiding at full Council meetings. These meetings have increased in complexity recently with the introduction of webcasting and electronic voting. This has resulted in an increase of tasks for the Chair eg. ensuring the correct use of desk microphones and that all members have voted. While officers can support the Chair in preparing for a meeting, it is often most appropriate for the Vice-Chair to support the work at the meeting, as full Council is a member-led forum. In addition, the Vice-Chair of Council is expected to attend pre-meetings ahead of full-Council meetings and will support or deputise for the Chair at a range of civic events that take place throughout the year. The Vice-Chair is invited to approximately 20-25% of civic events on behalf of the Council.

The IRP considered this report as well as the benchmarking information from South East Employers, which showed that 50 of the 68 local authorities paid an allowance to their Vice-Chair of Council. It also was recognised that having the Vice-Chair take a more active role increased resilience for the Council.

The Panel agreed that, considering the workload associated with the role of Vice-Chair of Council, the Vice-Chair should be paid an SRA of 0.25x the basic allowance. It is suggested that this be revisited after a reasonable operational period, to review if this amount remains appropriate considering the Vice-Chair's responsibilities.

RECOMMENDATION

1. That Council agrees to introduce an SRA set at 0.25x the basic allowance for the position of Vice-Chair of Council, backdated to 21 May 2025.

Co-optees' allowances

The officer's report highlighted that the Regulations provide that councils may pay allowances to Co-opted Members i.e. members of committees who are not elected members.

The Council currently has two independent members of its Audit and Governance Committee and three Independent Persons who are consulted by the Monitoring Officer on matters related to standards and the conduct of Members and act as co-opted members at standards hearings. Having at least one Independent Person on Standards is a requirement of the Localism Act 2011, and having Independent Members on Audit is considered good practice by the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA). To provide resilience in the positions of Independent Persons and Independent Members, the Council has in the last two years been through an open recruitment process and appointed additional co-optees so that conflicts of interest and unavailability have not resulted in standards matters being unable to proceed.

The Council currently allows co-opted Members to claim a co-optees' allowance of £75 for up to four hours and £150 for more than four hours but less than 24 hours for eligible meetings and other duties as in 5.1 of the scheme. This figure has been in place for at least 6 years and has not had any uplifts applied to it during this time.

The Panel considered whether it would be appropriate to amend the way that these allowances are paid out to co-optees, which would make it a simpler process for our co-optees to claim and officers to administer. Administering the existing scheme involves keeping a manual record of meeting attendance and instructing payroll to make payments on an ad hoc (quarterly) basis. As well as being easier to administer, the Panel believed that a flat scheme would ensure auditability and avoid internal control issues.

The Panel agreed that a flat rate scheme would be a reasonable model and noted that this was operated at most other councils in the South East region. As a fixed rate payment would not be pro-rata to the work undertaken, the Panel felt it was important that the amount should be reasonable to the co-optees' overall workload. In discussion, it was noted that Independent Persons (IPs) who were consulted on standards matters have a higher workload than those who sit on the Audit and Governance Committee. While it was felt that the latter should be incentivised to

attend meetings, this was less relevant for IPs on standards, who are expected to make contributions outside of meetings e.g. by reviewing sometimes complex materials related to standards complaints and corresponding with officers over email as well as at formal meetings. For this reason, the Panel agreed that the existing attendance-based scheme should be retained for Independent Members on the Audit and Governance Committee, but that a flat-rate scheme should be put in place for IPs who are consulted on standards matters.

The Panel consulted with the IPs to seek their feedback on the proposed changes before making the final recommendations to Council. The comments from the IPs are summarised as follows;

- A move to a standard level of expenses for IPs would be advantageous for the Council in terms of budgeting, payroll transactions and administration efficiency and was supported by IPs.
- While this would mean a flat rate regardless of workload, IPs did not consider this problematic on balance.
- As the figure has not been uplifted in a number of years, it was suggested that the IRP may wish to review this at a future point. An alternative way of operating the scheme could be directly paying a smaller base rate, plus a low rate per case claimable by the IPs directly.
- All the IPs stated that the proposed changes would not discourage them from continuing their roles. It was also considered that a flat rate may make the role more attractive if advertised in future.

As the most recent payment made to co-optees was in April 2025 for duties undertaken up to 31 March 2025 it is considered to backdate the payment to the IPs to the start of the current financial year, 1 April 2025.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

2. That the existing co-optees' allowance (£75 for up to four hours and £150 for more than four hours but less than 24 hours for eligible meetings and other duties as in 5.1 of the scheme) be retained for Independent Members on the Audit and Governance Committee.
3. That Independent Persons who are consulted on standards matters be paid a flat rate of £1000 a year, backdated to 1 April 2025.

ICT Allowances

One Member submitted a representation requesting the Panel review the Council's approach to ICT provision. The Council does not currently provide Councillors with council-issued devices or an allowance to purchase their own.

The Panel considered this representation and noted that part of the role of a member takes place online (e.g. email, accessing meeting papers digitally) and thought it would be reasonable for members to be provided with either council-issued devices or an allowance to cover the cost of purchasing a device. It was noted that most councils in the South East of England region do not pay an ICT allowance or provide devices, and of the ones who do, most provide devices instead of paying an additional allowance (the Regulations governing members' allowances do not include provision for ICT allowances).

The Panel suggested that the Council could explore the option of providing members with Council-issued devices. The IRP did not make a recommendation to the Council on this and suggest that it could be re-considered at a future review.