

## **EPPING FOREST DISTRICT COUNCIL COMMITTEE MINUTES**

**Committee:** Member Remuneration Panel                      **Date:** Wednesday, 25 January 2012

**Place:** Group Room, Room 1.19, First Floor, Civic Offices, High Street, Epping                      **Time:** 5.30 - 6.45 am

**Members Present:** D Jackman, Ms R Kelly and S A Lye

**Other Councillors:**

**Apologies:**

**Officers Present:** I Willett (Assistant to the Chief Executive) and G Lunnun (Assistant Director (Democratic Services))

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### **1. CHAIRMAN**

#### **RESOLVED:**

That Ms R Kelly be elected Chairman for the meeting.

### **2. MINUTES OF THE LAST MEETING**

#### **RESOLVED:**

That the minutes of the meeting held on 3 February 2011 be taken as read and signed by the Chairman as a correct record.

### **3. MEMBER ROLE ACCOUNTABILITY STATEMENTS**

The Panel received Member Role Accountability Statements which had been adopted by the Council and had been referred to the Panel to assist in making future recommendations regarding the amounts of allowances.

The Panel agreed that the Statements would be useful in future if there was a need to undertake a form of job evaluation of various member roles.

### **4. MEMBERS' ALLOWANCES - REVIEW**

The Panel was advised that following consideration of its report in 2011, the Council's Overview and Scrutiny Committee had requested that the following aspects be reviewed:

- (a) the special responsibility allowance payable to the Chairman of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee in the light of proposed changes to reporting at Council meetings;
- (b) the IT Connectivity Allowance; eligibility and payment levels; and

(c) review of the wording in respect of an assessment of hours worked by Councillors as a basis for calculating the basic allowance by reference to the national minimum wage.

**(a) SRA – Chairman of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee**

The Panel was advised that the SRA for the Chairman of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee had traditionally been the same as the basic allowance (£4,300 per annum in the approved scheme with implementation currently being an amount of £3,150 per annum). It noted that this compared with the SRA for a portfolio holder of £6,450 in the approved scheme with implementation currently being £6,300 per annum.

The Panel was informed that the SRA for the Chairman of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee had been queried by members in the context of recent changes to the Council's Constitution providing for Scrutiny Panel Chairmen, rather than the Overview and Scrutiny Committee Chairman, to present the reports from Panels at full Council meetings.

The Panel considered the report submitted to the Council on 13 December 2011 which had led to the change in the Constitution.

The Panel took the view that any reduction in the SRA would imply a reduction in the responsibilities/time commitment of the Overview and Scrutiny Chairman. The Panel concluded that the change which had taken place had not reduced the responsibilities/time commitment of the Chairman and amounted to an administrative change only.

**RESOLVED:**

That the Council be recommended to make no change to the SRA for the Chairman of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee in the light of the changes in reporting on Overview and Scrutiny matters at Council meetings.

**(b) IT Connectivity Allowance**

The Panel was advised that some Overview and Scrutiny members had queried why the Council should continue to pay this sum at a time when the vast majority of councillors had the required access to the Internet in their homes. The Panel noted that members had also suggested the amounts of this allowance were arbitrary and the link between these payments and Connectivity training courses had been queried.

The Panel recalled that the sum of £500 per annum payable to members in their first year of office was expected to assist them with the cost of a personal computer (if necessary), internet connection and any consumables. The payment of £250 per annum in subsequent years was designed to assist with the cost of consumable items for the computer. The Panel discussed the Member Connectivity Scheme and the views expressed by members. The Panel noted that members had also expressed some interest in electronic (rather than paper) agenda despatch linked to handheld mobile computers (tablets) and officers were due to report on this in due course.

**RESOLVED:**

That further consideration of this issue be deferred pending the outcome of the introduction of possible electronic agenda despatch.

**(c) Basic Allowance**

The Panel was advised that the basis for calculating the basic allowance had been queried by some members. The Panel was informed that when they had first considered the Members' Remuneration Scheme several years ago there had been a lack of data available on which to base recommendations. As a result one of the indicators taken into account had been the hourly National Minimum Wage multiplied by an average number of hours worked per week (15 per councillor). The 15 hours per week had reflected the nationally held view that time spent by members on Council business should be "discounted" by between 25% and 50% in recognition of the public service element.

The Panel was advised that members had expressed concern about the average number of hours used for the calculation and had questioned how this assessment compared with those of other councils. Use of the National Minimum Wage itself had also been questioned with a comment that councillors were not employees.

The Panel discussed its calculation for the basic allowance. It was pointed out that in more recent years account had also been taken of comparative data available from other councils. The latest available comparison figures showed that the average amount paid by similar councils in the region was £4,500 per annum per member which compared with this Council's basic allowance of £4,300 per annum with implementation currently £3,150 per annum. The Panel noted that a figure for £4,742 was achieved by applying the current National Minimum Wage of £6.08 per hour to a 15 hour week. The Panel also noted that in 2010, members of all local authorities had been invited to complete a census questionnaire which had included a question asking how many hours were spent on Council business each week. Twenty-four of this Council's 58 members had completed the national questionnaire and the average number of hours for those members in relation to that question had been 16.3 hours per week.

In the light of the comments made by Overview and Scrutiny members the Panel requested that further research be undertaken to establish how Panels of other authorities in the region came to their conclusions about the amount of basic allowance.

**RESOLVED:**

- (1) That to enable the Panel to give further consideration to the basis for calculating basic allowance, the officers collate data from other authorities in Essex and the adjoining areas about the matters taken into account by their Remuneration Panels in recommending the level of basic allowance; and
- (2) That the data collected be reported to a future meeting.

**5. TRAVEL EXPENSES - CAR TRAVEL**

**(a) Approved Duties**

The Panel was advised that the current Members' Remuneration Scheme specified approved duties for the purpose of the payment of travelling and subsistence expenses. The Panel noted that the list of duties included "attendance at any

meeting or other official function at the request of the Chief Executive, Deputy Chief Executive or a Service Director including meetings between group representatives for a particular committee and officers".

The Panel considered an addition to the list to reflect meetings attended by councillors at the invitation of other officers.

**RESOLVED:**

That the Council be recommended to amend paragraph 1(e) of Schedule 2 to the Members' Allowances Scheme to read:

"Attendance at any meeting or other official function at the request of the Chief Executive, Deputy Chief Executive, a Service Director or an Assistant Director, including meetings between group representatives for a particular committee and officers".

**(b) Rates of Travel by Car**

The Panel was informed that the Council's current scheme provided that the normal rates for car travel were the same as the higher rates paid to officers classed as casual users. These rates were reviewed annually at national level by the Joint Council for Local Government Services.

The Panel was advised that members received a tax free approved amount when using their own vehicles. Currently the "approved mileage allowance payments" (tax free amounts) were 45p per mile for the first 10,000 miles. The Panel noted that the current rates paid to members were in excess of the tax free amounts.

The Panel was informed that one member who had been entitled to the rate of 65p per mile in accordance with the Council's scheme had signed a written statement stating that she wished to restrict all of her future claims to 45p per mile (or higher in line with any future increased tax free amounts) in order to avoid payment of tax on the expenses she received for using her vehicle to Council meetings, etc. The Panel considered whether to make a recommendation suggesting that this approach be applied to all member claims.

**RESOLVED:**

That having regard to the ability of a member to forego any part of entitlement to an allowance or expense, no change be recommended to the current rates of travel by car.

**6. JOINT REMUNERATION PANEL**

The Panel noted that in September 2011 Tendring District Council had sought the views of other Essex District/Borough Councils on the "sharing" of an Independent Remuneration Panel. Officers advised that informal views from been had sought from senior members of the Council and the Council's officer Corporate Governance Group and the consensus was that unless some demonstrable benefits could be identified in terms of savings/efficiency there was unlikely to be support for the idea.

**RESOLVED:**

That the response to the approach from Tendring District Council be noted.

**7. BASIS OF MEMBERS' ALLOWANCES**

The Panel noted that at its meeting on 1 November 2011 the Council had resolved:

"That this Council calls on the Government, through the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, to amend the rules on Councillors' remuneration in order that:

(a) potential candidates who are in receipt of State Benefits are able to seek election without placing those State Benefits at risk if elected; and

(b) remuneration is based on a combination of attendance and basic allowance".

The Panel also noted that a reply had been received stating that the Government had no plans at present to change the rules on allowances.

**8. DATE OF NEXT MEETING**

**RESOLVED:**

That the next meeting be held on a date to be agreed.

**CHAIRMAN**