

# Surrey County Council

## Report of the Independent Remuneration Panel November 2023

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## **Executive Summary**

This report provides the Council with the recommendations from the Independent Remuneration Panel (IRP) as prepared under the Local Authorities (Members' Allowances) Regulations 2003. The Independent Remuneration Panel consists of three members; Steve Banks-Smith (Chair), Chris Brown and Pinky Kwok. All panel members are independent of Surrey County Council (the Council) and of any political party. In approaching this work, the Panel has met with a wide range of Members and officers and is grateful for their input. The Panel conducted an online census of Members' views and provided all Members with the opportunity to meet with a Panel member. The Panel has reviewed documentation and data relating to roles and allowances, and collected information about the allowance schemes of other Councils to provide context.

The Panel is grateful for the support provided by Democratic Services, most notably Elliot Sinclair who provided a full induction to new panel members, advised on Council business and governance and delivered essential logistical support including the administration of a Members' Census. The Panel owes him and Democratic Services as a whole, its thanks.

In undertaking this work the Panel recognises that the IRP report of 2020 made 21 recommendations, all of which were accepted. One of the recommendations was the removal of the Special Responsibility Allowance (SRA) from deputy chairs and the introduction of an SRA and a new role for Select Committee Task Group Leads. The IRP conducted further work including the submission of an additional report in 2021 to establish how effective the introduction of the new role had been.

The approach of the panel to this report was to ensure the current allowances were still appropriate given the number of previously adopted recommendations, the challenging fiscal environment and the shift away from office-based roles to home or hybrid working.

## **Part 1 Basic allowance**

The Panel heard views from party leaders, members and officers and also bench-marked the Surrey provision against that of similar sized and funded county authorities. These latter figures can be found at appendix 1.

The 2020 report recommended an annual increase linked to the prevailing Consumer Price Index (CPI) which was accepted. The UK then found itself in an inflationary fiscal environment which led to the council taking the decision to cap the increase. Whilst this is understandable, the Panel feels that any cap should be pre-set. The Panel considers that an appropriate cap, should the same situation arise again, would be at the level of the average staff salary increase for the relevant year.

### **Recommendation 1**

That the Council continues with the 2020 recommendation of linking the basic allowance to the CPI. This should be adjusted on the 1<sup>st</sup> of April each year.

### **Recommendation 2**

That the increase in basic allowance is capped at the level of the average staff salary increase if this is lower than the CPI. The Panel is aware that historically different awards have been made for different staff grades therefore recommends that it is the mean average of the previous year that is utilised.

## **Part 2**

### **Special Responsibility Allowances**

The Panel revisited the existing allowances, spoke to members and officers and conducted a survey open to all members.

The Panel is satisfied that the current range and level of allowances are appropriate but recommends that the SRAs are also linked to the CPI and capped if appropriate, as recommended for the Basic Allowance.

### **Recommendation 3**

That the Council continues with the 2020 recommendation of linking any increase to SRAs to the CPI. This should be adjusted on the 1<sup>st</sup> of April each year.

### **Recommendation 4**

That the increase in SRAs is capped at the average level of the staff salary increase if this is lower than the CPI. The Panel is aware that historically different awards have been made for different staff grades therefore recommends that it is the mean average of the previous year that is utilised

### **Part 3 Inclusivity**

The Panel's terms of reference include the following provision: "The Panel will have regard to the need for the composition of the Council to better reflect the population of Surrey."

The 2020 report made a number of specific recommendations in regard to allowances and these recommendations were all accepted. This Panel has not found that there are any specific further recommendations it could make regarding allowances, other than that covered in Part 5.

The Panel found that a number of members cited an increased workload as a factor in them considering whether to stand again. Other views expressed relating to a growing disaffection with the role were the move from Kingston to Reigate and the number of meetings held during the working day. This was particularly prevalent amongst members who had full or part time working roles outside that of their role as councillors.

The Panel found that a number of members were of the view that recruitment and retention of councillors would be improved by a change in meeting times. This needs to be considered against the fact that some councillors are also Borough councillors whereby evening meeting attendance is more common.

The Panel's overriding aim is to increase the pool of younger, working people potentially available to stand as County councillors in order to provide a more representative cohort.

#### **Recommendation 5.**

That the Council conducts an audit of its meeting schedule with a specific focus on mandatory in-person attendance and any need for the meeting to be during the working day or on a particular day.

#### **Recommendation 6.**

That the Council considers lobbying Central Government to reinstate the right to vote remotely, as was utilised during the COVID pandemic.

#### **Part 4 Expenses and food provision**

The Panel gave consideration as to whether the current provision of subsistence and a provided lunch is still appropriate. It found that the number of claims is low and decreasing year on year. This trend is likely to continue with the advent of home and hybrid working. The move from Kingston to Reigate is also likely to be a factor as the new council offices were cited as being a lot less accessible by a number of members.

The Panel considered whether the provision of a lunch for members attending mandatory meetings at Reigate was an appropriate use of public money. This provision is valued by members and the cost is not significant at a time when members are feeling their workload is increasing and their benefits decreasing.

#### **Recommendation 7**

That the Council retains its existing subsistence and expenses framework including the provision of a lunch for appropriate meetings.

## **Part 5 Hybrid working**

A number of members reported increasing challenges to their workload and also to their health by virtue of working from home increasingly. The Council currently provides members with a laptop although these are not suitable for prolonged daily use particularly given the demography of the current cohort of councillors. The Panel considers that the Council technology provision could be improved but recognises that the purchase by the Council of additional IT hardware could lead to issues around maintenance, repairs, purchase and disposal. The Panel also considers that the solutions are individual to the members and their circumstances. The Panel has heard from members who have identified IT solutions which would mitigate against the challenges of home and hybrid working and therefore believes that the provision of a one-off payment to members would provide significant benefits in terms of support and long-term health. The Panel considers the payment should be in the range of £200 to £300 per member. This would lead to a total cost of £16,200 as a minimum to £24,300. Any IT equipment purchased using this payment would remain the property of the member and therefore their responsibility to maintain and, ultimately, dispose of. This equipment is in addition to the laptop currently provided.

### **Recommendation 8.**

That the council provides a one-off payment to members for bespoke IT solutions. The payment would be to cover a four year term of office but would not be repeated should the member be re-elected.

### **Recommendation 9.**

That the payment be in the range of £200-£300.

## **Summary of recommendations**

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## **Appendices**

### **1. Comparative data from comparable authorities**

#### **Surrey – conservative controlled**

Population – 1,200,000

Number of councillors - 81

Budget for allowances - £1,500,00

Basic allowance for 2021/22 - £13,120.00

#### **Kent – conservative controlled**

Population – 1,589,100

Number of councillors - 81

Budget for allowances - £2,166,400

Basic allowance for 2021/22 - £15,695.12

#### **Hampshire- conservative controlled**

Population – 1,419,330

Number of councillors - 78

Budget for allowances - £1,700,000

Basic allowance for 2021/22 - £13,058.00

#### **Oxfordshire – no overall control**

Population – 696,880

Number of councillors - 63

Budget for allowances - £1,000,000

Basic allowance for 2021/22 - £11.013.77

