

WIRRAL METROPOLITAN BOROUGH COUNCIL

REPORT OF THE INDEPENDENT PANEL ON MEMBERS' ALLOWANCES

JUNE 2019

Introduction

1. The Independent Panel on Members' Allowances met on 4 June 2019 to give urgent consideration to whether Leaders and Deputy Leaders of Minority Groups i.e. Groups having fewer Members than the second largest Opposition Group, should receive Special Responsibility Allowances. Also, following representations made by the Director of Pensions, the Panel was requested to give consideration to them and make a recommendation in respect of the amount of Special Responsibility Allowance that the Chair of the Pensions Committee should receive. The Panel comprised:

Peter Bounds, Former Chief Executive of Liverpool City Council (Chairman)
Nunzia Bertali, Consular Correspondent
Pauline Brown, Eclipse Executive Ltd
Ray Allan, Solicitor (Retired) – Apologised for absence

Budgetary Pressures

2. We are aware that there has been pressure because of austerity to keep Members' Allowances at the same level for a number of years. The Council continues to face considerable financial challenges and it is vital to ensure that public money is well spent and that all allowances are justified and merited. Members had previously given a lead on this and, with the support of the Panel, elected to take a 5% cut in basic allowance in 2011 and there have been no increases since then.

Periodic Review of Members' Allowances

3. We began a periodic review of Members' Allowances on 14 November 2018 but its work has been put on hold until 25 September 2019 when a further meeting has been scheduled to continue this review.

4. One Member had heard that the Panel was meeting and had sent in written representations which we agreed to take into account, as part of our periodic review of the Members' Allowances Scheme, later in the year.

5. The Chair of the Panel offered to draft a consultation paper in order to assist the periodic review which will be circulated to all Members of the Council in advance of our next meeting so that responses can be considered before the Panel makes any recommendations to the Council.

Chair of the Pensions Committee

6. We agreed that consideration of the proposal to increase the Special Responsibility Allowance paid to the Chair of the Pensions Committee be deferred until the next meeting of the Panel on 25 September 2019, when the periodic review of Members' Allowances will be continuing.

Minority Groups

7. We have been asked to meet again, in the interim, because the Council is now made up of Councillors representing five different Political Groups as follows:

- Labour – 32
- Conservative – 22
- Lib Dem – 6
- Independents – 3
- Greens – 3

8. This is as a result of the Local Government Elections held in May 2019. The Council's Members' Allowances Scheme only makes reference to three Political Groups so there is no provision for the new Minority Groups.

9. We considered the published material and comparisons with the Council's fifteen comparator local authorities, paying particular attention to those that have similar Minority Groups. We also took into consideration the requirements of Government Regulations on Member Allowances. The Leader of the Council - Councillor Pat Hackett (Labour) and the Deputy Leader of the Labour Group - Councillor Janette Williamson were invited into the meeting to make representations. They attended and presented Group views to the Independent Panel and were followed by the Leader of the Liberal Democrat Group, Councillor Phil Gilchrist. Councillor Ian Lewis – Leader of the Conservative Group, Councillor Lesley Rennie, Deputy Leader of the Conservative Group, Councillor Moira McLaughlin – Leader of the Independent Group and Councillor Pat Cleary – Leader of the Green Group had also been invited to make representations but they all chose to do so in writing. All the representations that were received have been taken into consideration in making our recommendations.

10. We are aware that the Basic Members' Allowance is paid in recognition of the time commitment of all Councillors, including such inevitable calls on time as meetings with officers, constituents and attendance at Political Group meetings. It is also intended to cover incidental costs such as the use of Members' homes. However, in accordance with statutory guidance, it is accepted that an element of the role of an elected Member must be viewed as voluntary and unpaid.

11. We are also aware that, currently, each of the two Minority Group Leaders are already in receipt of a Special Responsibility Allowance as one Member is the Chair

of an Overview and Scrutiny Committee, whilst the other is a Member of the Liverpool City Region Transport Committee. This is an important factor because Members are restricted to one Special Responsibility Allowance only. In the future, of course, Leaders of Minority Groups may not be carrying out any other role and may wish to claim a Special Responsibility Allowance for being a Group Leader, if this is possible.

12. We are informed that the five Group Leaders have begun to meet together, for an hour, on a fortnightly basis, in the spirit of cooperation and in an attempt to reach agreement on some issues e.g. committee places, Council wide projects. This is an extra duty being undertaken, because they are Group Leaders. It is also noted that Group Leaders are responsible for galvanising the rest of their Members and the Minority Groups have changed the status quo.

Recommendations

13. The Council be recommended to agree to the following:

That

- (1) a Special Responsibility Allowance of £1,146 (5% of the SRA paid to the Leader of the Council) be paid to the Leaders of Minority Groups, i.e. Groups having fewer Members than the second largest Opposition Group, comprising of at least three Members;**
- (2) no Special Responsibility Allowances be paid to the Deputy Leaders of Minority Groups; and**
- (3) the Panel be requested to give further consideration to Special Responsibility Allowances for the Leaders and Deputy Leaders, as part of its periodic review of Members' Allowances, when it meets again on 25 September 2019.**