

SEFTON METROPOLITAN BOROUGH COUNCIL
REPORT OF THE INDEPENDENT REMUNERATION PANEL
DECEMBER 2008

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 The Panel was convened specifically to consider:-

- (a) The appropriate figure for the Special Responsibility Allowance for Overview & Scrutiny Chairs.
- (b) The appropriate figure and level of Special Responsibility Allowance for the Audit and Governance Chair.
- (c) Whether it is appropriate to pay travelling expenses to those Members who undertake statutory visits to childrens homes.

1.2 We met on the 3rd December 2008. Unfortunately Steve Dickson, the third member of the Panel, was unable to join us. In the circumstances we agreed to proceed in his absence but requested the Legal Director to circulate the draft report on the Panel's findings to Mr Dickson on the understanding that if he has any concerns about the findings then the Panel be reconvened to discuss the matter further.

1.3 The three Leaders of the Council had been given the opportunity to attend and make representations to us or send a nominee. The four Scrutiny Chairs had also been invited to attend to make representations. We therefore had the opportunity to hear directly from three of the Scrutiny Chairs, namely Councillor Hardy, Councillor Papworth and Councillor Hands. In addition Councillor Mrs Parry and Councillor P Cummins addressed us in relation to the issue of travelling expenses. We were advised by Paul Edwards (Finance Director), Caroline Elwood (Legal Director) and Viv Swale (Claims & Administration Manager).

1.4 This report outlines our recommendations to the Council in respect of the current Members Allowance Scheme.

2.0 BACKGROUND

2.1 The Panel last met on the 14th June 2007 and undertook a full and comprehensive review of the Members Allowances Scheme. This was subsequently accepted and approved by the Full Council in September 2007. We had recommended that the Basic Allowance should be reviewed and increased to a figure comparable to the Merseyside average, with future increases linked to the Local Government annual pay settlement (using scp 33) and that the Special Responsibility Allowances should continue to be calculated based upon a multiplier of the Basic Allowance. We also recommended that the Council should no longer continue to make separate payments to cover travel expenses for duties undertaken by Members within Sefton, on the basis that the enhanced level of Basic Allowance would reflect the discontinuance of separate travel expenses. We also recommended that a further full review of the Scheme should be undertaken prior to the beginning of the Municipal Year 2010/2011.

3.0 OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY CHAIRS

3.1 The Cross Party Working Group which was originally established to implement the detailed recommendations made by Dr Snape into improvements to the scrutiny function at Sefton requested that the Panel should formally review the level of Special Responsibility Allowance (SRA) currently paid to the Overview & Scrutiny Chairs. The Working Group felt that the level of the SRA demonstrated the value placed upon the function and Dr Snape herself expressed concern that generally scrutiny had a low status within the organisation which was having an adverse effect upon the performance of the function. The recommendation that the allowance should be reviewed was subsequently approved by Cabinet on 13 December 2007 and Full Council on 28 February 2008.

3.2 We noted that there are currently four Overview & Scrutiny Chairs each of whom receives a Special Responsibility Allowance based on a multiplier of 50% x the Basic Allowance (ie. £4,425). This can be contrasted with the Chair of both Planning and Licensing Committees, both of whom received a Special Responsibility Allowance based on a multiplier of 100% x the Basic Allowance (ie. £8,850).

3.3 We were advised that in recent years the scrutiny function had evolved significantly with a resulting impact upon the workload of the Scrutiny Chairs. Although each Overview & Scrutiny Committee still meets once a cycle much more work is now done in Working Groups undertaking in-depth reviews on a variety of topics. Working Group reports have been well received and welcomed by Cabinet. The Chairs and Committees are supported by a dedicated Scrutiny Team with

Chairs generally kept briefed and informed and becoming involved in a wide range of issues related to the work of the Committee.

3.4 We heard from three of the Scrutiny Chairs who explained the far more proactive role which had now developed and we noted the proposed expansion and strengthening of the roles envisaged by the government, particularly in acting as a critical friend to partner organisations requiring the Council to adopt more innovative and imaginative scrutiny enquiries and wider engagement with service users. We also noted the pro-active role of the Scrutiny Chairs in protecting the integrity and propriety of the decision making process by their guardianship of the Forward Plan of Key Decisions.

3.5 We noted that national research commissioned by the LGA and IDeA in 2006/07 demonstrated that the average allowance of O&S chairmanships is comparable or higher than chairmanships of Licensing and sometimes of Planning Committees. We were also provided with information from 18 other areas and noted 17 of these paid a higher amount of Special Responsibility Allowance than Sefton. Overall the summary showed the average amount paid to Overview & Scrutiny Chairs is £7,482 which equates to 75% of the average Basic Allowance.

3.6 We considered it was important to send out the clear message that as an organisation Sefton does value its scrutiny function and the important role it plays not only in holding the Executive to account but also as a guardian of the constitution particularly in relation to the Forward Plan. We therefore recommend that the Special Responsibility Allowance for Chairs should be increased to 100% of the current Basic Allowance ie. £8,860 with effect from the new Civic Year in May 2009.

4.0 Audit & Governance Chair

4.1 At the meeting of the Panel on the 26th September 2006 it was resolved that "the allowance to the new Chair of Audit & Governance be approved and linked to the current multiplier paid to Chairs of Overview & Scrutiny (namely half of the Basic Allowance)". Accordingly we noted the Audit & Governance Committee Chair is currently paid the same rate as Overview & Scrutiny Chairs (£4,425). We were provided with information from the survey of 18 Authorities undertaken on our behalf which shows that the average amount paid to Audit & Governance Chairs is £4,647 (which equates to 43% of the Basic Allowance). In those circumstances we felt that the current allowance to the Audit & Governance Committee Chair continued to be appropriate and that the current link to Chairs of Overview & Scrutiny should be discontinued.

5.0 Visits to Childrens Homes.

5.1 As previously noted at the last Panel Meeting it was agreed that, in order to save administrative time in future Members would not be paid individual travelling expenses for travel within the Borough of Sefton. Instead an amount was incorporated within the increased Basic Allowance which all Members received. However Sefton is required to undertake statutory visits to childrens homes within the Borough and these visits are over and above Members regular commitments. At present only a small number of Members actually undertake the visits and in these circumstances the Leader of the Labour Group had suggested the Panel should consider providing those Members who do additional mileage an appropriate internal mileage allowance. We heard from Councillor Paul Cummins who is in favour of this proposal and Councillor Paula Parry who did not favour any alteration to current payments for travelling expenses.

5.2 We received details of visits undertaken since 2006/07 and wished to express our concern that Sefton may not be fulfilling the required number of statutory regulatory visits to childrens homes. However, we did not consider that the payment of travelling expenses to undertake such visits was a suitable way to remedy this issue. Accordingly, we do not recommend that it is currently appropriate to pay travelling expenses to those Members who undertake statutory visits to childrens homes. We are aware that this issue has been drawn to Members attention and note that Childrens Overview & Scrutiny Committee are shortly to commence a review of the Council's Corporate Parenting Role which will include the statutory requirement to visit childrens homes. Once the report has been concluded and considered by Cabinet we would be prepared to reconsider the issue of whether and how this function should be recognised in the Allowance Scheme.

6.0 Conclusions

We recommend the above amendments to the Council's current Scheme of Members Allowances and that all other details of the Scheme remain unchanged.

December 2008

Canon R Driver (Chair)
Mrs S Lowe
Mr S Dickson