

REPORT OF THE INDEPENDENT REMUNERATION PANEL (IRP)

MEETING ON 16 FEBRUARY 2024

1. BACKGROUND AND PURPOSE

- 1.1 This report arises from an interim review of the current scheme and is not the product of a periodic review, the next being due in 2026. Instead, the Panel had been asked to convene to consider specific proposals being brought forward for the Panel's views and recommendation to Council.
- 1.2 These proposals relating to Special Responsibility Allowances (SRAs) and annual allowances to independent members are addressed in turn and recommendations given within section below.

2. ISSUES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

(1) Cabinet Support Assistants (CSAs)

- 2.1 The Council had agreed on 22 May 2022 to establish this role with a remit to support particular Cabinet Members requiring support in their day-to-day roles, such as providing briefings, research and assistance with policy development. In the evidence provided to the Panel, it was confirmed that, in practice, this would be limited to 3 - 4 CSAs with focus on supporting work in those portfolios with the most demanding workload. The benefits of these roles in developing talent, succession planning and deputising was acknowledged, although not strictly relevant to consideration of the level of allowance.

Recommendation 1

That these CSA roles attract an SRA, the amount of which is pegged at 10% to that of the Cabinet Portfolio-holder (currently £18,461). Note: that this is in addition to and does not affect the level of current allowances paid to the Cabinet Members.

(2) INDEPENDENT CHAIR OF THE AUDIT COMMITTEE

- 2.2 The Panel noted that currently there was no allowance payable for an independent chair of Audit Committee (i.e. a non-Councillor) and acknowledged the significant workload and contribution of this role.
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Recommendation 2

That an annual allowance of £5,882 be payable to the Independent Chair of Audit Committee - that being commensurate with the SRA currently paid to the Chair of Standards Committee.

(3) MEMBERSHIP ALLOWANCES FOR INDEPENDENT MEMBERS SERVING ON BOTH STANDARDS AND AUDIT COMMITTEES

2.3 The Panel felt it was appropriate to extend the availability of allowances to all independent members serving on the Audit Committee, should others be appointed in the future, to recompense them for time and trouble, and expenses associated with attending meetings. Independent Members on the Standards Committee and the Chair of the Audit Committee currently received an allowance of £750 and the Panel's view was to retain the allowance on its current level.

Recommendation 3

That an annual payment of £750 be payable to any independent member serving on either of the Standards or Audit Committees, with the exception of the Independent Chair of Audit Committee who will receive a Chair's allowance (see (2) above).

(4) PORTFOLIO LEAD ALLOWANCE FOR LEADER OF COUNCIL IN RESPECT OF WEST MIDLANDS COMBINED AUTHORITY (WMCA)

2.4 The Leader of the Council has taken on additional duties with the WMCA and that the WMCA's own IRP was recommending constituent authorities pay a 'top-up' to the Leaders of £9,500 to acknowledge the time commitment and responsibilities required for the role. The WMCA currently had no legal powers to pay allowances themselves.

2.5 The Panel was minded that the Leader's role with the WMCA arose by virtue of his leadership of Walsall Council for which he already received an SRA for fulfilling his wide role and representing the Council externally. However, the Panel considered that being a portfolio holder with the WMCA inevitably brought with it additional responsibility and workload.

2.6 The Panel noted the benchmarking information provided and thought it appropriate to follow the lead provided by Wolverhampton Council in considering this same issue. In the longer term, WMCA may be able to pay their own allowances at which point an increase agreed now can be reversed

Recommendation 4

That the Leader of the Council's current SRA be increased by £2,000 to recognise the additional responsibilities required from his role with the WMCA.

(5) ANNUAL UPLIFT

- 2.7 The Panel was asked to consider whether there should be any adjustment to the mechanism of linking the annual increase in the Basic Allowance to the award to staff in line with the National Joint Council (NJC). A complication had occurred in 2023 where a flat rate award of £1,925 had been paid to staff on NJC spinal points 2 to 42 whereas a 3.88% increase had been applied for staff on spinal points 43 and above.

Recommendation 5

That annual updating of member allowances should remain linked to the employees' award except where council staff agree a lower percentage rise, freeze or reduction. In years where the pay award is a fixed value (rather than a percentage) the annual updating of Members Allowances will be the actual percentage of increase received at scale point 43.

Note: whilst this is the preferred recommendation from the Panel, the Panel also considered that there was an alternative where the Members Allowances could be increased by applying the average increase across all grades (rather than linking to NJC Scale Point 43)

3. NOTE ON METHODOLOGY

- 3.1 The Panel met on Friday 16 February 2024 receiving briefing papers from the officers on the five issues above.
- 3.2 Detailed benchmarking information was provided on allowances paid by other comparator local authorities, including constituent councils within the West Midlands.
- 3.3 The Panel received oral representations in person from eight Walsall Councillors.
- 3.4 The Panel carefully considered all of these inputs before determining their recommendations.
- 3.5 The Panel was unanimous in its decision making in its recommendations to the Council.

4. PANEL MEMBERS

Indra Cheema
Richard Hood
Phillip Tart

21 February 2024