

Somerset Council Independent Remuneration Panel – Report of the Independent Remuneration Panel on Allowances for the Members of Somerset Council for 2023/2024

Date of report: February 2023

1. Summary

The Remuneration Panel was set up following a resolution from Somerset County Council in July 2022 recommending that a new Independent Remuneration Panel to consider allowances for the new Somerset Council should be in place by Autumn 2022.

A recruitment process was undertaken and following an interview process five panel members were selected to form the new Somerset Independent Remuneration Panel, in accordance with legislation approved in 2003. Panel members normally serve a three-year term of office. A member may be reappointed by a further term of three years, meaning that each member can only sit for a maximum of six years on the Panel. At the first Panel meeting the Chair was appointed to serve for an initial 1-year term until March 2024.

Although the Panel is appointed by Somerset County Council we are an independent body. Our responsibility is to review the Council's Members' Allowance Scheme to ensure that payments are set at the appropriate level to undertake the role and at the same time to ensure the Scheme is sufficiently attractive to all who would wish to serve as a Councillor of Somerset Council.

In terms of independence Panel members are not employees and are therefore independent of the Council. Panel members are not line managed but are expected to complete an application through the Council's Volunteer Team to ensure compliance with basic data protection policies and the Council's insurers.

Support to the Panel is provided by the Council as and when required. The Panel members have agreed that they will not receive an allowance for their role but can claim reimbursement for reasonable travel and subsistence costs incurred on Panel business in line with rates set by Somerset Council.

The Panel will make their first recommendations to Somerset County Council on 22 February 2023 on the levels of remuneration that are considered justified for the new Somerset Council's members to retain the balance between public duty and a realistic recompense for the time given up, plus commitment and responsibility in undertaking the role of a unitary Councillor.

From 1 April 2023 there will be a new unitary Somerset Council, which will see all the services and duties previously carried out by 5 local authorities to be undertaken by the new unitary Council. The development and implementation of the new Council is

a challenging undertaking for officers and members and many decisions about form and function will be made at the February 2023 meeting of the County Council. As such, there are a number of elements of the new Council relating to the work of the Councillors that are not yet in place. This means that it is difficult for the members of the Panel to quantify and evaluate the workload of Councillors in the first year of the new Council and the precise demands that will be placed upon them.

The Panel used comparator data from unitary authorities which have similarities although none are identical, some of which have been established for some time to offer a useful insight into the roles of a unitary Councillor. The Panel also consulted with Group Leaders on their views of the proposed levels of allowances.

In May 2022 at the County Council elections, 110 Councillors representing 55 divisions were elected to represent the County Council through to 31 March 2023. From 1 April 2023 until elections in May 2027 those 110 Councillors will represent the new unitary authority. Overall, the number of Councillors in the County will have reduced from a total of 324 to 110 (Mendip DC x 47 members, Sedgemoor DC x 48 members, Somerset West & Taunton x 59, South Somerset x 60 and Somerset County Council x 110). With the new unitary authority being created it is expected that this will lead to an increase in workload for the new unitary Councillors, given the full range of functions of the former County and District Councils including education, social services, highways, planning, licensing and housing.

For 2023/2024 the Panel has received advice from senior officers of the Council and has reviewed data from comparable unitary authorities. Based on this information the Panel is recommending a starting **Basic Allowance of £15,500**. The Panel has also reviewed the Special Responsibility Allowances for existing roles and to those newly created roles which will commence on 1 April 2023 *(as noted it has been difficult for the Panel at this early stage before the new unitary comes into existence, to fully assess these roles)*.

The Panel recognise that the rates proposed will be for the first year of the new unitary Council and will commit to undertake a full review during 2023 including meeting key councillors to fully understand the workload of councillors in the new council and those who have undertaken new roles.

The Panel acknowledge that the new Council is seeking to create 18 Local Community Boards to act as a forum for community voice, engagement and influence, which in the first year of the new Council will be developed. The Panel will review evidence from members on the workloads and commitment arising from the Local Community Boards in their future work and to determine if any Special Responsibility Allowances will be claimable by members.

In respect of Travel and Subsistence Allowances the Panel recommends that existing rates contained in the current Somerset County Council allowances scheme are retained as they are in line with rates of travel and subsistence claimable by Council employees.

If any changes are made to the staff rates then the Councillor levels should be adjusted accordingly to come into effect at the same time.

2. Independent Remuneration Panel for Somerset Council

We represent the Independent Remuneration Panel which reports to Somerset County Council on 22 February 2023. As from 1 April 2023 the Panel will continue in office and report to the new Somerset Council. It is anticipated that the Panel will conduct annual reviews whilst it understands the workloads and case work for the new unitary Councillors.

The Council seeks the advice of the Panel before making any changes or amendments to the Members' Scheme of Allowances and therefore should take its reasoning into account before setting a new or amended Allowance Scheme.

The current membership of the Independent Remuneration Panel is as follows:

David Lamb – Panel Chair

Owner of a number of businesses in the Bridgwater area employing around 300 employees. Previously served as the Chairman of the Sedgemoor District Council Independent Remuneration Panel.

Bryony Houlden – Panel Member

Chief Executive of South West Councils which is a membership organisation of all 29 local authorities in the South West (from April 2023). Currently sits on a number of other Independent Remuneration Panels, including Devon County, Cornwall, Plymouth, Torbay, Bristol and Bath & North East Somerset Council's, previously a member of the Joint Somerset Independent Remuneration Panel.

Mel Hillman – Panel Member

Former Corporate Service Manager at Yeovil Hospital before retiring. Also worked as a School Clerk on a local school Board of Governors.

Dr Paull Robathan – Panel Member

Governor of the Foundation Trust and Independent Governor of the Health Trust and a former district councillor. Also worked for Government agency conducting independent peer reviews.

Phil Gait – Panel Member

Retired, a former district councillor and member of a local parish council.

3. Terms of Reference for the Panel:

- To consider issues relating to Members' remuneration and expenses.
- To consider any representations.
- To make recommendations and provide advice to the County Council and from 1 April 2023 to the new Somerset Council.
- To carry out a full review of Basic Allowances and Special Responsibility Allowances.

4. Background

The Panel considered evidence including national and local contextual information on benchmarking data, financial context and input from Senior Council Officers.

On 21 July 2021 the Government approved that the current 5 local authorities in Somerset would be replaced by a new single Council, to come into place on 1 April 2023.

The new Council will have the responsibility to deliver all of the services that were previously delivered by the District Councils and County Council in Somerset.

In May 2022 elections took place for 110 County Councillors representing the 55 electoral divisions. The 110 Councillors have been elected to the County Council until 31 March 2023 and will continue into the new unitary authority for the period from April 2023 until elections in May 2027. In total this is a term of office of 5 years.

The role of Councillors in the new unitary Council will change considerably from April 2023 as the new unitary authority takes on the responsibilities of all five Councils that previously provided services in the County. There will be a strong emphasis upon locality working, community leadership and linking in with Parish, Town and City Councils and other local bodies. The new Council will also have more statutory and regulatory responsibilities including planning and licensing functions along with housing landlord functions. The Panel referred to data from other unitary authorities and received information from Council officers. Using the available information, the Panel has determined Basic and Special Responsibility Allowances for 2023/2024.

In the autumn of 2023, the Panel commence its report for 2024/2025 and will invite Councillors to provide information on their workloads and areas of responsibility within the new unitary council.

5. Councillors' Basic Allowance

All local authorities must make provision in its scheme of allowances for a basic flat rate allowance payable to members. The allowance must be the same for every Councillor and is paid in equal instalments throughout the year. At Annexe 1 are details of the comparator information with other unitary authorities, that the Panel has used in making their recommendations.

In formulating its recommendations, the Panel was guided by the following:

- Councillors volunteer for their roles. They are not remunerated at a commercial rate for their time, as if they were employees.
- The Council should feel able to attract high quality candidates to stand as councillors from a wide variety of backgrounds and there should be no financial barrier to anyone who wishes to stand for election.
- The level of allowances paid reflect that of allowances in comparable unitary authorities.

The Panel focused on an assessment of the level of workload for the new Council and comparator data from existing long running unitary councils and those who have set allowances for new unitary authorities created in April 2023.

Previously the former Joint Independent Remuneration Panel for Somerset County Council had calculated Basic Allowances based on an appropriate spinal point on the Officers pay scale and discounted by a third to reflect the voluntary element of the work. The daily rate has then been multiplied by the equivalent of 4 days a week (the average time that members spend on Council business) to give the final calculation.

The Panel acknowledge that this approach had worked well for the Joint Panel and the County Council, however for 2023 to 2024 the Panel is using a simpler methodology, based upon reviewing the basic allowance of other comparable authorities and determining where it would be appropriate to set the remuneration level for councillors in the new Somerset Council.

Panel Recommendation - Basic Allowance:

The Panel concludes that the Basic Allowance for 2023 to 2024 should be £15,500.

The Panel recognised the comparator information in respect of rates paid in other unitary authorities and to statements from senior officers regarding the anticipated increase in the workload for the new unitary Councillor.

6. Councillors' Special Responsibility Allowances

The Panel also considered the provision for the payment of Special Responsibility Allowances for those Councillors who have significant responsibility over and above the normal work of a Councillor.

Panel Recommendation – Special Responsibility Allowance:

The Panel reviewed specific SRA roles, including new SRA roles and their recommendations are set out in Annexe 2.

The Panel has set new SRA roles based on comparator data and will revisit SRA levels later in 2023 by conducting interviews with Councillors who have a specific responsibility. This will give Councillors who are undertaking SRA roles in the new authority an opportunity to provide evidence on their workloads to the Panel ahead of any further recommendations the Panel may wish to make in respect of the levels of SRA's claimable in 2024/2025.

7. Co-opted Member Allowances

The Panel reviewed the comparator data for co-opted member allowances and feel that the allowance of £1,000 should continue for 2023/2024.

The Panel were also invited to consider whether an allowance should be claimable by members of the Independent Remuneration Panel; this formed part of the recommendations from Full Council in July 2022. The Panel members confirmed that they were content with their roles being voluntary and recommended that no allowance would be claimable, only those for travel and subsistence in line with the Councillor rates.

Panel Recommendations – Co-opted members:

The Panel recommend that the current level of co-opted allowance remains at £1,000.

The Panel recommend that the role of the Independent Remuneration Panel member should remain as voluntary and that no allowance is claimable.

8. Parental Leave and Carer's Allowance

The Panel supports the arrangements contained in the current Somerset County Council scheme for Parental Leave and recommend that this continues for the new Council. In respect of Carers' Allowances the Panel supports that the new scheme should continue to provide for payment of expenditure for childcare and carers' which ensures members have the opportunity to undertake their duties and provide care to their dependents.

Panel Recommendation – Parental Leave and Carers’ Allowance:

The Panel recommend that the Scheme of Allowances continues to include a Parental Leave and Carers’ Allowance in line with the current Somerset County Council scheme.

9. Travel and Subsistence

The Panel reviewed the current rates in the Somerset County Council’s scheme for travel and subsistence. Those arrangements are linked to the rates for Council employees and the Panel recommend that the travel and subsistence rates for councillors should be in line with those claimable by Council employees.

Panel Recommendation – Travel and Subsistence:

The Panel recommend that the travel and subsistence rates for councillors should remain in line with those claimable by council employees as set out in Annexe 2.

Looking ahead 2023 and beyond

The Panel has responded to a tight timescale in preparing its recommendations with the Council meeting in February 2023 looming. The Panel recognise that during 2023 they will be required to carry out further work to review allowances. The Panel propose to undertake a survey of members and will be followed by the Panel conducting interviews with councillors; this work will commence in November 2023 allowing evidence reflecting six months operation of the new Somerset Council to be collected. The Panel will use the survey results and interviews to inform making any recommendations to Council in February 2024.

As Panel Chair, I would like to thank my fellow Panel members for bringing robust challenge to the process and being able to work quickly to ensure that recommendations on the allowances for councillors in the new authority can be submitted. Finally, on behalf of the Panel I would like to thank Scott, Andrew and Laura for their support and guidance in assisting the Panel in their work.

David Lamb

Chair – Somerset Independent Remuneration Panel

February 2023