

Somerset County Council

County Council

– 22 February 2023

Report of the Independent Remuneration Panel

Division and Local Member: All

Lead Officer: Scott Wooldridge, Monitoring Officer and Strategic Manager – Governance & Democratic Services

Author: Andrew Melhuish, Service Manager – Member Development & Support, Governance & Democratic Services

Contact Details: andrew.melhuish@somerset.gov.uk

1. Summary/link to the Corporate Plan

1.1. This report sets out the proposals in relation to the Members Allowances 2023/24 for the new Somerset Council. The proposals have been developed in consultation with the Somerset Independent Remuneration Panel (“the Panel”) following their review of the proposed Scheme of Member’s Allowances 2023/24 which was carried out by the Panel in January and February 2023.

1.2. The role of this report, is to:-

1. Recommend a Scheme of Members’ Allowances for the new Somerset Council for 2023/2024; and to
2. Request that the Council asks the Panel to undertake a further review of the Scheme of Members’ Allowances during late 2023/24 (including interviewing members to fully understand workloads and responsibilities in the new unitary council) and for that review and any recommendations to be reported to Full Council in February 2024.

1.3. The arrangements for determining allowances for elected members are set down in statutory regulations - the Local Authorities (Members’ Allowances) (England) Regulations 2003 (SI 1021) and subsequent amendments to the regulations (SI 2003/1022 and SI 2003/1692). Each local authority is required to appoint and maintain an Independent Panel to make recommendations to the Council on members’ allowances. The Council must have regard to the Panel’s recommendations before making decisions in relation to members’ allowances but doesn’t have to accept them. Where the Council doesn’t accept the Panel’s recommendations it should give reasons for not doing so.

1.3 All Members have a personal and prejudicial interest in the receipt of allowances, but the Council’s Code of Conduct includes a dispensation allowing members to attend relevant meetings and vote on this matter. This paragraph has the effect of declaring this interest by all Members at this meeting of Council. Members do not need therefore to make a verbal declaration at the Council meeting.

2. Recommendations

2.1 Council is recommended to:

- (a) Thank the Panel for its report and recommendations set out in Appendix 1;**
- (b) Consider the Panel's recommendations when determining the Scheme of Members' Allowances 2023/24 set out in the Panel's report attached as Appendix 1 and the draft Scheme of Members' Allowances 2023/24 (set out in Appendix 2);**
- (c) Support the Panels recommendation for a further review of the Members' Scheme of Allowances for 2024/2025, and for this to be reported to the Council by February 2024;**
- (d) Authorise the Monitoring Officer to finalise and make any amendments to the Scheme of Members' Allowances required as a result of the Council's decisions in (b) above.**

3. Background

- 3.1** In 2020 the One Somerset Business Case set out proposals for reducing the number of councillors in the five local authorities in Somerset from 279 to 100 members. The Business Case highlighted savings of £500k in respect of member allowances with this reduction to 100 members.

As part of the Structural Change Order in March 2022 it required that the number of councillors for Somerset County Council from May 2022, until Vesting Day in April 2023, would be 110 members.

Following the May 2022 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).

In July 2022 the Council recommended that an Independent Remuneration Panel for Somerset Council should be established to advise on the development of the 2023/24 Scheme of Members Allowances for the new Somerset Council.

An extensive recruitment process was undertaken and following an interview process 5 panel members were selected to form a new Somerset Independent Remuneration Panel. The Monitoring Officer in consultation with the political group leaders confirmed the appointments in late December 2022.

The Panel met on a number of occasions with meetings taking place virtually and most recently on 6 February 2023. The culmination of that work is set out in the report of the Panel attached as Appendix 1.

In making its recommendations, the Panel considered the impact of the creation of a new unitary Somerset Council upon the role and responsibilities of councillors and in particular the impact of the reduction in the number of councillors in the county from 324 to 110. The Panel also reviewed comparator data for similar unitary authorities (see table below), reviewing the role descriptions for councillors, submissions from senior officers regarding the responsibilities and scope of the new council and economic data on inflation and national pay awards.

Comparator information (Based on figures for 2023/2024)

Authority	Basic Allowance	Leader of Council	Deputy Leader	Executive member	Population	Number of Councillors
Wiltshire	15,610	39,025	31,204	23,415	510,400	98
North Yorkshire	15,500	39,654	21,165	19,554	614,505	90
Cornwall	17,681	32,711	24,533	22,897	570,300	87
Somerset Council	15,500	31,000	23,250	20,150	569,400	110

The Panel's report makes recommendations for Basic Allowance and Special Responsibility Allowances for councillors in 2023 to 2024, which is the first year of the new unitary authority Somerset Council. The key recommendations from the Panel include:

- Basic Allowance for new Council = £15,500
- Banding of SRA for Leader (2.5 x BA = £31,000), Deputy Leader (1.5 x BA £23,250) & Executive Leads (1.3 x BA £20,150)
- Banding of SRA for Opposition Leader (Conservative) & Chair of Council (1 x BA £15,500)
- Banding of SRA for Strategic Planning Chairs (0.5 x BA £7,750) & Vice Chairs SRA's (0.25 x BA £3,875)
- Banding of SRA for Licensing Committee and Planning Sub-Committee Chairs (0.5 x BA £7,750) & Vice Chairs SRA's (0.25 x BA £3,875)
- Banding of SRA for 5 Scrutiny Committee Chairs (0.5 x BA £7,750) & Vice Chairs SRA's (0.25 x BA £3,875)
- Carers' Allowance – remain as per current SCC scheme
- Mileage & Subsistence – remain as per current SCC scheme

In view of the new functions and role of the unitary council and the 110 councillors from 1 April 2023, it is proposed that the Council requests that the Panel will carry out a further review of member allowances in autumn of 2023, including interviewing councillors around their workloads and commitments in their new roles as unitary councillors. This work will be used to inform any recommendations to be implemented in April 2024.

4. Implications

- 4.1** Financial: The existing base budget for Members allowances in 2022/23 for 55 County Council and 214 District Members is £2,744,700. The base budget for 2022/23 is not comparable to the budget need for 2023/24 as there is much change within Members duties across the five existing authorities to that to be undertaken as part of Somerset Council to be considered.

Following the May 2022 elections, the number of Somerset County Councillors increased from 55 to 110. To support the increase in the number of councillors a one-off budget of £682,000 was made to meet the additional costs of the increase in members for 2021/2022.

Allowance has been made in the Medium-Term Financial Plan for the Members expenses budget requirement in 2023/24 to include an additional 55 Members up to 110 for Somerset Council and also for a potential increase in basic/special responsibility allowances in line with other Unitary Authorities (Increase Basic Allowance to £13,900) which resulted in a net saving to Somerset Council put forward in 2023/24 of approx. £520,000.

This gives an MTFP 2023/2024 budget for member allowances of £2,277,900.

The Panel's recommendations propose a Basic Allowance of £15,500 and with changes to banding and a number of new Special Responsibility Allowances to reflect the new roles to be undertaken in the new Council, this gives a total member allowance budget of £2,338,400; the 2023/2024 budget has been adjusted to reflect the proposals set out in the report, based on this figure (£2.3 million).

- 4.2** Legal: The legal requirements are set out in the report.

The proposed Members' Allowance Scheme complies with the relevant provisions of the Local Authorities (Members' Allowances) (England) Regulations 2003; the Local Government and Housing Act 1989 and the Local Government Act 2000.

As soon as reasonably practicable after the making of a Scheme, copies of the Scheme have to be made available for inspection at the Council's office and a notice has to be published in a local newspaper.

The Standards Committee has granted a dispensation to all elected members to participate and vote on setting the 2023/24 Scheme of Members' Allowances.

4.3 Risk: The risks are reputational rather than legal. The Council does not have to accept the Panel's recommendations but where it chooses not to do so it should give reasons that can be part of the record of the meeting. The Council is required to give reasons where it chooses not to accept Panel recommendations on allowances.

4.4 Equalities:

Under section 149 of the Equality Act 2010, the council has a duty when exercising its functions to have "due regard" to the need to eliminate discrimination, harassment and victimisation and any other conduct prohibited under the Act and advance equality of opportunity and foster good relations between persons who share a protected characteristic and persons who do not. This is the public sector equality duty.

When setting the Scheme of Members' Allowances, consideration needs to be given as to how the allowances enable the Council to attract high quality candidates to stand as councillors, from a wide variety of backgrounds, whilst also ensuring that financial barriers to anyone who wishes to stand for election are minimised.

The proposed Scheme of Members' Allowances relates to all 110 elected members across all 55 electoral divisions. It applies to all 110 members equally.

Other implications: There are also no sustainability or community safety implications.

5. Background papers

5.1 Independent Remuneration Panel –review

Local Authorities (Members' Allowances) (England) Regulations 2003
Standards Committee meeting 1 February 2023 – grant all members a dispensation

Scheme of Member Allowances 2022 - 2023 available at on the following link
[SCC allowances and expenses](#)