

A Review of Members Car Parking
Permits and Mobile Phone
Provision for Sandwell Metropolitan
Borough Council

By

The Independent Remuneration
Panel

April 2024

Stewart Towe (Chair)

Ashley Savell-Boss

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Background

This report contains the recommendations of the Independent Remuneration Panel (IRP) in relation to Parking Permits and Mobile Phones for elected members.

The report also sets out the approach taken by the panel, and any rationale for its recommendations.

The IRP was convened under The Local Authorities (Members' Allowances) (England) Regulations 2003. These regulations provide for the requirement for all local authorities to maintain an independent remuneration panel to review and provide advice on the Council's members allowances. The Council, in accordance with the regulations, retains decision making powers and responsibilities to determine the scope and levels of allowances.

All Councils are required to convene and seek advice from the IRP before they make any changes to their scheme of allowances and must do so having considered any recommendations from the IRP.

A full review of the Members' Allowance Scheme was undertaken in November 2022.

Membership of the Panel

- **Mr Stewart Towe** (Chair) - Stewart is the former Chairman of the Black Country Local Enterprise Partnership Board and remains Chairman and Managing Director of Hadley Group, an Engineering Group, with its Head Office and fourth manufacturing site in the borough of Sandwell. Stewart is a Deputy Lieutenant.
- **Ashley Savell-Boss** - Ashley has over 30 years of experience in Funeral Directing, has served as a school Governor for over 30 years and now chairs the multi academy trust 'Shireland Collegiate Academy Trust' based in Smethwick.
- **Ms Sylvia Parkin** - Sylvia is a Lieutenancy ambassador for Sandwell. She had a career in public sector employment and was the Regional Employer Engagement Officer for the Wm RFCA and negotiated with Employers on the terms and conditions for Employment of Reserve Military Personnel. As a member of 2 Independent Remuneration Panels for other West Midland authorities, Sylvia brings significant direct experience to the panel.

Items for Consideration

The IRP met at the Council Offices Oldbury on 22nd April 2024 to consider two matters:-

Allowances in relation Parking Permits for Elected Members

The Panel heard that there had been recent changes to the Council's Parking Charges Policy and the options available to elected members set out in the Allowance Scheme were no longer available.

Members were able to park at the Members Church Street Car Park to access the Council House, Oldbury, by purchasing a £60 permit at £5.00 a month, there is no change to this arrangement.

Following changes to the Council's Car Parking Policy, prices of purchasing annual parking permits have risen from £240 to £450 (excluding West Bromwich) and £650 including West Bromwich (50% discount for fully electric vehicles). There is no longer a £240 permit as specified in the Allowance Scheme.

The uptake by members to purchase the annual car park parking permit is very low.

The Panel considered the changes made to the parking charges and the provision within the current scheme no longer being available and also the numbers of members accessing the annual Sandwell permit. The Panel noted that members could purchase the annual Sandwell permit via the Council's website and pay monthly options were available.

Recommendation

It is recommended that reference to the £240 Annual Sandwell Parking Permit is removed from the scheme. However, the scheme should set out the options available to members setting out that if a member requires an annual Sandwell parking permit, they can be purchased directly via the Council's website, in accordance with the charging policy at that time.

The Monitoring Officer would propose that section 5.5 of the scheme be revised to read –

“5.5 Car Parking Permits

5.5.1 All Members are eligible to use the Members Car Park in Church Street adjacent to Oldbury Council House, subject to the purchase of a parking permit (excluding blue badge holders). The cost of this permit is £5.00 per month and is valid on any duration or duration, solely for use directly arising from your role as an elected member.

5.5.2 All members are eligible to purchase a range of parking permits for alternative parking locations across the borough. Permits are available with a range of differing payment methods and with varying durations including daily, weekly, monthly or annually. The costs for purchase of any permit are required to be met by the individual elected member and are available for purchase through MiPermit. Additional details on the range of available permits is published to the Council’s intranet and internet pages.”

Allowances in relation to Mobile Phones for Elected Members

As part of the Panel’s review of the Member Allowance Scheme in November 2022, the Panel recommended a full review of the policy in relation to the provision of mobile phones to elected members.

In addition, the Council’s Value for Money Panel, which has been set up to review spend of £1,000 or more within the Council, had requested that the situation be reviewed as soon as possible.

The Panel heard that, under the current arrangement, the Council met the first £150 of any handset, with any amount over this being met by members. As Members had paid the remaining amount for their handset, they could keep it. Cabinet Members did not have to meet any cost of the handset, but it consequently remained the property of the Council. Cabinet Members could choose to waive this and pay towards their handset and then keep it.

The Panel gave consideration to the current tariff rates and contributions made by elected members with each councillor that took up the mobile offer contributing £9 or £10 per month for line rental, voice, data, SMS texts and insurance. The actual contract per councillor varied between £28 and £34 depending on the handsets which was very high compared

to the contract for staff mobiles. Charges falling outside of the tariff, e.g. charitable donations, picture messages, games, etc were met by the member. Monitoring phone bills each month was staff resource intensive as each mobile itemised bill had to be scrutinised to reclaim any additional payments and adjustments to payroll.

Benchmarking with neighbouring authorities had been carried out. And shared with the Panel for consideration.

The Panel considered various options:-

- (1) All mobile phones and associated costs could be included within the member allowance and usage restricted to official council duties.
- (2) A separate allowance could be provided where members do wish to have a separate mobile phone to undertake their duties as an elected member and they source the phone/tariff themselves.
- (3) The Council could look to purchase android phones via a separate provider (handsets operating on Android 11 plus can be purchased from around £75) and would remain the property of SMBC.
- (4) A set allowance (£10 per month) could be offered for members to source their own sim deals.

In deliberating the options, the Panel also took into account potential issues around data protection and ensuring there were no breaches of information in use of non-Council devices.

Recommendation

It is recommended that options (1) and (3) be considered whereby the Council would issue a suitable corporate mobile device to members with a standard monthly tariff sim card which limited data usage and prevented overseas charges.

The Panel was of the opinion that this approach would reduce current costs considerably, provide a safeguard against data protection issues and providing capped contracts would eliminate the requirement to scrutinise itemised billing.

The Monitoring Officer in response would propose the following replacement section 6 for the scheme –

6. Mobile Telephones

- 6.1 The Council will provide all members with a mobile telephone for use in the discharge of their statutory and policy making functions.
- 6.2 Upon issue of a mobile telephone the user must comply with all legislation covering the safe and effective use of mobile telephones.
- 6.3 The tariff will include inclusive calls (some calls may be chargeable, for example, premium rate numbers), inclusive texts, inclusive data and 4G in the UK only and overseas use is not permitted without prior application and authorisation by exception.
- 6.3 Some services are not included in our inclusive tariff, these include, but are not limited to; picture messages (however, third party apps can be used to send pictures and videos etc.), premium rate numbers, international premium rate numbers, any in app charges (games, media etc.) or texts to make charitable donations.
- 6.4 Inclusive data is subject to a fair usage policy. Members are required to manage data use responsibly by always using Wi Fi when available.