

**SUBJECT: MEMBERS' IT ALLOWANCES**

**DIRECTORATE: CHIEF EXECUTIVE & TOWN CLERK**

**LEAD OFFICER: CAROLYN WHEATER, CITY SOLICITOR**

## **1. Purpose of Report**

- 1.1 To request members' views regarding changing the provision of IT allowances to members.

## **2. Background to Members' IT Allowances**

- 2.1 The current Member ICT Policy was drafted in 2010 and has been subject only to minor amendments since that time. As well as containing general provisions relating to the use of IT by elected members, the Member ICT Policy sets out a series of allowances which members are entitled to claim. These allowances are as follows:

- Computer Equipment (£60 per annum or a Council-provided computer)
- Printer (£15 per annum or a Council-provided printer)
- Broadband (£240 per annum)
- Paper and printer cartridges:
  - Replacement paper and cartridges (maximum 4 per year); or
  - Up to £100 per year for receipted expenses.

- 2.2 If a member claimed all of these allowances he or she could receive an additional £415 per year. No receipts or invoices are required other than for paper and print cartridges, and these are seldom claimed. Approximately two-thirds of elected members receive more than £150 each year in relation to these allowances. In 2014-15, the Council paid a total of £6,182.50 in taxable expenses of this kind to members.

- 2.3 As the Committee will be aware, information technology is in continual flux both within and outside the Council. Since the adoption of the Member ICT Policy, the internet has become increasingly central in everyday life, with people accessing the internet more frequently and in a wider variety of ways.

- 2.4 In view of these changes both in the use of information technology and the ongoing need to make financial savings wherever possible, the Committee is requested to provide its views regarding the proposed changes to allowances outlined below.

## **3. Proposals for Change**

### **3.1 Broadband Allowance**

In 2014, 84% of households were estimated to have broadband internet access. Of the 16% of households without access to the internet, 23% cited cost as the

principal reason for not having access (either of broadband itself or PC equipment). This equates to less than 4% of households not having access to the internet owing to cost. Based on long-term trends, it is likely that access to broadband internet will continue to increase.

- 3.2 Equally, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation's regular survey of minimum income standards has classified internet access as an essential part of life in the UK for a number of years, regardless of household type. People are also able to access an increasing number of free internet services, with wireless internet access now freely available in a number of sites across Lincoln, including City Hall.
- 3.3 Given that more than 96% of households either have or can afford internet access, it is worth considering the rationale for providing a broadband allowance regardless of the actual cost incurred or whether a councillor is actually incurring those costs as a direct result of their role as a councillor.
- 3.4 Line rental costs have historically been considered to be covered within the basic allowance and members may consider it reasonable to treat broadband internet in the same manner.
- 3.5 Computer/Printer Allowance  
As highlighted above, members have the opportunity to receive a computer or printer from the Council, or can receive allowances in lieu of equipment. At present the majority of councillors claim neither equipment nor an allowance.
- 3.6 27 councillors currently have access to a tablet computer provided by the Council for paperless working. Another councillor uses a tablet computer issued before the start of the paperless working programme. All councillors also have access to printing and IT facilities at City Hall.
- 3.7 The tablet computers issued to councillors are anticipated to have a lifespan of 3-4 years. At present the purchase of IT equipment is made from reserves which are sufficient to fund the replacement of the iPads already issued. As previously reported to the Policy Scrutiny Committee, the use of iPads has freed capacity within the Democratic Services team to allow the Democratic Services Assistant post to remain vacant. The savings from this post for this financial year, are expected to be £18,600.
- 3.8 The Council continues to provide dedicated IT facilities for councillors at City Hall, including computers, printers, and internet access. The Council also offers members the opportunity to install home-working software on their own computer in order to access the Council's systems.
- 3.9 Proposed Revision  
If members were minded to re-allocate the funds currently spent on members' IT allowances, the cost is anticipated to be sufficient to meet the Council's long-term costs in supplying IT equipment to elected members. In order to ensure that councillors are properly supported on an ongoing basis, it is suggested that members consider allocating an annual sum equivalent to that currently spent on IT allowances to be used exclusively on the cost of members' IT equipment.
- 3.10 As noted above, funding remains available to meet the Council's anticipated costs for members' IT equipment in the medium term. However, the timing of all-out

elections in May 2016 combined with imminent significant cuts to the Council's budget, make it opportune to seek to implement any changes early in the new municipal year. This limits the scope for any members to be disadvantaged through changes to the scheme midway through a term of office.

- 3.11 It is proposed that members will continue to be able to choose whether they wish to have a tablet computer provided to them by the Council. All members who do not have access to a tablet computer continue to have the right to receive printed copies of meeting agendas.
- 3.12 Given the relatively low take-up of either computers or the computer allowance among members, it should be considered whether the provision of computers should either be limited to tablet devices or assigned based on councillors having a particular role, such as being a member of the Executive. This removes the budgetary risk that a large number of members will unexpectedly request a computer or allowance and place existing resources under strain.

#### **4. Strategic Priorities**

- 4.1 The Council is committed to becoming and continuing to be a fit for purpose organisation. Elected members play a critical role in this and it is vital that councillors have access to the necessary equipment to carry out their roles. Equally, it is important to ensure that people are adequately compensated for the costs they incur in being a councillor.

#### **5. Organisational Impacts**

##### **5.1 Finance**

There is no dedicated budget for the purchase of members' IT equipment. Previous investment in tablet computers has been made from long-standing reserves. These reserves are considered to be sufficient to fund tablet computers in the medium term. However, the Council faces considerable pressures on its budgets in coming years and it is prudent to seek a solution which can safeguard the ongoing provision of IT equipment to elected members. This could be achieved by allocating funds currently spent on members' IT allowances to a dedicated reserve for members' IT equipment.

- 5.2 As a direct result of widespread use of tablet computers and reduced demand for printed agendas, savings of £18,600 pa have been made through reductions in staffing, while the Council has been able to avoid considerable increases in printer rental costs by renting a lower capacity printer. The savings generated by paperless working have been utilised within the general fund, thereby assisting in achieving the Council's overall savings target.

##### **5.3 Legal Implications**

There are no direct legal implications arising from this report.

#### **6. Recommendation**

- 6.1 That members consider and offer views regarding the proposed changes to members' IT allowances.