



Belfast City Council

Report to:	Strategic Policy and Resources Committee
Date:	Friday, 19th February, 2010
Subject:	Publication of Members' Information
Reporting Officer:	Mr. Liam Steele, Head of Committee and Members' Services (extension 6325)
Contact Officer:	Mr. Robin Boyd, Members' Support Officer (extension 6323)

Purpose of Report
To submit for the consideration of the Committee a report regarding proposed changes to the information which is published annually on the Council's website relating to Members' allowances and expenses.

Relevant Background Information
The Former Policy and Resources (Members) Sub-Committee at its meeting on 4th August, 2003 agreed the nature and format of information to be published on the Council's website relating to Members allowances, mileage claims and details of costs incurred by attending conferences and undertaking visits.
The Sub-Committee approved the publication under the following headings:-
<u>Allowances</u>
Basic
Attendance
Special Responsibility
<u>Conferences/Visits</u>
Subsistence (including the cost of accommodation and out of pocket expenses)
Travel (by public transport or car)
Conference Fees

Travel Expenses

Mileage, etc. to and from meetings

The Sub-Committee agreed also that explanatory notes should be published in relation to each of the proposed headings outlining the nature of each payment and indicating that all of the costs were in accordance with relevant legislation, Council policies and procedures, that Allowances were subject to the normal Income Tax and National Insurance deductions and that expenses associated with attendance at conferences or for travel were related to the costs actually incurred and should not be considered as being of a financial benefit to Members.

The Sub-Committee agreed also that locally-held training sessions and meetings such as boards of outside bodies, since they were part of the routine work of Councillors and were clearly distinguishable from conferences should not be included among lists of conferences attended.

It was agreed that the information would be updated on an annual basis and that prior to publication each Member would be circulated with the information applicable to them personally to allow verification of the information being provided.

Current Position

In accordance with the Sub-Committee's decision, the information as authorised has been published on the Council's website each year in June and has been included in the Council's Publication Scheme.

Publication of the information in this manner has removed the need for the Council to respond to individual requests for information which the public is entitled to receive in regard to the above-mentioned items under the Freedom of Information Act 2000. It also permits the information to be collated on the basis of a full financial year which results in more consistent and accurate reporting of the financial information.

Key Issues

Over the past number of months several Freedom of Information requests have been received from individuals seeking information about Members' allowances and expenses. It has been the practice to refer these individuals to the Council's Publication Scheme and the information published annually. Recently one such individual asked for the response to be reviewed on the basis that the information provided was not complete and not sufficiently up-to-date.

Having conducted a review as required under the Act, the Director of Legal Services concluded that publication of such information on an annual basis was not unreasonable, however, it was determined that the nature of the information published required to be reviewed given the changes in Members' allowances and expenses which had been introduced since 2003.

In light of the Director of Legal Service's determination it is necessary to re-assess the information published in relation to Members' allowances and expenses. It is

also clear that there is increased public interest in payments made to elected representatives at every level from Central Government down. It is essential for the Council to be transparent in relation to all payments made to Elected Members and, accordingly, the Committee's authority is sought to revise the Council's Publication Scheme in so far as it relates to allowances and expenses paid to Councillors to include all payments made by the Council.

The main changes required are the removal of Attendance Allowance which is no longer applicable and the inclusion of information on Members' allowances associated with membership on the District Policing Partnership Board and the Council's Transition Committee. These allowances are 75% and 100% funded respectively and will require an explanatory note if they are to be published or otherwise provided to the public. It is suggested a revised list of allowances and expenses are published under the following headings:-

Allowances

- Basic
- Special Responsibility
- District Policing Partnership
- Transition Committee
- Civic Dignitaries Personal Allowances

Conferences/Visits

- Subsistence (including the cost of accommodation and out of pocket expenses)
- Travel (by public transport or car)
- Conference Fees

Travel and Other Miscellaneous Claims

- Mileage, etc. to and from meetings
- Home Phone Rental/Broadband Fee
- Hands Free Car Kits

Explanatory notes relating to each of the above elements should also be published to provide details of the nature of each allowance or claim and the extent, if any, of outside funding which applies (for instance 75% funding for District Policing Partnership payments).

Recommendation

It is recommended that the Committee authorises the revision of the details of Councillors' allowances and expenses published on the Council's website as outlined above and agrees that the information be updated on an annual basis and that prior to publication each Member would be circulated with the information applicable to them personally to allow verification of the information being provided.

Decision Tracking

To be undertaken by Liam Steele, Head of Committee and Members' Services, by 31st July each year.

Attachments

N/A