

COUNCIL
–9 SEPTEMBER 2025

**MEMBERS' ALLOWANCES – OPPOSITION GROUPS AND
PARENTAL LEAVE**

Report by the Director of Law & Governance and Monitoring Officer

RECOMMENDATION

The Council is **RECOMMENDED** to consider the Interim Report of the Independent Remuneration Panel, and in so doing to consider the following options, either:

- a) To adopt the recommendations of the Independent Remuneration Panel on the Special Responsibility Allowances for the recognised Opposition Group(s) as set out in Annex A to this report; OR
- b) To agree alternative values for any of the allowances, as the Council may determine; OR
- c) If the Council does not wish to accept the Panel's recommendations at this time, in whole or in part, or to substitute alternative amounts, to agree a status quo Scheme of Allowances for 2025/26 for any unchanged aspect;
- d) To agree the Independent Remuneration Panel's recommendation that basic and any Special Responsibility Allowances (SRAs) should continue to be paid to any councillor taking parental leave in accordance with the Parental Leave Policy approved by Council on 8 July 2025

Introduction

1. The Independent Remuneration Panel (IRP) is undertaking a full review of the Council's current scheme of members' allowances, with a final report to be presented later in the Council year which will recommend a further Scheme of Allowances effective from 1 April 2026. The IRP was asked by the Director of Law and Governance and Monitoring Officer to provide early recommendations on two specific matters:
 - i) The payment of Special Responsibility Allowances (SRAs) to the Leaders and Shadow Cabinet Members of the two equally sized opposition groups recognised as the official opposition, following the May 2025 elections.
 - ii) The application of allowances for councillors taking parental leave, following the adoption of a new policy on 8 July 2025

2. The Council's attention is drawn to the recommendations made by the IRP on these two issues which are set out in its interim report (Annex A). Under the Members' Allowances (Local Authorities)(England) Regulations 2003 the Council shall have regard to the recommendations of its Independent Remuneration Panel when making or revising a scheme of allowances. Any decision not to follow the IRP's recommendations must be published. Consequently, Council should consider the IRP's recommendations, but it is for Council itself to agree any amendments to its own scheme. The Council therefore has a choice of whether to accept the IRP's recommendations in whole or in part, or not at all, or to determine other amounts. In doing so, the Council should be clear of its reasons for reaching any decision.
3. The Council may, for example, agree other amounts; or adopt a status quo which makes no substantive changes to the current scheme of allowances.

Considerations and Rationale

4. Following the May 2025 elections, the Labour and Co-operative Group and the Oxfordshire Alliance Group each have 12 members and are tied as the second largest political groups on the Council. At the Annual Meeting of the Council on 20 May 2025, the Monitoring Officer reported that, in the absence of any specific mechanism in the Council's constitution to determine the recognition of an official opposition group in the event of tie in numbers of members in the second largest groups, both would need to be recognised as the official opposition.
5. The Council's current members' allowances scheme does not provide for the specific calculation of Special Responsibility Allowances (SRAs) where there is more than one official opposition group of equal size.
6. The IRP noted that Oxfordshire was among a minority of authorities that made constitutional provision for an "official" opposition group. A benchmarking exercise revealed that a smaller number still had specified how the payment of SRAs for the Leader and Shadow Cabinet members would be calculated in circumstances where there was more than one group of equal size. This research illustrated a range of approaches, including dividing SRAs or applying specific formulas.
7. The IRP noted that paying the full SRA, as specified in the members' allowances scheme, to both opposition groups in this Council would result in a significant increase to the Council's budget (£47,328 in 2025-26) and could affect public perception negatively. The IRP also considers that the existence of two recognised opposition groups presents an opportunity for enhanced cross-party working and scrutiny.

8. The Panel also considered the payment of allowances during Parental Leave noting that the Council approved a councillors' parental leave policy in July 2025.. The IRP supports the continuation of all allowances, including SRAs, for members taking parental leave, in line with the Council's policy and national best practice.

The Panel's recommendations

9. The Panel's Interim Report is included as Annex 1 and sets out the following recommendations :-
 - a) That, in the event of the designation of two or more opposition groups of equal number that are the next largest groups to that of the Administration, the Special Responsibility Allowances (SRAs) for Opposition Group Leaders and Shadow Cabinet Members specified in the Members' Allowances Scheme should be divided by the number of groups accorded with that status. This amendment to the scheme should be effective from 1 October 2025.
 - b) That basic and Special Responsibility Allowances for members taking parental leave in accordance with the Council's policy should continue to be paid during their period of leave and in making this recommendation it is accepted by the IRP that there may be an instance where a Special Responsibility Allowance may be duplicated for a limited period of time .
10. Council may choose to accept these recommendations in whole or in part, or not at all.

Financial Implications

11. Total 2025/26 annual Revenue budget for the additional Opposition Group is £47,328.
12. Additional Special Responsibility Allowances budget will be required for parental leave when duplicated.

Comments checked by:

Bick Nguyen-McBride
Assistant Finance Business Partner
Bick.Nguyen-McBride@oxfordshire.gov.uk

Legal Implications

13. The Members' Allowances (Local Authorities)(England) Regulations 2003 are Regulations made by the Secretary of State under S18 of the Local Government and Housing Act 1989. The duty to have regard to the

Independent Remuneration Panel's recommendations is set out in Regulation 19.

19.— Duty to have regard to recommendations

(1) Before an authority referred to in regulation 3(1)(a), (b), or (c) makes or amends a scheme, the authority shall have regard to the recommendations made in relation to it by an independent remuneration panel

Comments checked by:

Anita Bradley
Director of Law and Governance and Monitoring Officer
Anita.bradley@oxfordshire.gov.uk

Equality & Inclusion Implications

14. The councillors' parental leave policy will contribute towards enhancing the diversity of experience, age, and background among local authority councillors. Furthermore, it will assist in retaining experienced councillors and making public office more accessible to individuals who might otherwise feel excluded from it.

ANITA BRADLEY
Director of Law and Governance and Monitoring Officer

Annex: Interim Report of the Independent Remuneration Panel – September 2025

Contact Officer: Chris Reynolds, Senior Democratic Services Officer
Chris.Reynolds@oxfordshire.gov.uk

September 2025