

Independent Remuneration Panel

Tuesday, 30 October 2007

4.00pm

Present:

Ms Jeanett Campbell - Boots
Rev. Michael Fanstone - Baptist Church
Mr David Gingell - Local Resident

Shirley Whatmough - Head of Democratic Services

Cllrs: Michael Snelling - Leader of the Executive
John Burden - Leader of the Labour Party

4. Last Meeting

Since the first meeting of the Panel when consideration had been given to the role of the new Chairmen of the Policy Overview Committees and Vice-Chairmen generally, Panel members had asked to interview the leaders of the two groups on Gravesham Council to learn more about a councillor's role and the reasons behind the allowances payable.

The Panel then interviewed in turn, Cllr Michael Snelling, Leader of the Executive and Cllr John Burden, Leader of the Labour Group.

5. Interview with Cllr Snelling

Cllr Snelling briefly explained the background to the Local Government Act 2000 which had brought in the Cabinet and Scrutiny system. In introducing the role of Chairmen of Policy Overview Committees, the incoming administration in May/June 2007 wished to involve back bench councillors more directly in influencing policy development by the Cabinet. Cllr Snelling thought there was a significant role for these Chairmen although he recognised that as advisory bodies they did not carry the same weight as other committees for which allowances were paid to Chairmen.

Cllr Snelling confirmed that a Vice-Chairman's role was to only act in the absence of the Chairman and this happened rarely. He felt that the role of Vice-Chairman of the Overview Scrutiny Committee was rather more onerous since this was the only committee of the Council chaired by a member of the opposition group.

In answer to questions from the Panel Cllr Snelling said that he did not believe that the level of allowances payable influenced in any way the decision of candidates to stand for the Council. He explained, however, that significant amounts of time were spent by councillors in attending to constituency matters and formal meetings at the Council. Cllr Snelling went on to explain the time that he spent as Leader of the Executive on Council business.

Cllr Snelling confirmed that he would expect the Council to implement any recommendations made by the Panel.

6. Interview with Cllr Burden

Cllr Burden welcomed the opportunity to talk to the Panel about Members' Allowances. He felt that the level of allowances did not now reflect the amount of work expected of a councillor and thought that the basic allowances should be increased to be nearer the average level paid in other authorities and phased over of a number of years.

Cllr Burden said that he would oppose any proposal to pay allowances to the Chairmen of the Policy Overview Committees. He felt that these bodies had replaced the previous Cabinet Advisory Panels and they had no additional power or remit.

Cllr Burden also considered that the level of allowances did not influence whether Members stood for election but he did feel that some councillors in employment had to sacrifice aspects of their career if they were to undertake the role of a councillor successfully. He felt that this should be recognised in the allowances paid, although it would never make up for the time spent. Cllr Burden also commented that he did not believe that those who served on more than one authority should be able to claim allowances from each.

Cllr Burden said that the workload of councillors had increased since the scheme had been introduced in the year 2000 and there was a need for a long term strategy for dealing with allowances. He did not feel it was appropriate to simply pay an increase in line with the staff salary award.

7. Discussion

The Panel wished to discuss in detail what they had heard from the two leaders but in view of the shortness of time they agreed to reconvene on another date.

Close of meeting

The meeting ended at 5.45 pm.