

OPPOSITION SPECIAL RESPONSIBILITY ALLOWANCES

Introduction

The arrangements for Opposition Special Responsibility Allowances (SRAs) have been the subject of considerable debate by the IRP in the past, including the threshold for Groups to attract SRAs, that the IRP last recommended as six.

The current scheme takes into account Group size in allocating SRAs for both Spokespeople and the Leaders of Opposition Groups. It was introduced by the IRP in this way to reflect that the degree of liaison work within Opposition Groups grows as the size of the Group grows and gives some sense of reflecting election results and how the electorate have voted.

The current arrangement has been applied with a range of different size Groups in the past, most significantly when the Council had two large Opposition Groups (Liberal Democrat and UKIP) as well as smaller Groups that did not meet the IRP's size threshold for payment of SRAs. Allowances therefore grow as Group size grows and fall as Group size falls.

Detail

It is worth noting the rationale behind Opposition SRAs. These fulfil a variety of functions and are quite different from the SRAs paid to members of the majority Group running the Council.

Spokesperson SRAs assist staff in briefing one lead Councillor for each Group, where typically Groups have a number of Councillors serving on thematic bodies such as the County Council's Select Committees. The history of these broadly mirrors the old "committee" system that operated before the current "cabinet" system of governance around areas and budgets of Council activity. The lead Councillor is a key contact for members of staff, for liaison with all of that Group's members of the Select Committee and wider Group, other political groups, community and pressure groups and the media. The scope of the role has some relationship to the total membership of the political groups. It was this factor that influenced the IRP to consider Group size as a factor in the calculation of the SRA.

Group Leaders have a similar role across the Council as a whole, and again the IRP considered that the size of each Group should be taken into account when calculating the SRA, with a fixed sum for each Group Leader together with an additional amount for each councillor in the Group. Co-ordination within large Groups reduces duplication of contributions to debates, manages motions, amendments and corrals research and information needs, aiding efficiency.

The Leader of the largest Opposition Group on the Council (currently the Liberal Democrats, but in the past also Conservative), has additional roles to fill. The Leader of the Opposition has additional contact with senior staff, the Leader of the

Council, and the media. It is a unique role. Additional briefings and contact assist in the smooth-running of the Council and debates: the single point of contact is a conduit to the whole Group, reducing the number of meetings and briefings.

Smaller Groups

The County Council has a history of smaller political Groups that have not met the IRP's definition for entitlement to SRAs. The IRP recommendation of 6 as the threshold for SRAs was reduced to 4 by the Council. The Council has operated for many years with sometimes several Groups, typically of two or three councillors, including a period when the UKIP Group split, along with single councillors not in membership of any Group.

Clearly, it is for the IRP to consider the requests from the current two smaller Groups on the Council. The IRP has considered a range of requests for additional SRAs in recent years and where recommended these have been accepted by the Council with budget growth accordingly. The Liberal Democrat Group has no formal view on the minimum size of a Group needed to qualify for SRAs but does consider that if the IRP is minded to recommend a lower threshold this should, on grounds of equity as with other additional SRAs created in recent years, be budget growth rather than be taken from any other SRAs.

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Leader of the Liberal Democrat Group

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