

11. ELECTED MEMBER OVERSEAS TRAVEL SUBCOMMITTEE

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Corporate Plan Output: Public Accountability	

The purpose of this report is to present the recommendation of the above Subcommittee which was appointed at the February meeting of the Committee to investigate “ways and means of monitoring the cost of elected members’ overseas travel”. The members of the Subcommittee are the Chairman and Councillors James and Sheriff.

The Council’s current policy on overseas travel is set out in the two resolutions given below:

“Overseas Travel

That all Councillor and staff overseas travel is to be advised to the Council, including how funded and the cost to the ratepayer.”

Adopted 24 June 1991

“Councillors’ Overseas Travel

1. *That the resolution previously adopted by the Council on 24 June 1991 be amended to provide:*

- (i) That as a general policy all elected members and staff air travel be by way of economy class, where the cost of the fares are met by the Council.*
- (ii) That there be no overseas travel unless there is clear benefit to the Council.*
- (iii) That no unnecessary expenses be incurred in the course of such travel.*
- (iv) That all costs of elected member overseas travel be reported to the Strategy and Resources Committee as part of the six monthly monitoring process.*
- (v) That all travel be planned in advance.*

2. *That, in the case of elected members, exceptions to this policy require approval of the Council where business class air travel is desirable for health or other compelling reasons”.*

Adopted 26 August 1998

The question of Council approval of overseas travel is also governed by the Local Government (Local Authorities Salaries and Allowances) Determination 1999 which means that for an elected member to claim a daily allowance for travel and attendance at overseas conferences that travel and attendance needs to be duly authorised by the Council in advance.

It seemed to the Subcommittee that there were two major gaps in the existing policy.

1. The lack of any explicit requirement for budget approval in advance of the overseas travel by elected members;
2. The lack of any criteria on which to base the “clear benefit to the Council” referred to in (ii) above.

PRIOR APPROVAL

This is a straightforward matter and it would seem the policy needs to be amended to require that all elected member overseas travel and the funding for it be approved by the Council in advance. This would mean that the report requesting Standing Committee recommendation and Council approval of the travel would include a budget for the trip with the various elements identified viz:

Travel costs
Accommodation costs including meals
Incidental expenses (itemised where significant costs are known).
Conference fees

Total _____

The source of funds should be part of the approval.

The report should also indicate whether or not any Council staff will be attending the conference to provide support and advice to elected members. Generally speaking, it would be unusual for the Council to approve elected member attendance at a conference which did not warrant staff attendance.

Councillors are entitled to be paid a daily allowance when their attendance at conferences has been approved by the Council. The Strategy and Resources Committee wanted the Subcommittee to consider whether to include the Councillor daily allowances as part of the cost of attending a conference. On the one hand these payments for the time the Councillor is involved are real costs to the public purse. On the other hand Councillor daily allowances are separately budgeted and, for example, the costs of daily allowances for a special meeting to consider a particular project are not charged against that project. Further it is very likely that while Councillors are travelling overseas they miss meetings in Christchurch for which they would receive attendance payments. Finally, the basis of paying elected members is under review by central government and Local Government New Zealand, and the result of that review will probably be higher salaries and significantly lower (or even the abolition of) daily attendance allowances. Given that Councillors would be attending meetings if they were not at the conference the Subcommittee does not believe that these costs should be included in the conference expenses.

The six monthly report on elected member overseas travel to the Strategy and Resources Committee should then include both the budgeted and the actual cost, and an explanation of any variations. This process should stop any “unpleasant” surprises to the Council regarding the high total cost of previously approved travel.

CRITERIA FOR TRAVEL

The current policy recognises that overseas trips are both expensive and time consuming and that there needs to be “clear benefit to the Council” for it to be worthwhile elected members undertaking such trips. The Subcommittee recommends that the criteria for assessing “clear benefit” include the following:

1. The major subject of the travel (visit, conference, seminar, etc) should be of significant and immediate relevance to the Council.
2. The travel involves a significant policy/governance content.
3. The travel is relevant for getting an understanding of policy and initiatives taken by other local authorities relevant to the Council’s activities.
4. The information obtained and the understanding gained by the travel is above and beyond what could be got by reading the paper and the conference report.
5. In selecting which Councillor(s) should undertake the travel the preference should be towards Councillors who have a responsibility or who take a lead on the issues that the travel is related to.

PROPOSED CHANGES TO PRESENT POLICY

In addition to adopting the above criteria the Subcommittee also recommends that the present Council policy be amended to include the following provisions:

1. The Council to authorise the attendance of only one elected member unless there are special circumstances.
2. Approval to be given for conferences beyond Australia only in exceptional circumstances unless funding is available from external sources.
3. All travel and accommodation arrangements to be made by appropriate staff with the Council’s preferred travel agents at the most economic cost available at the time of booking.
4. As staff attendance at conferences to be attended by elected members would normally be expected, approval for sole elected member attendance to be given only in special circumstances.
5. The travel expenses to be reported to include travel, accommodation, incidental expenses and conference registration.
6. A report to be submitted to an ordinary or seminar meeting of the relevant Standing Committee on the Council-funded component of the travel and the findings and benefits to the Council.

Recommendation: That the above criteria for elected member overseas travel and the amendments to the present Council policy, be adopted.

Chairman’s

Recommendation: That the above recommendation be adopted.