

Report title: Foreign Travel and Higher Cost Member Travel Annual Report 2022-23	
Report to: Audit, Governance and Standards Committee	
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Date: 5 June 2023	For: Discussion
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County Divisions affected: 'All Essex'	

1. Executive Summary

- 1.1 This report shares the annual report on high value and overseas travel with Members of the committee. This is the first time this has been reported to this Committee, as it was previously reported to a dedicated committee set up for this purpose.

2. Recommendations

- 2.1 Members of the Committee are asked to note the annual report and make any recommendations they may have.

3. Summary of issue

- 3.1 For the last ten or so years the County Council has had a special approval process for regulating overseas travel or offices and members and for high cost travel for members within the UK. This involved a committee set up to approve travel. All trips involving councillors were individually approved and officer travel could be approved on a per-trip basis or some teams were pre-approved, in the case of officers, per-team basis.
- 3.2 During 2022/23 ECC implemented a new system for approving certain categories of travel:
- All overseas travel (travel outside the UK) by officers and/or councillors.
 - All business trips anywhere (including the UK) which involves Councillors and where the total trip will cost the Council more than £500 where one Councillor is travelling or more than £1000 if more than one Councillor is travelling (even if the Council is subsequently reimbursed).

- All business travel by Officers when they are accompanying councillors and the total trip costs more than £500.

Prior to July 2022, this type of travel was either approved on an individual basis by the *Committee to consider applications to undertake certain duties by Members and foreign travel by Officers* or in some cases, for Officer travel only, specific teams had pre-approval to travel if it was a necessary part of their role. To maintain transparency an annual report of travel undertaken by these pre-approved teams was presented to the same Committee.

- 3.3 In July 2022 Full Council agreed to dissolve the Committee and replace it with an Officer approval process which is less cumbersome to operate. Since then, the above types of travel require authorisation from two out of three of:

- Chief Executive, Gavin Jones
- Executive Director, Corporate Services and Section 151 Officer, Nicole Wood
- Monitoring Officer, Paul Turner, Director, Legal and Assurance.

People cannot approve their own travel and in the unlikely event that two of the officers are travelling then their deputy may approve in their place.

This process is managed by an online approval system and all trips must be individually approved - there are no longer officer teams 'pre-approved' to travel.

In order to be transparent all approvals are reported to this committee annually.

- 3.4 For 2022/23 one report of all the above categories of travel has been prepared (appendix 1) as per the decision at Full Council in July 2022 that all foreign travel by officers or members will be reported annually to the Audit, Governance and Standards Committee. To present a complete picture this report includes travel by ECC officers where the costs were met by another organisation and were not a cost to ECC. As this is a year where we transitioned between the two systems, the report also includes travel approved under both.
- 3.5 The report shows that there has been an increase in travel since last year, although this is perhaps to be expected as a result of the pandemic - there was no foreign travel reported in 2021/22 or 2020/21. While there is no current concern relating to overseas or costly travel, that does not mean that there is no risk of problems arising in future. Members should form their own view and should consider whether or not they wish to express any view on any of the content of the report.

4. Financial implications

- 4.1 This report has no financial implications – the cost of the travel will be met from individual relevant budgets.

5. Legal implications

- 5.1 The approval of high value travel is part of the system of internal controls operated by the Council

6. Equality and Diversity implications

- 6.1 The Public Sector Equality Duty applies to the Council when it makes decisions. The duty requires us to have regard to the need to:
- (a) Eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment and victimisation and other behaviour prohibited by the Act. In summary, the Act makes discrimination etc. on the grounds of a protected characteristic unlawful
 - (b) Advance equality of opportunity between people who share a protected characteristic and those who do not.
 - (c) Foster good relations between people who share a protected characteristic and those who do not including tackling prejudice and promoting understanding.
- 6.2 The protected characteristics are age, disability, gender reassignment, pregnancy and maternity, marriage and civil partnership, race, religion or belief, gender, and sexual orientation. The Act states that 'marriage and civil partnership' is not a relevant protected characteristic for (b) or (c) although it is relevant for (a).
- 6.3 This report simply presents the annual report to the committee.

7. List of appendices

- 7.1 Foreign Travel annual report 2022/23.