

From: Foi Enquiries
Sent: 18 December 2018 13:37
To: [REDACTED]
Subject: FOI-18-1754 - Hotel Accommodation Policy
Attachments: V2 - Further Information - Right to Review & Appeal.pdf; FOI-18-1754 - Travel-Policy.pdf

Dear [REDACTED],

Thank you for your information request of 21 November 2018. Aberdeen City Council (ACC) has completed the necessary search for the information requested. Our response is now detailed below.

I read with interest the article in the Aberdeen Press & Journal, Tuesday 20th November 2018, where it was reported that the Council had paid out £7,500 over the past few years for overnight hotel accommodation in Aberdeen for the CEO.

I should appreciate it if you would provide me with the following information:

1. The Aberdeen City Council Policy that makes it possible for the Council to pay the costs for Aberdeen hotel accommodation for staff and/or elected members whose employment is based in Aberdeen.

Please see attached the current Travel Policy.

2. The Aberdeen City Council Policy that makes it possible for the Council to pay the costs for Aberdeen hotel accommodation for staff and/or elected members whose employment is based in Aberdeen but who live outside the city and choose to commute to work from their place of residence.

Please see our response to question 1.

3. The number and value of costs and/or expense claims that have been paid out under cover of the Policy or Policies in (1) and (2) above over the past four years.

ACC is unable to provide you with information on **The number and value of costs and/or expense claims that have been paid out under cover of the Policy or Policies in (1) and (2) above over the past four years** as the cost of providing it has been calculated as being in excess of the statutory maximum (£600). To explain this, it would involve an ACC Officer looking at all the transactions processed through the Travel & Subsistence code, Courses code and Conferences code to identify when this policy was applicable. In 2017-18 there were 14,249 transactions processed. This has been calculated at 1 minute per transaction, which equates to 238 hours, at the cost of £3,570 for one year. If we were to estimate this for 4 years, the total cost would be £14,280 in total.

In order to comply with its obligations under the terms of Section 16 of the FOISA, ACC hereby give notice that we are refusing your request under the terms of Section 12 - Excessive Cost of Compliance - of the FOISA.

ACC would be happy to discuss ways in which you may refine your request, so we can provide some information of interest to you within the maximum cost limits. Please do contact the Information Compliance team, who will be happy to advise you, if this is something you would like to pursue.

We hope this helps with your request.

Yours sincerely,

Grant Webster
Access to Information Officer

INFORMATION ABOUT THE HANDLING OF YOUR REQUEST

ACC handled your request for information in accordance with the provisions of the Freedom of Information (Scotland) Act 2002. Please refer to the attached PDF for more information about your rights under FOISA.



Grant Webster | Access to Information Officer

Aberdeen City Council | Access to Information Team | Customer Feedback | Customer
Marischal College | 3rd Floor | Broad Street | Aberdeen | AB10 1AQ

Dial: 01224 522166

www.aberdeencity.gov.uk | Twitter: @AberdeenCC | Facebook.com/AberdeenCC

Travel Policy. Procedure and Guidance

Purpose and Scope

This policy covers all local, long-distance and foreign travel undertaken by staff employed by or seconded to the Council. It also covers Elected Members of Aberdeen City Council and any other traveller (e.g. client) where Aberdeen City Council funds are used to pay for all or part of the travel.

All financial transactions undertaken by or on behalf of the Council are also subject to the Council's Financial Regulations.

The policy includes travel for teachers on Council business, but excludes school trips attended by pupils and teachers.

The nature of the travel required by the Council means that some staff and Elected Members travel extensively as a normal and routine part of their work. The purpose of this policy is therefore to ensure that all travel arrangements:

- Satisfy the purpose of travel;
- Demonstrate due regard for the safety and welfare of the traveller; and
- Offer value for money.

Definitions

The following definitions are used in this document.

- Local travel means travel within Aberdeen City Council boundaries.
- Long-distance travel means travel outside Aberdeen City Council boundaries. Foreign Travel means travel outside of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and
- Northern Ireland (i.e. outside Scotland, England, Wales and Northern Ireland)

Major travel expenses mean the costs of purchasing flights, train tickets, inter-city buses, car hire, visa costs and accommodation (including breakfast) that should normally be booked in advance.

Minor travel expenses mean the costs of taxis, local buses, car parking, business telephone calls and other incidental items incurred while travelling for business purposes.

Car mileage expenses – expenses paid for travel undertaken by personal vehicle. Living expenses include the cost of meals, gratuities, drinks, phone calls and similar costs. Those that can and cannot be claimed from the Council are referred to in the relevant section below.

Foreign Travel Float means a sum of money provided in advance of foreign travel that enables travellers to meet minor travel expenses.

Travel Co-ordinator means a person authorised to make bookings for major travel expenses (member of the Corporate Governance Administration Team).

Travel Partner is one or more companies contracted to provide travel services to the Council as organised by the Travel Co-ordinator.

Long-haul flights are those flights (including necessary same-day flight connections) outside Europe.

General Policy – Relevant to all travel

Booking and Approval

The Council will fund approved, ordinary and necessary travel to undertake the business of the Council.

All major travel expenses for long distance and foreign travel must be booked by a Travel Co-ordinator. This allows the Council to ensure that this policy is observed, to achieve purchasing economies, to best use the time of staff, and to meet its duty of care to employees.

Travellers must consider the best value or lowest cost option and consider whether the travel is necessary, the mode of transport and the time and date of travel.

Travellers are expected to exercise reasonable judgement regarding expenses incurred under this policy and to neither personally gain or lose financially from its implementation.

All long distance travel must be approved in advance by: The budget holder; and

If the traveller is a member of staff or seconded to the Council - The line manager of the traveller (in the event they are the budget holder then the approval of the one person is sufficient); or

If the traveller is an Elected Member - The Director of the Service Committee that approved the travel, or the Chief Executive.

In addition, all foreign travel must be approved in advance by:

The relevant Service Committee;
The Corporate Management Team; and
The Chief Executive.

In urgent or emergency situations the Chief Executive may approve foreign travel.

The budget holder and line manager may only approve:

The costs that are necessary to perform Council business; and

That those are for situations where the travel is clearly necessary and alternative methods of working (e.g. video conference) would clearly not achieve the necessary business purpose.

Where the estimated cost of travel varies from the estimate by more than £500 the Travel Co-ordinator will advise approvers in advance of approval.

Once booked, the Travel Co-ordinator will contact the approvers once cost is known.

Purpose of Travel

Staff and Elected Members travel within and away from Aberdeen for various reasons and fundamentally the reasons for doing this must be the business objectives of the Council and in fulfilment of its obligations.

The objectives of the Council include the promotion of and participation in the economic development of the City. Further there is an increased focus and emphasis on partnership working, funding generation opportunities (from Europe in particular) and the knowledge and skills that can be obtained from working and meeting with others. These are justifiable purposes for undertaking long distance and foreign travel under this policy.

For long-distance and foreign travel a full disclosure of the purpose of travel must be made before the travel is approved. This must include information on the time spent on non-Council business, personal travel, recovery time and any other non-Council related activity.

An employee may extend a business trip for personal reasons if approved in accordance with the booking and approval section of this policy. Employees must use the normal holiday application process in addition to the travel application when applying for an extension of a business trip for personal reasons.

Incremental costs relating to extension must be paid for personally. It must be clearly demonstrated that Council business was the primary purpose of the visit. Leave records should be appropriately completed.

Council insurance does not cover claimants for the additional days of any extension of a business trip for personal reasons.

Should the time spent on personal business in any one trip exceed seven days the claimant must contact the Payroll team for guidance on the taxation position of any reimbursement made by the Council.

General Exceptions

In conjunction with the Head of Finance, either the Chief Executive or Head of Human Resources & Customer Service, may approve requests for upgrades in class of travel, hotel or additional travel expenses where there is a documented health issue relating to the applicant or their family circumstances with corresponding medical advice that justify the additional cost involved in such a decision. In addition to upgrades, travel arrangements may be generally revised in such circumstances where an additional cost may be incurred to protect the safety and well-being of the traveller.

In the event that the traveller is attending an event hosted at a higher standard hotel, or has a business need for a higher standard hotel, then approval in advance is also required from the Chief Executive or Head of Finance.

Evidence of such approvals should be provided to the Travel Co-ordinator at the time of the request for a higher class of travel in advance of the travel taking place.

Travel Insurance and Emergencies

The Council has a travel insurance policy with ACE Europe. The policy number is UKBBBO04443112.

This policy covers all Council employees, Elected Members and relevant representatives of the council for whom the council has accepted responsibility for travel insurance. The policy covers medical expenses, cancellations, delay, personal effects, etc. while engaged in foreign travel for a business purpose.

Cover is provided for loss of money or personal property and, where expenses are incurred, receipts will be required to support any claim. In the event of theft, the loss should be reported to the police and a copy of their report obtained. Welfare assistance is also provided such as counselling, legal advice, security advice, bereavement advice.

In the event of an emergency the number +44 20 7173 7796 (*business class Assistance*) should be contacted immediately, but in any event within 48 hours of any serious accident or illness abroad requiring in patient hospitalisation, extended treatment or alteration to travel arrangements. The number is available 24 hours a day, including weekends and will accept call collect and reverse charge calls.

No arrangements should be made without involving and obtaining the agreement of *business class Assistance*.

An information letter and emergency phone numbers will be supplied by the Travel Co-ordinator as part of your travel information.

A copy of the insurance policy is available from the Travel Co-ordinator. Any concerns about the adequacy of this policy should be raised in advance with the Travel Co-ordinator so that these can be checked with the insurers prior to departure.

Safety

If the applicant or approver of the travel application form identifies that there may be a risk to the traveller outside of normal business risk as part of their substantive role, then a risk assessment form should be completed by the traveller.

This will identify, for example, any risk due to the country of location of the visit or due to the nature of activities being undertaken.

This form should be submitted to the Travel Co-ordinator along with the application form.

On receipt of the application, the Travel Co-ordinator will review the application and the risk assessment for relevant health and safety information relevant to the country(ies) being visited.

On receipt of any information from the Travel Co-ordinator, the traveller and their line manager will agree any mitigating action to be taken to minimise risk.

Travellers who may have specific health issues or who are not British Citizens are strongly advised to obtain their own travel advice in relation to the information that will be supplied as a result of these checks as the Travel Co-ordinator will not have access to personal information about each traveller.

Basis of Calculation

HMRC produces tables of subsistence rates that provide a measurable value for different countries and in some cases different cities / regions in countries. These represent 'moderated' values for each country that HMRC will allow to be 'given' to an individual by an organisation up to which HMRC is not to be taken into account for tax purposes. These tables are broken down into different elements of subsistence to provide a framework that can be used to make calculations and they provide a reasonable basis upon which to base a scheme for individuals travelling abroad.

The Council uses these as the basis for its currency calculations for staff and Elected Members travelling abroad.

Environmental impact of travel

Before booking travel claimants should consider whether the trip is necessary or whether teleconferencing or video conferencing offer a viable alternative.

When arranging travel, the Council encourages claimants to use the mode of travel that results in the least environmental impact, as carbon dioxide from transport, particularly from air and road travel, is a key contributor to climate change.

Where choosing a more environmentally friendly mode of travel results in an increase in costs, the employee must raise this in advance of making any bookings, with their authorising manager.

Policy Relevant to Types of Travel

Air Travel

Generally flights will be booked using the cheapest available Economy class fare (or equivalent), buying tickets with fixed dates where feasible, as these are generally cheaper. However the cost of tickets should be considered in terms of "overall value for money" and factors such as the predictability of travel plans, airline schedules and connection times may mean that a more expensive ticket provides better value for money under a specific set of circumstances.

The Travel Co-ordinator will consult with the applicant regarding appropriate flight time and carrier arrangements and to allow sufficient rest time following the flight. Flight arrangements will be made by the Travel Co-ordinator giving due weight to the three criteria of travel set out in the Purpose and Scope of this document. If the applicant wishes to extend the trip for personal reasons then this should be made clear in advance to the Travel Co-ordinator with any excess cost being agreed to be funded by the applicant.

While the traveller may retain frequent flyer benefits, these must not result in any incremental cost to the Council.

Hotel Accommodation

Hotel accommodation should be booked in a convenient hotel to the business location. The hotel standard will be booked by the Travel Co-ordinator with reference to HMRC guidelines for relevant rates dependent on the location. The Travel Co-ordinator will take advice from the Travel Partner on suitable accommodation options and where appropriate safety advice from the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) will be taken into account when making bookings.

Wherever possible, breakfast should be included in the hotel rate. If this is not possible, the cost of breakfast should be claimed in accordance with guidance on living expenses. In the UK where possible, an evening meal will also be booked.

Upgrades to executive floors / rooms are not acceptable unless the hotel offers them on an entirely complimentary basis (as could be the case for frequent visitors).

Local hotel accommodation may be booked in exceptional circumstances where as a result of operational needs the traveller would be required to undertake travel during unreasonable anti-social hours and/or where it could expose the employee to an inappropriate level of personal risk.

Ground Transport

Train travel should be booked in a class equivalent to UK standard class. If the applicant is in possession of a railcard then this should be notified at the time of application in order for the Council to benefit from any relevant discounts.

Hire cars should be booked using a category sufficient for the number of passengers and luggage to be carried. The Travel Co-ordinator will make the necessary arrangements using the relevant Travel Partner. Hire cars should be considered if they are a value for money option to meet the business need. Situations and circumstances where this is of particular relevance are personal safety, travel time, weight of luggage, inaccessibility of the destination by public transport, and the cost of group travel by public transport is excessive.

Taxi use should be restricted to situation where personal safety, travel time, weight of luggage, inaccessibility of destination by public transport, or the cost of group travel by public transport makes a taxi journey clearly necessary.

Buses offer a cost effective means of travel and should be considered as an option for local and long distance travel. While this is cost effective it is recognised that other factors need to be taken into consideration when deciding what mode of transport to use and therefore it is not a requirement that buses are used.

Mileage Claims

The hire of cars (as referred to in the section above) and use of the Co-Wheels car club (<http://www.co-wheels.org.uk/>) scheme is strongly encouraged.

However, where a traveller has had to use their private car and that is the most cost effective method of ground transport the Council will pay mileage for the actual distance covered as set out in the Council's Travel Expenses procedures

It is the traveller's responsibility to ensure that the vehicle is roadworthy at all times and is taxed and has a current MOT certificate (if an MOT certificate is legally required). Travellers must also ensure that they have a valid driving licence and that they have the relevant business use motor insurance in place at the time of travel. The cost of adding business use onto a personal motor insurance policy cannot be claimed by the traveller.

Mileage claims are made by a Travel and Subsistence Claim form.

Parking, congestion charges, tolls, ferries and other driving-related penalties

Reasonable expenses incurred on parking, congestion charges, tolls and ferries may be claimed in respect of journeys which qualify for the mileage allowances above. Receipts or other documentary evidence should be submitted as part of the claim.

Charges for overnight parking will be paid only when subsistence expenses are payable for the night(s) in question.

Should an employee be liable for clamping or other parking / congestion charge penalty (e.g. because a meeting over runs or due to non-payment of a congestion charge) then reimbursement of the charge will not be made. Similarly, reimbursements will not be made to an employee who receives a fine or other financial penalty relating to an offence committed whilst driving on Council business (e.g. for speeding or for using a hand held mobile phone or similar device). Employees are required to notify the Council of any such offences and penalties.

Policy Relevant to Living Expenses

Foreign Currency Expenses Application

For foreign travel, an allowance for travel living expenses will normally be paid by means of a currency application in advance of travel. This will include an allowance for breakfast, lunch and dinner based on HMRC recommended guidelines for the location to be visited. If meals have been booked as part of the travel arrangements, or are provided by the host then the allowance will not be included in the currency payment. In addition, if it has not been possible to pay hotel costs in advance, it will include an allowance for the payment for the hotel.

All such expenses have to be receipted. The full value of the currency application will require to be accounted for and any balance remaining unspent along with receipts must be returned to the Travel Co-ordinator within seven days of returning to Aberdeen.

It is the responsibility of the traveller to notify the Travel Co-ordinator of meals (or other living expenses) supplied as part of the travel / conference arrangements

The payment will be based on the time the traveller is expected to be based in the foreign location based on 24 hour, 10 hour and 5 hour time periods up to the total expected time away. Calculations will be based on the scheduled time of arrival in the first country outside the United Kingdom of Great Britain (UK) and the scheduled time of departure of the route returning to the UK. Living expenses outside these times will be deemed UK travel and claimed in the normal way (reference Travel and Subsistence Claim Form below).

The currency issued will be in the relevant local currency of the destination country.

If more than one country is being visited then this will be identified in the itinerary and a relevant split of currency will be made based on the time spent in each destination.

Foreign Currency Float

In addition to the foreign currency application, the traveller may apply for a float to meet the cost of minor travel expenses. Floats for overseas travel must be submitted to the Head of Finance, Corporate Governance, for approval. The full value of the Float will require to be accounted for and any balance remaining unspent must be returned to the Travel Co-ordinator within seven days of returning to Aberdeen.

The Foreign Travel Float application should detail the itinerary of the traveller(s) and any specific minor travel expenses that are known and likely to be incurred, e.g. taxis or hospitality. In general a sum of £25 per 24 hours and part thereof will be calculated for minor travel expenses unless there is a clear and demonstrable need to provide a greater value on any particular day.

The currency issued will be in the relevant local currency of the destination country. If more than one country is being visited then this will be identified in the itinerary and a relevant split of currency will be made based on the time spent in each destination.

Travel and Subsistence Claim Form

For UK travel, living expenses will normally be paid by completion of a travel and subsistence claim form after travel has taken place. All such expenses have to be receipted (in the unusual event that no receipt is available full justification / explanation must be given and accepted by the authorising manager).

All Travel and Subsistence Claim Forms must be authorised by the claimant's line manager or other authorised signatory who is senior to the claimant.

Use of Corporate Credit Card

Corporate credit cards are allocated based on the business need of the postholder, and will be offered to staff who have a regular business need to undertake long distance travel.

If the traveller is in possession of a corporate credit card, they may use it in lieu of the foreign currency float, the foreign currency expenses application or instead of the travel and subsistence claim form.

Credit card bills will be monitored and reconciled by the Travel Co-ordinator. Reference must be made to specific guidance on the use of corporate credit cards. Any misuse of the corporate credit card will be referred to the Head of Finance and is subject to the Council's disciplinary policies.

Inadmissible living expenses

Expenses the Council will NOT pay for:

Personal telephone calls, other than to announce safe arrival;
Personal internet access;

Parking fines and traffic offences;
Mini-bar or in-room entertainment;
Newspapers
Clothing or any other items that the traveller may reasonably be expected to bring from home;
Excess luggage costs, unless the traveller is required to travel with significant quantities of business materials or equipment. This should be identified at the time of booking major travel expenses so that the Council can take account of reduced rates for booking this in advance;
Laundry costs and dry-cleaning (except where the period of travel covers more than 5 days);
Membership of airline frequent flyer / loyalty schemes or similar;
Alcoholic drinks, tobacco products, gratuities
Travel Insurance
Equipment, materials or services that should be bought through the normal procurement process e.g. computers, phones.

Any claim that contains an item listed above (or similar) will require explicit approval by the Chief Executive or the Head of Finance. In a travel emergency, the situation may arise where such expenditure may be appropriate.

Miscellaneous

Entertaining and Gift Expenses

The offering and accepting of hospitality is a normal part of working and building business relationships in many of the countries with which the Council engages. If the travel requires business entertaining or presentation of gifts, then:

Any entertainment or gifts provided must be consistent with the image and reputation of the Council as a UK public body that is subject to full public audit;

An expenses claim must be submitted with the name(s) of the beneficiaries, included any staff members in attendance. This will be held with the register of gifts and hospitality; and

The cost must be covered by the approved budget line.

In the event that the traveller is offered hospitality or gifts (other than small business items such as pens, folders, diaries, calendars, etc. with an estimated combined value of less than £30) while undertaking travel, then a full declaration must be made in the Register of Gifts and Hospitality.

Gifts and hospitality must not be offered or accepted in any way that could be construed as a bribe or inducement. Gifts and hospitality should not exceed £200.

Gifts and hospitality should be in accordance with the Council's Financial Regulations and reference should be made to them for additional guidance.

Travel funded by grant expenditure

Travel costs that are met by grant expenditure are subject to the same policy as all Council travel. The traveller should ensure that the Council maximises the income to the Council in respect of that travel and grant claims are made in a timely and effective way.

Working hours whilst travelling

Staff should ensure that they comply with the Employee Handbook in respect of claiming hours worked whilst travelling.

Monitoring of Expenditure

All major and minor travel expenses are subject to regular checks and performance monitoring information is gathered in respect of expenditure. Reports of expenditure may be presented to the Head of Finance and Corporate Management Team. Attention may be drawn to trip activity of high volume claimants.

From time to time the Council may be required to publish information relating to expenses claimed for instance in response to a Freedom of Information request. In such cases the Council would normally release information at an aggregate or summary level.

Where a request involves the expenses of Directors, other senior managers and others who it may be possible to identify from the data, those involved will, wherever possible, be given the opportunity to comment in advance on the information likely to be released.

In any other instances where the public interest may favour disclosure the individuals affected would, wherever possible, be given the opportunity to comment on any information likely to be released.

Where copies of receipts or invoices are requested these will be made available as appropriate, taking into account any issues relating to personal data.

Managers' responsibilities regarding authorisation

If you are a manager authorising an expenses claim, you need to keep in mind that the responsibility for checking receipts and sense-checking that the claim is appropriate lies with you. Claims will be processed based on your authorisation but are not re-checked afterwards – subject to audit testing and sampling exercises routinely carried out throughout the year.

Payroll will forward a copy of all foreign travel expenses claims to the Travel Co-ordinator in order to confirm that the claimant has not already received currency to cover the costs either through Foreign Currency Expenses, Foreign Currency Float or the Corporate Credit Card.

A manager cannot authorise their own Travel and Subsistence Claim Forms and similarly cannot authorise their own travel application, foreign currency expenses application, foreign currency float application or similar.

End