

REVIEW OF MEMBER DEVELOPMENT
(Report by the Overview & Scrutiny Panel (Planning & Finance))

1. PURPOSE

To present the findings of the Panel's review into Member development.

2. INTRODUCTION

2.1 At their meeting held on the 14th September 2004, the Overview & Scrutiny Panel (Planning & Finance) appointed Councillors M G Baker, D B Dew, N J Finnie and A B Stenner to a working group for the purpose of undertaking a review of Member development within the authority and to bring forward recommendations and proposals for consideration by the Panel.

2.2 The working group has met on four occasions, focusing their review on :-

- Current levels of Member support (including facilities, personal support and training);
- Potential developments in Member support; and
- Skills development for Members.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 To explore the support arrangements that currently exist for Members within the District Council and possible improvements which could be made to these arrangements, a number of qualitative and quantitative methods of information collection were used. The Council's existing arrangements are summarised in a questionnaire referred to below.

Questionnaire

To obtain views on existing support arrangements and potential improvements, the working group devised a questionnaire which was circulated to all Members. A copy is attached at Annex A.

Telephone Survey

Members of the working group decided that a telephone survey of other local authorities in the area should be conducted to explore support arrangements and potential good practice in the nearby authorities. In this respect information was obtained from South Cambridgeshire District Council and Cambridge City Council.

Best Practice

Information was also obtained from reviews carried out by other authorities, details of which had been published on the Centre for

Public Scrutiny's website. Particular attention was paid to the support services which were being offered by those authorities or which were being recommended as an improvement.

4. RESULTS FROM QUESTIONNAIRE

4.1 An analysis of the results of the questionnaire is set out in Annex B (copy attached). The response rate was good, with 52% of Members finding time to complete the questionnaire and provide detailed comments.

4.2 Overall, a general degree of satisfaction was expressed with the services provided to Members. However, there were some issues raised in the questionnaire which were identified as being useful improvements to Members' services. Those which received significant support were identified as follows:-

- briefings for Members on specific topics;
- formal notification for Members of ward related committee reports;
- the provision of a broadband internet connection at home for all Members for use on Council business;
- support for Members in the organisation of ward surgeries; and
- development of an organised mentoring scheme for new Members.

4.3 The working group also agreed that other ideas identified by Members should be the subject of further investigation, including the recording of training sessions and subsequent distribution to Members unable to attend and greater use of practitioners as opposed academics for Member training (including experienced former councillors).

4.4 With regard to the support provided by other authorities in Cambridgeshire, the working group concluded that in general terms Huntingdonshire already compared favourably and that there were few if any lessons to be learned from other authorities.

5. LESSONS LEARNED FROM OTHER AUTHORITIES

5.1 The working group also considered support arrangements / practices in other authorities, namely:-

- Derbyshire County Council;
- Wiltshire County Council;
- Stockport Metropolitan Borough Council;
- Salford Metropolitan Borough Council; and
- Tameside Metropolitan Borough Council.

Annex C sets out those areas in which different services are offered to those currently provided by the District Council.

5.2 Those authorities have recently undertaken their own reviews of member development and their final reports are available on the Centre for Public Scrutiny's website.

- 5.3 Having considered the outcomes of the reviews and the support arrangements in place at those authorities, the working group concluded that the Council's existing arrangements compared favourably with Member support and development arrangements elsewhere. Nevertheless they felt that those Initiatives which had arisen from the District Council's survey of all Members and which are set out in the following section should be pursued, together with the appointment of training champions to keep a watching brief and act as the main points of liaison between Members and Officers on training.
- 5.4 The working group were also conscious of the decision by the Council at their meeting in February 2005 to delete the provision in the MTP for the current year for the employment of a dedicated Member Support Officer. Members acknowledged that the lack of additional resources will affect the ability of officers to support the measures which they recommend.

6. INTERIM REPORT

- 6.1 An interim report was considered by the Overview and Scrutiny Panel at their meeting on the 13th July 2005 at which time it was agreed that in view of the possible need to submit those proposals involving additional expenditure for potential funding under the forthcoming MTP process, the Cabinet should be recommended to consider the provision of broadband on request to Members who did not currently have access to this facility. An MTP bid is currently in the process of being compiled for consideration as part of the budgetary process for the forthcoming year.
- 6.2 The Panel felt that it would be inappropriate for officers to assist with the arrangements for ward surgeries which was a matter for individual members. As a consequence the working group has not pursued this matter further in producing their final report.

7. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

- 7.2 The working group recognise that existing support mechanisms have worked well over time and there is much to commend. However the evidence examined during the course of the review highlighted the need for a number of potential improvements to Member support and development. The working group therefore put forward the following recommendations;

1. Briefing for Members on specific topics

That a programme of briefing sessions for all Members be organised by service area on a rolling bi-monthly basis. The results from the consultation exercise revealed that councillors find that information is, at times, difficult to access, particularly on new and emerging issues and that briefings on specific policy matters would be useful.

2. Notification of ward related committee reports

The working group recognise that the Council's Constitution currently requires Members to be informed about ward related issues. Paragraph 10.2 of the Protocol on Member / Employee Relations states " it is essential for the efficient functioning of the Council that members should be fully informed about matters on which they may be required to make decisions of which affect their wards. Chief Officers should ensure that all relevant staff are aware of the requirement to keep local members informed and that, as far as practicable, the timing of such information allows Members to contribute to those decisions. Local members shall also be kept informed about matters affecting their wards during the formative stages of policy development".

The working group are not satisfied that Members have been sufficiently well informed by officers in accordance with the protocol. They therefore recommend that Chief Officers Management Team remind their staff of the requirements of the Code and the importance of briefing members about issues affecting their wards.

3. Introduction of a mentoring scheme

To complement support for newly elected Members, the working group consider that a mentoring scheme could be formally adopted, that would provide each newly elected Member with a nominated contact who will provide advice and information on a practical level about council membership and processes. Clearly this will be dependent upon existing Members being willing to offer support as a mentor. The working group so recommend.

4. Appointment of Training Champion

The working group welcome the comprehensive training programme that is available for members. However they feel that there could be greater involvement and consultation with Members as to what training and development provision is to be provided and how to ensure that this is appropriate to Member needs. The working group therefore recommend that each Political Group nominate a "Training Champion" to act as the main point of liaison between members and officers on the subject. Terms of reference for the Training Champions are contained in Annex D attached.

5. Use of alternative training mediums

The working group consider that the format in which training and development is provided should be widened. In addition to the usual attendance at presentations, seminars and conferences, alternative methods should be explored such as

- The recording and distribution of training presentations
- The availability of power point presentations on line
- The supply of DVDs/ videos for "home learning"

- A Members' homepage library of training events / presentations.

By so doing, this would assist Members with family, personal and work commitments who may otherwise find it difficult to attend in person. It was noted that weekend training events were unlikely to be popular. The working group recommend accordingly.

6. Broadband for Members on request where available

This matter has been addressed by way of a separate report which has been endorsed by the Panel at an earlier meeting. The Working Party consider that this issue should be addressed at the earliest opportunity as a matter of high priority.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The recommendations of the working group were endorsed by the Panel at their meeting on 11th November 2005. Cabinet is now invited to consider the recommendations.

BACKGROUND PAPERS

Minutes of Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Planning and Finance) – 11th September 2005.

Minutes of Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Planning and Finance) – 14th September 2004.

Minutes of Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Planning and Finance) – 12th July 2005

Questionnaire to all Members.

Notes of Telephone Survey with local authorities.

www.cfps.org.uk

Analysis of results of questionnaire prepared by District Council's Policy Division.

Review of Member training/development – Derbyshire County Council.

Final report and recommendations on Member training and development – Wiltshire County Council.

Policy Development Review – Supporting Local Democracy – Stockport Metropolitan Borough Council.

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