

**SUPPORTING COUNCILLORS:
A MANIFESTO FOR COUNCILS**

(Report by Head of Administration)

1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 The role of the Councillor is changing. The process started by the Government's programme to re-invigorate local democracy with the Local Government Act 2000 is continuing with the implementation, in the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007, of the proposals contained in the Local Government White Paper 'Strong and Prosperous Communities'.
- 1.2 A number of commissions and inquiries have reported on the subject in the past twelve months, the most recent of which is an invitation by the Local Government Information Unit to adopt a manifesto for Councils that they have published.

2. PROMOTING DEMOCRACY

- 2.1 For many and varied reasons, surveys in recent decades have shown little recognition and understanding of the role of Councils and Councillors on the part of the public. In part, this reflects changes in the community and in the structure and functions of Councils. It is also part of a wider concern about the relationship between the citizen and the state and how we are governed.
- 2.2 The White Paper 'Strong and Prosperous Communities' recognised that strong local councillors, representing their communities, are at the heart of local democracy. A Councillors Commission, established by the Department for Communities and Local Government, to look at the incentives and barriers to serving on Councils reported in December 2007 with 61 recommendations for Government, local authorities, the media and employers based upon the following principles –
- local authorities are key to promoting local democratic engagement;
 - a feeling that an individual is able to influence the democratic process and the course of events is key for better engagement;
 - Councillors are most effective as local elected representatives when they have similar life experiences to those of their constituents;
 - key to local effective representation is the relationship and the connections between Councillors and their Constituents;
 - it should be less daunting to become a Councillor, Councillors should be better supported once elected, and it should be less daunting to stop being a Councillor.
- 2.3 The recommendations of the Commission can be found in full by following the link -<http://www.communities.gov.uk/documents/localgovernment/pdf/583990>.

3. A MANIFESTO FOR COUNCILS

- 3.1 Working with its associate bodies, the Local Government Information Unit recently has launched 'Supporting Councillors: A Manifesto for Councils' which was presented to the All Party Parliamentary Group on Local Government last month. The manifesto is attached as an Annex to this report. It sets out 12 action points that it is asking all Councils and Councillors to implement without the need for legislative change.
- 3.2 The LGIU has requested authorities to sign up to the manifesto to send a clear signal to Government that Councils are serious about the need to support Councillors in order to maintain effective local government. The responses will be used to influence Government thinking on their reaction to the Councillors Commission report in the Spring. A suggested model resolution has been drafted by LGIU which it has asked Councils to adopt.

4. IMPACT

- 4.1 Several of the action points contained in the manifesto have already been implemented by the Council, including
- Promoting greater awareness of the role of Councillors through use of the web, encouraging and supporting individual web pages;
 - Supporting Councillors in their representation on a range of voluntary and other organisations, developing the role of scrutiny and encouraging public participation in the process;
 - Providing information to potential candidates for election about the implications of becoming a Councillor;
 - Providing induction training for newly elected Councillors and an extensive training programme thereafter;
 - Defining the role of Councillors in the Constitution, together with other protocols and codes that help Councillors in their community role;
 - Supplying hardware and access to Council software systems, together with the necessary training, that enables Councils to make best use of technology.
- 4.2 There are resource implications for the Council to implement other action points, some of which are dependent on legislative change, but adoption of the manifesto does not imply that actions will be implemented within a defined timescale and these can be dealt with as existing resources permit.

5. CONCLUSION

- 5.1 The additional emphasis on promoting and enhancing the role of the Councillor is welcome. While the Council could always do more to support its Councillors more effectively, Government recognition of the importance of the Councillor's role is critical and its response to the Councillors Commission report will be illustrative of potential future changes. Government expects much from local councillors in their new role and if a greater cross section of the public is to be encouraged to stand for election, more support is needed with resources being made available through the revenue support grant, employers need to be more sympathetic to the time commitments of

employees who become Councillors and there should be better recognition nationally of the successes and achievements of Councillors generally.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

6.1 It is therefore

recommended

- (a) that the Council recognises that Councillors have a valuable representative role which helps to ensure that local people have an active role in the development and delivery of council services;
- (b) that the Council notes the recommendations of the Councillors Commission report and awaits with interest the Government's formal response; and
- (c) that the Council welcomes the LGIU's document 'Supporting Councillors: A Manifesto for Councils'; considers it important to support actions that would help make a real difference to existing and future Councillors; calls on Government to help people be active and effective Councillors; and agrees to support and act on the 12 action points set out in the manifesto attached so that local democracy is strengthened.

Background Papers:

- DCLG Local Government White Paper 'Strong and Prosperous Communities'
- Report of the Councillors Commission 'Representing the Future'
- LGIU's 'Supporting Councillors: A Manifesto for Councils'

Contact:

Roy Reeves, Head of Administration: Tel 01480 388003