

COUNCILLOR SERVICES GROUP

26 November 2008

Present:

Councillors G. Bretherton (Chairman), H. Cadman, G.A. Fairhurst, G. Fairhurst, D. Hodgkinson, J. Moodie and M. Winstanley.

ACTION

1. **APOLOGIES:** Councillors S. Barnes, R. Derricutt, J. Haley, J. Miller, P. Prescott, R. Splaine and N. Whittingham.
2. **MINUTES:** With regard to the minutes of the last meeting, Cllr G.A. Fairhurst asked if any progress had been made in relation to the audibility issue in the committee rooms that he had previously raised. Brian Leigh responded by stating that he would provide an update to the Group on this issue under AOB.
3. **URGENT BUSINESS:** None for consideration.
4. **DEMOCRATIC SERVICES:** The Chairman welcomed Sue Johnson, Deputy Chief Executive and Kevin Lawson, Service Director-Borough Solicitor to the meeting. The Deputy Chief Executive was grateful for the opportunity to brief the Group on the new Democratic Services structure that had recently been put in place. The Deputy Chief Executive explained that a comprehensive review had been conducted of the council's democratic services, and that a key outcome from this process had been the re-positioning of all such services within the Business Support Services department. The review process had been influenced by the improvement agenda of central government, and the Deputy Chief Executive cited recent White Papers including the 'Communities in Control' publication as major drivers in this regard.

B. Leigh

A key theme within recent White Papers was the need to provide better support to elected members, and the democratic services review process had focussed on this improvement priority. In addition, the review had also considered updates to the council's constitution and the potential to change the role of panels in order that they might better support the scrutiny function. The Deputy Chief Executive referred to two earlier reports that had been submitted to both Overview and Scrutiny and Cabinet in relation to the proposed changes to the role of panels. In addition, a consultation with elected members was ongoing concerning Township processes.

The Deputy Chief Executive referred to the structure chart that had been issued to Group members, and then went on to outline the key changes from a staffing perspective. The new structure included provision for 4 additional full time posts, and these staff resources would be deployed to improve and enhance support to elected members in a number of key areas. Additional staff resources would be available to strengthen the elections work carried out by Democratic Services, and improved administrative

support would also be put in place. The Deputy Chief Executive drew Group members' attention to the new principal officer post for Overview and Scrutiny. This additional member of staff would operate to facilitate and co-ordinate improvements to the research work done in support of scrutiny, and the Deputy Chief Executive also expressed the view that the investment supported the council's efforts to respond to the new agenda.

The Deputy Chief Executive went on to explain the changes to the line management arrangements for Democratic Services; citing the fact that overall responsibility for Democratic Services now rested with Kevin Lawson. A key consideration in making the changes to line management arrangements had been the need to ensure that our democratic services were unified in a way that best met the needs of key customers. The Deputy Chief Executive stressed that the new arrangements were designed so as to provide enhanced support to elected members, and this was particularly important given the wider ward based and scrutiny role of members. The Deputy Chief Executive confirmed to the Group that the establishment process was now underway, and that this had started with the appointment of a new Democratic Services Manager. The member support function would now also incorporate support for Mayoralty. The Deputy Chief Executive then concluded by saying that the new democratic services structure would operate to better serve the needs of all elected members.

Councillor Hodgkinson said that he felt that the existing structure operated well, and then asked how the new structure had been approved. The Deputy Chief Executive responded by saying that the new organisation structure had been approved by the relevant cabinet member under delegated powers, adding that the review process itself had been instrumental in identifying the need for unified services. Councillor Hodgkinson asked about the position of individual officers, and the Borough Solicitor responded by stating that they would take on new roles within the structure. The Borough Solicitor went on to explain the broader scope of the Support Services Review, adding that the process was giving rise to significant savings. The Borough Solicitor also made the point that the new structure was necessary due to increased responsibilities being placed on the council. Councillor Hodgkinson responded by expressing the view that inefficiency within the council had the effect of restricting the resources required to bring about real improvement in services.

Councillor Gareth Fairhurst asked about the role of the Principal Scrutiny Officer within the new structure. The Deputy Chief Executive responded by explaining that the role was currently shared by a number of officers in addition to their everyday job roles. It was envisaged that the new post would give the council a dedicated staff resource who would lead the research function relevant to scrutiny. Additionally, the officer would be responsible for co-ordinating the scrutiny work of committees and make best use of the expertise available at departmental level.

Councillor Moodie welcomed the strengthening of the elections section of democratic services, stating that this was a key function which was central to the work of the council. He also welcomed the strengthening of scrutiny resources in support of the scrutiny process. Councillor Winstanley said that in his view the current panel structure did not make for effective scrutiny, but he acknowledged that the new post would enhance the role of elected

members.

The Chairman said that in his experience the officers who currently supported the scrutiny function had been very helpful. The Deputy Chief Executive then outlined to the Group how the recruitment process would operate; this would involve a combination of both open competition and the ring fencing of posts in appropriate cases. It was also possible that staff would be re-directed from other parts of the wider organisation. Finally, the Deputy Chief Executive stressed that the Support Services Review process would be instrumental in freeing up some £1.6 million in savings for the next two years. The Chairman thanked the Deputy Chief Executive and Borough Solicitor for briefing the Group.

5. **LOCAL DEMOCRACY WEEK 2008:** Katie Long, Programme Support officer was introduced to the Group. Ms Long referred Group members to the evaluation report which had been circulated with the papers for the meeting, and went on to highlight the importance of Local Democracy Week (LDW) in facilitating citizen engagement in the democratic process. Ms Long then summarised each of the activities that had taken place during LDW, highlighting positive aspects and areas for improvement. With regard to the online voting contest, Ms Long commented on the fact that Wigan had achieved the highest levels of participation out of 21 participating councils in terms of the number of questions and voter participation.

Councillor Gareth Fairhurst commented on his experience of the event, stating that the forum discussions had involved participation with a number of schools. Councillor Fairhurst recalled that many of the questions raised by young people had touched upon similar issues; one way of reducing the time taken to answer similar queries was to use the cut and paste facility.

Ms Long said that the joint cabinet meeting with young people had achieved a good level of participation and interaction. It was clear that young people had a number of key issues that they wished to be discussed, and consideration would be given to mechanisms that would continue to facilitate ongoing dialogue and action. Councillor Hodgkinson observed that schools could do some preparatory work with pupils and that this would make for effective participation. The Question time event had been well attended and good debate had taken place on transport issues and the economic situation. Councillor Winstanley observed that a great deal of the available debating time had been taken up on the congestion charge, and he suggested that it might be sensible for future events to work on the basis of questions being submitted in advance.

Councillor George Fairhurst expressed a concern that the young people's question time session were unnecessarily politicised. Councillor Moodie felt that it was important to consider the needs of young people and to give them an opportunity to express their own views. Councillor Winstanley suggested that it might be productive to involve 6th form pupils in future events.

Councillor Winstanley commented on the event at Golborne, and the extent to which proper public participation was required. This concern was acknowledged and future events would need to be designed so as to reduce the potential for disruption. Councillor Gareth Fairhurst suggested that it would be sensible to give pupils a greater degree of involvement in the

organisation of schools based events during LDW. Ms Long thanked the Group for their comments and suggestions, adding that the planning for LDW in 2009 would be started as early as possible in the new year.

- 6. BLACKBERRY TRIAL AND LAP TOP REPLACEMENTS:** The Executive Director of Business Support Services updated the Group on the Blackberry trial. The trial had started in May 2008, and there were now some 17 members who had been issued with the devices. The Executive Director summarised the facilities available on Blackberries; this included a phone and photo facility. The Blackberries operated on the national Vodaphone contract, and the Executive Director stressed the need for users to identify personal calls, and then to reimburse the council for the cost of such calls. The members participating in the trial would also need to hand in the mobile phones previously issued to them. The Executive Director reminded the Group that the devices had a purchase cost of £180 and annual charges of £300. The key question for consideration was therefore if the added benefits of Blackberries equated to value for money. The Executive Director suggested that a voluntary participation approach was possible, and this could be based on up to 50 participating members. A further option was for the council to resolve that all members should be issued with a Blackberry device.

Councillor Gareth Fairhurst responded by stating that a voluntary approach was a good idea, adding that the Blackberry helped working members to be more effective. The Chairman said that he had received very positive feedback from colleagues who were participating in the trial. Councillor Winstanley felt that the current economic climate required members to think very hard about efforts to reduce costs. Councillor Cadman did not support the issuing of Blackberries to members, and suggested that it was open for members to pay for them. Councillor Gareth Fairhurst acknowledged the importance of financial savings, but he felt that efficiencies could be made elsewhere such as the provision of member meals. Councillor Hodgkinson suggested a compromise approach which would involve members paying the difference in cost between a Blackberry and mobile phone. The Executive Director acknowledged the range of views within the Group, and accordingly it was resolved to conduct a formal survey of elected members.

The Executive Director addressed the issue of lap top suitability that had been raised by members. He explained to the Group the advances in software and also the systems employed when members connected to the council IT network. If members had a concern about the speed of their council lap top computer, then they should report this to staff on the helpdesk facility. A check would then be carried out by staff and extra memory fitted. If required, a replacement machine would be issued and the old one re-cycled. The Chairman thanked the Executive Director for his update.

- 7. MEMBER DEVELOPMENT CHARTER:** The Chairman welcomed the positive commitment of the political groups to engage in the development review process. He very much hoped that this process would lead to the council making application for accreditation under the NWEO member development charter in 2009. The Chairman felt that achieving the charter would send a very positive message to prospective election candidates about the support they could expect to receive if elected to office. Councillor

Bretherton also said that it was important for member development to be funded adequately, in order that individual councillors could access training appropriate to their needs. Councillor Winstanley confirmed that he had started arranging and conducting reviews with his group colleagues. He then asked what the position would be for members who chose not to participate in the reviews. The Resource and Development Manager said that the council had a duty to support the development of all elected members, but conceded that active participation by all members was the preferred outcome. Updates on progress with the member reviews would be reported to the Group at its next meeting on 4 February 2009.

Political Groups

8. **ELECTED MEMBER SUPPORT:** The Resource and Development Manager updated the Group on the responses to his request for members to prioritise the range of suggested improvement actions. In response, Group members had identified the need to update the induction arrangements for new members as the most important improvement priority. In expressing this view, members felt that the induction welcome should include WALH and WLCT, as the work of both organisations featured significantly in the every day enquiries received by elected members. Members had also identified the need for improved officer contact information in order to assist them with the speedy resolution of issues raised by constituents.

The Resource and Development Manager explained that a review of the new members information pack was underway. The focus of the review was to make sure that members were provided with information that was pertinent to their role, and also would help them to effectively carry out an ever more demanding role. The potential existed to include information in the packs covering FAQ's, and also web based toolkits that would enable new members to quickly access service specific information. Officers were also conscious that new members were given a great deal of information to read, and accordingly the potential to make increased use of intranet based material would be exploited by the use of hyperlinks in documents.

B Leigh

Respondents had also identified the need to implement the system of member development reviews in order that identified needs were documented and acted upon. It was noted that the political groups had started the development review process, and this in turn would hopefully lead to a development plan covering all members of the council. The Resource and Development Manager went on to summarise other identified improvement priorities, and these included:

Elected Members

Providing a level of administrative support for elected members

B Leigh

Implementing improvements in committee/panel specific training

Service departments
S Weetman

Improving the functionality of the Members Enquiry System.

9. **A.O.B:** Councillor George Fairhurst commented on the parking difficulties experienced by members at the last council meeting. The Executive Director of Business Support Services acknowledged the problem, and responded by explaining the measures that had now been put in place to avoid a repetition at future meetings. The loss of the Wiend car park had operated to increase the pressure on Civic Centre spaces, but the allocated councillor bays were normally sufficient to meet member needs. With

regard to council meetings, the car park attendant would now remain on duty at Civic Centre until the start of the meeting. The new arrangement would ensure that only authorised users could use Civic Centre car park, and also that vehicles would be parked sensibly.

The Executive Director also referred to the alternative parking arrangements available to members at Harrogate Street and at the Grand Arcade in specific circumstances. The Executive Director confirmed that he had written to members who had complained about the parking problem. Clarification was sought by the Group as to the position with usage of the Chapel Lane car park. The Executive Director responded by stating that arrangements were being put in place for Chapel Lane to be used as a temporary station car park for a period of time. However, members would continue to be able to use Harrogate Street car park in the event of Civic Centre being full.

The Resource and Development Manager updated the Group on his efforts to identify a suitable audio system for use in panel and committee meetings. He had looked at the potential to use either a fixed or portable system. A portable system offered the potential for flexibility of use, and a particular consideration was the potential to derive income from its use at commercial functions held at the Town Hall. The Resource and Development Manager stated that there was no existing budget provision to purchase such a system at the moment, but went on to explain that it might be possible to submit a bid in due course.

- 10. DATE OF NEXT MEETING:** 4th February 2009.