

COUNCILLOR SERVICES GROUP

11 June 2008

Present:

Councillors G. Bretherton (Chairman), Gareth Fairhurst, G. Fairhurst, P. Prescott, R. Splaine, M. Winstanley and N. Whittingham.

ACTION

1. **APOLOGIES:** Councillors H. Cadman, D. Hodgkinson, J. Haley , J. Miller and J. Moodie.
2. **MINUTES:** Councillor Bretherton opened the meeting by explaining that he had been asked by the Leader of the council to Chair Councillor Services Group, and this was acknowledged by Group members. The Chairman reviewed the minutes from the meeting on 26 March 2008. Councillor Prescott referred to the feedback provided by new members to the Group at the last meeting. He felt that key contact officers details should be captured in a list for the information of new members, but also observed that telephone numbers frequently changed. The Head of IT said that it was possible to use the same base information to feed different information systems, and this made for consistency. Councillor Gareth Fairhurst referred to the telephone directory web link, and the Head of IT confirmed that it was possible to link the directory to blackberry devices. A typing error was noted on agenda item 6, but in all other respects the minutes were an accurate reflection of the discussion. The Executive Director of Business Support Services (BSS) then took the opportunity to explain some of the changes that were taking place as a consequence of the support services review. He would in due course have executive responsibility for Democratic and Member Services, and accordingly wished to support team members involved in working with elected members.
3. **URGENT BUSINESS:** None for consideration.
4. **SMS FACILITY FOR ELECTED MEMBERS:** The Head of IT explained how standard text messages could be sent to elected members to notify them as to the dates and times of scheduled meetings. Wigan and Leigh Homes used the facility to remind individuals as to impending appointments, and they had found the facility to be effective in minimising missed appointments. The Head of IT referred to the exemplar message that had been sent out to Group members in the afternoon. Councillor Gareth Fairhurst felt that the facility was very positive, although other members were concerned about the potential cost. The Head of IT also explained the potential to use the calendar facility in Outlook as a means of managing committee/panel commitments. The Head of IT provided feedback on the blackberry trial that was underway. The feedback was positive to date, and participating members had commented on how useful the hardware was in managing mail whilst on the move. The Chairman asked if the facility would be extended to all elected members, as he understood that other councils

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had already made a commitment to do so. The Executive Director of BSS acknowledged the potential value of blackberry devices, but equally understood the concern of members on the issue of costs. The outcomes of the pilot evaluation would influence any future procurement decision.

Members enquired if blackberry devices had a camera facility, and the Head of IT replied that their functionality varied dependent on the model. Councillor Gareth Fairhurst asked how long the pilot would take, and the Head of IT explained that he would provide a full report to the Group at the end of the three month trial. The Head of IT also took the opportunity to update the Group on IT provision for new members who had joined the council after the May 2008 elections. All IT and telecommunications installation work had been completed, as had the initial assessment of IT training needs. Additionally, the Head of IT reported to the Group that IT and printing facilities were being upgraded at all council owned surgery facilities

Head of IT

5. **COUNCILLOR SERVICES GROUP TERMS OF REFERENCE:** The Resource and Development Manager outlined the terms of reference of the Group. Full details were contained in the Councillor Training and Development Strategy document, but essentially the Group existed to represent the interests of all elected members on matters relating to their support and training and development. The Group operated on cross-party lines, and was able to make recommendations to Cabinet on substantive matters pertaining to member support and development. Cabinet had asked if the minutes of the Group could be reported to it in draft form so as to avoid significant time delays. This was particularly important when the Group wished to make a recommendation to Cabinet that required a timely decision. Group members understood the benefit of aligning reporting arrangements, and accordingly were content for Cabinet to receive its own minutes in draft form. In future municipal years, it would be preferable to align the dates of Group and Cabinet meetings so as to facilitate effective communication.

6. **ELECTED MEMBER SUPPORT:** In response to the consultation questionnaire previously circulated, Group members provided feedback on areas of required improvement. Members expressed the view that induction arrangements should include the WLCT and WALH. The complexity of these partner organisations was such that new members needed to be briefed on their operation. Training was a key issue for members, particularly in relation to the operation of committees that exercised a quasi judicial role. Councillor George Fairhurst emphasised the need for ongoing training for Planning committee members. Councillor Splaine cautioned that insufficient training might lead to flawed decisions and the potential for the council to incur considerable cost. Councillor Prescott identified the changing role of Townships as a training and support need for elected members. Members needed to understand the terms of reference of Townships given that change was currently occurring. Councillor Winstanley identified the transaction of business at council meetings as a learning and support need for all members. The Chairman endorsed this view, and agreed that the offer of training on such processes should be made to all elected members. Members took the view that the members room at Wigan Town Hall should remain unchanged. In particular, its open layout facilitated discussion between members of all political groups. The

Resource and Development Manager undertook to reflect these views to colleagues, and also asked group members to return the completed evaluation questionnaire to him.

Group members

7. NORTH WEST EMPLOYERS CHARTER FOR ELECTED MEMBERS:

Group members had received a document outlining the criteria that the council would need to satisfy in order to be recognised under the NWE0 member development charter. The council met all the requirements, save for the operation of formal development reviews for elected members. Councillor Prescott was conscious of the limitations placed on member development, due to the location and timings of formal courses. Councillor Gareth Fairhurst doubted the need for a formal review system, but other members felt that a more formal approach to training was required. The Chairman felt very strongly that members should have the opportunity to have their learning accredited, and other members endorsed this view. The Chairman asked if all other North West authorities held the award, and the Resource and Development Manager confirmed that Wigan council was now one of a few councils that had not received accreditation for its member development process. It was agreed to seek a meeting with North West Employers with a view to making an application for assessment against the requirements of the charter. All members of the Group would be invited to participate in this meeting along with the leaders of each political group.

8. UPDATE ON COUNCIL CHAMBER AUDIO SYSTEM: The Resource and Development Manager updated the Group on the development of the new audio system. Problems had been encountered with the new software at the first time of use, but these had now been addressed. Training had been offered to members on the queuing and speaking protocols, and the majority of members had attended the training sessions. The new system however required members to follow stated protocols during debate, and these would facilitate the efficient transaction of business at future council meetings. Further training would be offered to members on the use of the electronic voting system, and the Executive Director of BSS said that it was important to demonstrate to all members that this facility was visible, accurate and robust. Further updates would be provided to the Group as the system was rolled out. Councillor Gareth Fairhurst advocated the recording of council meetings and this was something that the system could do. It would however require the agreement of members of the council.

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9. A.O.B.: Councillor Gareth Fairhurst asked what environmental conservation measures were possible in relation to reducing the use of paper at panel and committee meetings. The Chairman acknowledged the responsibility of the council in this area, and noted that Councillor Fairhurst had been making his own contribution by using a lap top at meetings. Councillor Prescott saw value in this approach, but opined that electronic versions of documents would need to be transmitted to members in good time. Councillor Whittingham expressed the concern that lap tops might offer a distraction and inhibit the efficient conduct of meetings. There was general acknowledgement however that this was an area in which efficiencies could be made.

The Chairman sought clarification on the extent of the training budget for elected member development. The Resource and Development Manager

explained that the budget had originally been set at £20K, although it had subsequently been reduced. The Chairman was keen to ensure that adequate resources should be devoted to properly support elected member development. Brian Leigh undertook to raise this issue within the Democratic Services Review process.

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10. **DATE OF NEXT MEETING:** 6 August 2008