

COUNCILLOR SERVICES GROUP

6 August 2008

Present:

Councillors G. Bretherton (Chairman), S. Barnes, H. Cadman, G.A. Fairhurst, G. Fairhurst, J. Moodie, P. Prescott, and N. Whittingham.

ACTION

1. **APOLOGIES:** Councillors J. Miller, R. Splaine and M. Winstanley.
2. **MINUTES:** The Minutes of the last meeting were reviewed by the Chairman and approved as a true record. With regard to the minute concerning elected member support, Cllr Prescott again stressed the need for ongoing training in support of the collective membership of Planning and Licensing committees. Committee Chairs
3. **URGENT BUSINESS:** None for consideration.
4. **ELECTED MEMBER IT SUPPORT:** The Head of IT updated the Group on progress with the Blackberry trial which currently included five elected members. The Head of IT summarised the feedback from members of the trial to date; this included improved response times, accessibility, the ability to send and receive e-mails when working remotely and the facility to take photographs. The participating members were generally very positive, although issues had been raised about deleting e-mails and the ability to connect to the Members Enquiry System. The Head of IT said that both of these issues could be resolved. Head of IT

The Head of IT also informed the Group that the process of updating Surgery IT equipment at council controlled venues had now been completed. Additionally, Karen Rooney had been organising 1:1 IT training sessions with elected members and ten such sessions had been completed. The Head of IT also reported that all new member IT and communications equipment had now been installed.

The Chairman asked if Blackberries would be made available to all members of the council in due course. The Head of IT said that a decision would be made based on the findings of the current trial. Any decision to issue Blackberries to all members of the council would have cost implications, but these needed to be balanced against the corresponding benefits in terms of increased flexibility and responsiveness afforded to members. Cllr Cadman expressed his opposition to such a decision on the grounds of cost. He was firmly of the opinion that council funds should not be used in this way.

The Head of IT responded by stating that the current trial did not involve a general offer to all members of the council. The Chairman recognised that Blackberries might not be suitable for all members; however the availability

of the option was a positive step forward in terms of the support available to members. The Executive Director of BSS said that the potential to extend the trial was open to members. He also referred to comments made by Cllr John Brien concerning the potential to use IT solutions more extensively in Panel and Committee work. The current practice of Overview and Scrutiny to access reports and papers from the council's intranet site was cited as one way to achieve efficiencies by minimising the use of paper. Cllr Moodie acknowledged that there was a balance of arguments, and he felt that Cllr Cadman made a valid point as to the issue of cost. Cllr Gareth Fairhurst felt that option of having a Blackberry was a positive one, although he accepted the need to strike a balance. Cllr Whittingham asked about the security aspects in the event of loss or theft of a Blackberry. The Head of IT responded by saying that his team could disable the device centrally as soon as they were alerted to the loss.

- 5. LOCAL DEMOCRACY WEEK 2008:** Simon Dale introduced Roy Pass, Andrea Smith and Katie Long who were working as part of a broader council team to develop proposals for Local Democracy Week. Simon introduced the agenda item by reference to the aims of Local Democracy Week, and he then went on to provide members with an overview of the effectiveness of the programme that had run in 2007. There was a commitment to run the event again this year, and Local Democracy Week would start on 13 October. The success of this year's event would depend largely upon the involvement of members from across the political groups, and a key aim was to improve the reputation of local government in the eyes of local residents. Simon reflected that the council had, over recent years, been gradually building the activities run during Local Democracy Week. The programme run in 2007 had not been extensive, but it had attracted significant press coverage and the involvement of a number of elected members from across the political groups. Crucially, the events had managed to achieve a level of engagement with the general public.

With regard to specific events, reference was made to the Youth Reporter session. This had brought together young people and elected members with the aim of the reporters producing an article about the role and work of elected members in the LINK magazine. Cllr Prescott felt that it was difficult for third parties to properly understand the work of elected members, and suggested that some form of buddy system might be preferable. This would involve a young person work shadowing elected members for a day and then reporting on what they had observed. The Cabinet session with college students was also discussed, and the Executive Director of BSS opined that it had worked better when the observers had been politics students. The Chairman asked how this session had been organised. Simon Dale explained that the session was designed so as to open up the potential for dialogue between young people and the cabinet. This was achieved through structuring the agenda in such a way as to make it meaningful to young people. Additionally, the act of holding a cabinet meeting at another venue was aimed at making key council processes more open to the public.

Cllr Moodie asked if the activities set out in the report constituted the planned programme for 2008. Simon responded by saying that the core planning group wanted to build upon the activities run in 2007, although it was recognised that changes were required in some areas. The Question

Time event had seen a majority of the questions focussing on national issues, whereas the expectation was that local topics would be the focus for discussion. The Young People's Question time event had been well received in 2007, but the commitment of elected members would be crucial to it working well again this year. Cllr Prescott felt that this was a positive initiative, and the Chairman urged all members to get involved.

Cllr Prescott linked the aims of Local Democracy week with the recent motion to council tabled by Cllr G Wilkes. The motion to council concerned the adoption of a public question time. Cllr Prescott stressed the importance of improving the accessibility of elected members to the general public, and he suggested that better use of IT through web page information and blogs could help in this regard. The Executive Director of BSS felt that a public question time might not be the best way of engaging the public, and he suggested that moving cabinet meetings around the borough might be more beneficial. Cllr Prescott suggested that it would be useful to discuss this particular issue at more length at the next meeting of the Group.

Cllr Gareth Fairhurst endorsed the idea of public questions to cabinet, but noted that IT was already utilised to communicate on key issues. The Chairman stressed that the key issue was how to best engage with the public, and Cllr Whittingham pointed out that member web page facilities already existed.

Simon Dale went on to explain the key requirements for the 'I'm a councillor get me out of here' contest. A minimum of 4 and maximum of six members were needed to ensure the viability of the event, and Simon stressed that the optimum time for nominations was fast approaching. Accordingly, a note would be circulated to the political groups asking them to make their nominations. Cllr Whittingham stressed the importance of advertising as an aid to maximising participation. The issue of MP involvement in the Question Time panel was then raised. Cllr Prescott felt that it was important to seek the involvement of local MP's, but Cllr Cadman then raised the issue of political balance. Cllr Barnes echoed this concern, and said that this would be difficult given the current political disposition of local MP's. Cllr Moodie observed that MP's had a duty to represent all the residents of a constituency. Cllr Gareth Fairhurst urged colleagues to ensure that the focus of the Question time event would be on local issues; this in turn suggested the need for representation by local elected members. Cllr Whittingham however suggested that it was not easy to define localism.

Roy Pass shared with the Group the structures adopted in Wigan to facilitate youth participation work. These structures existed to give young people a voice, and Roy suggested the idea of a debate between the council's cabinet and young people who would effectively form a young people's cabinet. The Executive Director of BSS said that any such dialogue would need to focus on issues that matter to young people.

Last, Simon Dale said that members participating in the 'I'm a Councillor' contest would be supported better this year; the intention was to put together a support toolkit. The debate concluded and the Chairman thanked Simon Dale and colleagues for their attendance. The views of the Group would be taken back to the steering group and a further update would be provided at the next meeting.

Elected
Members

S Dale

6. **MEMBERS ENQUIRY SYSTEM:** Sharon Dickinson, Head of Customer Services thanked the Group for the opportunity to open a dialogue with members on the Members Enquiry System. Sharon said she was keen to gain input from members as to how the system should be taken forward. It was the case that both technology and the needs of customers had changed since the system was introduced. A number of improvements had been implemented previously, but Sharon was keen to ensure that the potential to improve the system further was exploited for the benefit of members. It was important to the council to understand any trends with regard to member and service complaints, as this would help to identify trends. Sharon said that her analysis of MES usage by elected members showed that some councillors did not use the system, whilst others found it difficult to obtain satisfactory responses. A further group of members seemingly resolved their enquiries through other methods. In terms of moving forward, Sharon felt that the issuing of guidance to both members and officers would serve to establish a clear framework for the operation of MES. Equally, the issue of premature closedown by departments needed to be addressed as did the lack of a linkage to back office systems. Last, the alignment of departments with MES needed to be changed to reflect the current departmental structures.

Head of
Customer
Services

Sharon felt that a number of improvement options were available. These included retaining MES with system enhancements, using the new CRM system with a member screen or developing a new bespoke system. Sharon was keen to seek the views of members and invited feedback from Group members.

Cllr Whittingham had considered the issue of MES improvements, and he made a number of suggestions. The screen layout could be improved, and the issue of navigating between the screen and the main menu needed to be considered. Cllr Whittingham also asked about the compatibility aspects with Blackberry devices. He too was concerned about premature closure of enquiries by departments, and also raised the issue of having to raise separate enquiries with the Neighbourhood Teams. He suggested the inclusion of an e-mail link being included to the officer dealing with a specific enquiry. In general terms, his experience was that it was currently quicker to initiate direct e-mail contact than to use MES. Cllr Gareth Fairhurst endorsed the comments made by Cllr Whittingham. The Executive Director of BSS stressed that no system was a panacea for all issues raised by members. He however accepted that it was important for the system to work effectively.

Cllr Whittingham observed that member enquiries through MES were not always dealt with as he would have wished, and he queried if officers or departments had targets for achieving the speedy closure of enquiries. A facility to direct an enquiry to a specific officer would be helpful, and Cllr Whittingham also felt that adopting an A-Z approach would assist. Cllr George Fairhurst said that he did not use the system; he felt it was more efficient to contact the appropriate officer direct. Cllr Prescott felt that there

was room for both approaches. Cllr Moodie said that he had previously used the system, but now preferred to contact the officer or department directly. In part, this approach arose as members developed a detailed understanding of key officer contacts within departments.

The Head of IT stressed the need to maintain a consistent approach to enquiries. He reflected that the system had been subject to much change, and suggested that a working group could be formed with member input to define future changes. He also noted the future role of the JSC in handling customer enquiries. The Head of Customer Services said that she would like to distribute a quick questionnaire to all members of the council. This would seek member views as to possible improvements. The key aims would be to ensure consistency of treatment of enquiries, to avoid duplication, full information capture and tracking/trend analysis

Head of
Customer
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7. **'MODERN COUNCILLOR'**: The Resource and Development Manager reported that uptake by members of the on line learning modules was limited. Members had reported difficulties with logging in to the system, and accordingly it was suggested that a drop in workshop session might assist. The Group endorsed this proposal, and a workshop date would be identified and then communicated to all members.

Brian Leigh

8. **A.O.B.:** The Chairman asked Councillor Gareth Fairhurst to demonstrate the use of his lap top as a reading resource for panel and committee papers. Cllr Fairhurst explained that he was keen to reduce the use of paper, and accordingly that he had looked at using his lap top to view panel and committee reports electronically. Cllr Fairhurst explained that officers in the IT section of BSS had assisted with the conversion of documents into PDF format. Cllr Fairhurst also said that he used a facility of 'sticky notes' for annotating reports with his own comments and questions. He found the approach to be a viable one, and was hopeful its adoption by other members could lead to a reduction in paper usage and hence save money.

The Executive Director of BSS stressed the importance of getting the right balance when using IT hardware. He also said that it was important to access documents through the council web site. The example of Overview and Scrutiny was cited as an effective use of IT, in that all the committee papers and reports had been located on a common Share Point portal. The site was accessible to all members of Overview and Scrutiny, and it afforded the potential for members to view papers electronically. The Head of IT added that the potential for innovation and improvement existed. He however stressed the importance of specifying clear objectives as a pre requisite to exploring IT solutions.

A point was raised about the use of name plates at committee and panel meetings. Members reported that this was fairly common practice, but endorsed the view that nameplates should be used at all formal meetings.

Panel and
Committee
clerks

9. **DATE OF NEXT MEETING:** 1 October 2008