

**Report to:** Cabinet

**Date:** 16 April 2009

**Subject:** Councillor Service Group Minutes

**Report of:** Executive Director of Business Support Services

**Contact officer:** David Smith 01942-827232

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**Purpose / summary:** Attached are the minutes of the Councillor Services Group for 4 February 2009 as approved at the meeting of 1 April 2009. This covering report asks Cabinet to consider two issues – the continuation of the BlackBerry trial and the arrangements for the catering at the Annual meeting of the Council.

**Alternative options considered and reason for selecting the one recommended:** Members could terminate the BlackBerry trial and not change the Annual meeting arrangements. The proposals to continue were supported by a majority of the members surveyed in the trial.

**Recommendation / decision:** That Cabinet offers BlackBerry devices to all Members of the Council who request one – the cost to be met from the existing Members equipment budget.

That Cabinet consider the arrangements for the buffet for the Annual Meeting as set out in the minutes.

The decision will be made as a result of this report and will be published within 48 hours

**Risks / Implications:**

|   |  |
|---|--|
| Financial:  | Within existing resources  |
| Staffing:   | Within existing resources  |
| Policy:   | Community Engagement   |
| Equal Opportunities - Has a Diversity Impact Assessment been conducted? | A formal assessment has not been undertaken but diversity issues have been considered in completing this report. |
| Wards affected:   | All  |

**Property Implications – Does the proposal involve a reduction, addition or change to the Council’s asset base or its occupation?**

No

**If yes, have the property implications been agreed with the Corporate Property Officer?**

**Does this proposal have significant implications for the Council and the local population?**

A diversity impact assessment has been undertaken and is attached as an appendix to this report.

**Does this proposal involve a new policy or procedure or significant changes to an existing policy or procedure?**

A diversity impact assessment has been undertaken and is attached as an appendix to this report.

Has the Service Director - Borough Solicitor confirmed that the recommendations within this report are lawful and comply with the Council’s Constitution? **Yes**

Has the Service Director - Corporate Services confirmed that any expenditure referred to within this report is consistent with the Council’s budget? **Yes**

Are any of the recommendations within this report contrary to the Policy Framework of the Council? **No**

\* delete which applicable

**For Cabinet reports only:**

|                                     |          |             |          |
|-------------------------------------|----------|-------------|----------|
| Categorisation of the report:       | <b>X</b> |             | <b>X</b> |
|                                     |          |             |          |
| Discussion leading to a decision    | <b>X</b> | Discussion  |          |
| Monitoring                          |          | Decision    |          |
| Sharing for corporate understanding |          | Information |          |

**Tracking/Process:**

|       | Consultation        | Ward Members | Partners |
|-------|---------------------|--------------|----------|
|       |                     |              |          |
| Panel | Overview & Scrutiny | Cabinet      | Council  |
|       |                     |              |          |

List of Background Papers in accordance with Section 100D of the Local Government Act 1972:

None

Proper Officer David Smith

Date 2<sup>nd</sup> April 2009

## COUNCILLOR SERVICES GROUP

4 February 2009

### Present:

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

### ACTION

1. **APOLOGIES:** Councillors S. Barnes, J. Miller, J. Moodie, R. Splaine and N. Whittingham.
2. **MINUTES:** The Chairman took the opportunity to welcome Nick Lamper to the meeting. Mr Lamper had recently taken up his position with the council as Democratic Services Manager. The minutes of the last meeting, held on 26 November 2008 were accepted.
3. **URGENT BUSINESS:** The Chairman agreed to receive a verbal update from Pete Livesey, Head of IT on the Blackberry trial and related member support issues. The Head of IT updated Group members on the Blackberry survey, stating that 38 members of the council had responded including six current Blackberry users. Feedback from the current users was very positive, with those responding stating that the devices were a huge help in responding to e-mail communications at the point of receipt. Users also cited the fact that the devices enabled them to respond to e-mails whilst they were at work. The Head of IT went on to summarise the questionnaire feedback from 32 members who were not currently Blackberry users. Fifteen out of 32 respondents thought that the issue of a Blackberry would be a huge help to them in the discharge of their councillor work. Four respondents were however of the view that Blackberries would not be a useful support mechanism. In round terms, the ratio was 2:1 in favour of the use of Blackberries.

The Head of IT went on to update the Group on the purchase, rental and call costs for Blackberries. The Head of IT said that one option was to move from the trial and to issue a Blackberry to all members of the council. Councillor Cadman questioned if the devices were fundamental to the discharge of the duties of elected members. The Executive Director of Business Support referred to the previous discussion on Blackberries at the November 2008 meeting, and the specific suggestion that Members could purchase their own devices. The Executive Director said that such a course of action would be problematic in terms of the council's IT network protocol.

Councillor Ellis said that he could see the value of the devices, but was less sure that such investment could be justified at the present time. Councillor Hodgkinson contrasted the potential costs involved in Blackberry provision and the apparent absence of any increase in Brighton Borough allocations. Councillor Prescott said that he was a current Blackberry user, and that he had found it to be invaluable in assisting in the efficient conduct of his work as a councillor. The devices afforded flexibility, and he cited the fact that members were now able to check e-mails whilst they were at work. He

continued by stating that he was now able to deal with constituent queries at the point of contact, evidencing the efficiency of the devices. Councillor Prescott however acknowledged that the provision of the devices was a matter of personal choice. Councillor Winstanley said that the devices would be a distraction at work, and that he remained of the view that Blackberries were an unwarranted luxury. The Chairman acknowledged the range of views, but suggested that it was preferable to retain a voluntary approach to the use of Blackberries. The Executive Director reminded the Group that its composition did not reflect the political balance of the council. One way forward therefore was to refer the issue to Cabinet for further consideration. Councillor Cadman reiterated his opposition to the issue of Blackberry devices.

The Head of IT concluded his report by stating that secure IT provision was being looked at for the member's room within the new Platt Bridge building.

4. **PROPOSALS FOR ANNUAL COUNCIL 2009:** Christine Charnock-Jones, Principal Officer – Committees, outlined proposals for changes to the style of the annual council meeting on 20 May 2009. The traditional approach had made for difficulties, in that the new mayor had to leave his/her guests in order to chair the business part of the annual council meeting. Additionally, the mayoral party was separate to councillors and therefore not inclusive. Councillor Winstanley asked if it would be possible to defer the start to 1 pm, as working members would otherwise be required to take a full day off work. Group members also asked about the costs involved in the provision of a meal or buffet.

The Principal Officer said that a buffet would cost £9, and a three course meal around £18. Councillor Gareth Fairhurst was unable to attend the meeting due to another engagement, but had asked that his views on the item should be made known to the Group. Councillor Fairhurst was concerned about the costs involved in food provision, and this view was echoed by Councillor George Fairhurst. Councillor Ellis said that it would be preferable for members to meet the cost of the meal. Group members however acknowledged that the mayoral guests and Honorary Alderman should be afforded free hospitality at the event.

The Chairman said that the event was special in nature, but suggested a compromise approach which would involve members paying for the meal on a voluntary basis. Councillor Winstanley said that he was concerned that such an approach might lead to the politicisation of a key civic event. Councillor Hodgkinson said that his understanding was that meals were included in member allowances.

The Executive Director explained the methodology that had been adopted by the last Independent remuneration panel in 2006. The panel had taken into account the fact that meals were provided to Members prior to formal meetings or seminars before determining the overall allowance paid. Councillor George Fairhurst said that he was happy to pay for the meal. Councillor Ellis said that it was important for members of the council to make a gesture by paying for the meal; this would demonstrate an awareness of the difficulties faced by the public in the current economic situation. Councillor Prescott felt that it would be more appropriate to opt for the

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cheaper buffet provision. The Executive Director said that he would be willing to pay for the buffet as a senior officer of the council as was the recent practice adopted for the 2008 Christmas carvery. The debate concluded with an acknowledgement of the range of views held by Group members. One approach would involve elected members and officers paying for the buffet with guests of the Mayor free, whilst an alternative was to opt for the cheaper buffet option

5. **ADVICE TO COUNCILLORS ON LOCAL EXTREMIST ACTIVITY:** The Policy Manager – Equality, Diversity and Cohesion requested the support of the Group in carrying out work to prevent violent extremism in the borough. In this regard, the Policy Manager wished to issue written guidance to all members of the council in line with the report circulated to Group members. Councillor Winstanley, commenting on the report, said that any advice issued to elected members should stress the council's opposition to violent extremism of all forms and from all sources. Councillor Ellis cautioned that such efforts frequently had the effect of highlighting the activities of extremist organisations, and Councillor Hodgkinson felt that there was a need to remain objective at all times. Councillor Ellis acknowledged the sensitivities involved, but said that he did perceive a level of resonance in the general public over the issues.

The Chairman stressed that the council had a legal duty to combat violent extremism, and went on to say that information issued to members of the council would aid them in the discharge of their duties. Councillor Prescott commented on the programme of elected member equality training, and said that the issuing of further information would assist elected members. Group members requested sight of the detailed guidance in order that they might provide an informed view.

Sian Jay

6. **PROVIDING SUPPORT TO COUNCILLORS ON DIVERSITY:** The Policy Manager – Equality, Diversity and Cohesion had tabled a report for consideration by the Group. The report requested that the Group support efforts to build upon the programme of member equality training, by including key cultural and religious dates within the council yearbook and diary. Councillor Cadman stressed the need to adopt an inclusive approach when considering the list of religious and cultural events to include in the yearbook. Subject to this consideration, the Group were happy to support the proposed actions.

Sian Jay

7. **MEMBER DEVELOPMENT REVIEWS:** The Chairman asked for feedback on progress with councillor development reviews. Councillor Prescott responded by saying that he had completed 15 reviews with colleagues to date. Councillor Winstanley confirmed that he had completed 8 reviews with his own group colleagues, and said that he would be arranging 2 further discussion sessions. The Chairman urged all political groups on the council to engage in the process, as this would serve to identify development priorities and lead to a programme of tailored training. Councillor Prescott said that his focus was to ensure that elected members were provided with appropriate support. The Executive Director said that work was being undertaken to improve induction materials for all elected members, and added that there was perhaps also a need to assist members to gain a better understanding of respective roles within the council. Councillor Ellis responded by stating that the situation was complicated by virtue of the fact that officers were moving within the council quite regularly.

Political groups

8. **A.O.B:** The Principal Member Support Officer reflected on the ongoing work to improve the functionality of the chamber audio system. Group members again commented on the difficulty that members of the public experienced when listening to the proceedings of Planning Committee.

Councillor Ellis asked if it would be possible for Brighton Borough forms to be available in electronic format. This would make it easier for members to transfer and save forms. The Principal Member Support Officer said that he would refer this request to colleagues.

B. Leigh

Councillor Winstanley commented on government proposals to allow absent voting by local authority councillors. He felt that the proposals made for a dilution of democratic principles. The Executive Director said responses to the consultation exercise showed that 50% of respondents opposed the proposals outright; only 25% were in favour of absent voting. Councillor Winstanley said that he believed a parliamentary bill was still being contemplated. Councillor Winstanley added that he was mindful of the duties that any resultant legislation might impose on the council, but expressed the view that full council had an important role to play in making a decision on any proposals. The chairman said the vast majority of elected members wanted to participate in debate; his impression was that the proposals were designed to address issues in large rural councils. Councillor Winstanley commented on a recent press article on the proposals which quoted a council spokesperson. Councillor Winstanley did not feel that the quoted council position properly reflected the views of elected members.

9. **DATE OF NEXT MEETING:** 1 April 2009