

COUNCILLOR SERVICES GROUP

1 October 2008

Present:

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

ACTION

1. **APOLOGIES:** Councillors G. Fairhurst, D. Hodgkinson, J. Moodie and M. Winstanley.
2. **MINUTES:** With regard to the Blackberry trial, Pete Livesey, Head of IT confirmed that a total of seven Elected Members were now participating in the evaluation process.
3. **URGENT BUSINESS:** None for consideration.
4. **EQUALITY TRAINING FOR ELECTED MEMBERS:** Sharon Adams, the Training and Development Manager, thanked Group Members for the opportunity to update them on the programme of equality training for Elected Members and senior officers. Sharon referred to the aims of the programme; its focus being to assist Members and officers to gain an insight into the differing needs of our customers. Developing a better understanding of customer needs, would in turn assist Elected Members to focus on equality of access to services when considering policy issues. Sharon confirmed that a general introductory session had taken place along with specific workshops covering age and disability. The next workshop would take place shortly and this would cover the subject of race.

To date, approximately 52% of Elected Members had attended one or more of the sessions. Considerable effort had been invested in making the sessions accessible to Elected Members, with different venues and both day and evening workshop sessions being run. Sharon shared with Group Members the feedback that she had received to date from both Elected Members and officers. The use of speakers who had a particular insight into the needs of customers from particular aspects of the social identity model was regarded as a positive element of the training. Additionally, participants had commented favourably on the interactive nature of the sessions. All participants recognised the value of joint working as between Elected Members and senior officers. The value in this approach would be considered when planning future training initiatives.

Councillor Cadman cited his own personal experience, recognising that customers could have vastly differing needs. He was however less sure about the relevance of the remainder of the diversity agenda. The Chairman said that he valued the learning opportunities offered by the sessions and

was pleased that effort had gone into planning the sessions at different locations. Councillor Prescott said that he too had found the sessions to be valuable learning experiences.

Sharon Adams stressed that the sessions would help both officers and Elected Members to better understand the needs of our customers. This in turn would reduce the potential for poor service provision at the service planning and delivery stages. Steve Peddie, the Service Director for Customer Transformation, echoed these sentiments adding that the Council was committed to equality of access to services. Sharon Adams thanked group members for participating in the training workshops and urged all Elected Members to take part in future sessions.

All Elected Members

5. **LOCAL DEMOCRACY WEEK 2008:** The Resource and Development Manager updated the Group on the planning for Local Democracy Week. A programme of events had been previously circulated to the Group and Members had been involved in the planning process. The aim of Local Democracy Week was to engage the public and to increase the extent to which they understood the role of Elected Members and the Council. The Resource and Development Manager acknowledged the efforts of Elected Members, officers, schools and wider partners in bringing forward a varied and comprehensive programme of events. The emphasis of certain events had been modified slightly so as to increase the potential for public participation and involvement. An evaluation report would be produced at the end of Local Democracy Week and this would be shared with Group Members.

S. Dale

6. **ELECTED MEMBER SUPPORT:** Brian Leigh referred to the feedback from Members on the issue of their support requirements. A report and associated summary had been distributed to Group Members and this highlighted a number of areas for improvement. It was important to focus available resources on key improvements actions, and accordingly Group Members were asked to indicate the order of priority in which issues should be tackled. A simple priority list had been prepared for this purpose, and Members were requested to complete and return this to Brian Leigh.

Group members

Steve Peddie, Service Director for Customer Transformation was introduced to the Group. He wished to brief the Group on proposals to provide improved support to them which also linked to the objective of improving the reputation of the Council and Borough. The Service Director then outlined the extent of development work currently underway to improve the quality of information available to residents. Improvement actions included increasing the number of editions of Borough Life to 8 per year. Additionally, the new Wisdom system would make qualitative information available as to the breakdown of particular areas in the Borough, and this information would be available to Elected Members in due course.

The Service Director also referred to a recent report to a Select Committee of Overview and Scrutiny on the subject of Reputation Management for the Council. There was a clear recognition of the need to provide Elected Members with quick access to information that would enable them in turn to solve problems. The Service Director cited specific development work to improve Members' web pages and also the intention to upload the Members' information pack on to the intranet. It was intended to make the pack

interactive and also to include links within it to other information that would assist Members in the discharge of their functions.

The Service Director went on to refer to the potential value in issuing Elected Members with a professional document case as part of the effort to provide more effective support to Elected Members. This approach also had the benefit of involving elected members in the branding of the Council. The Service Director summarised the types of information that the pack would contain, stressing that the effort was directed at supporting Elected Members more effectively and promoting a professional approach.

Councillor Miller asked to what extent the views of Members would be taken into account in bringing forward definite proposals, and the Service Director said that it was open to Elected Members to submit a detailed response. This could be done at an individual level, or alternatively the membership of the Group might wish to provide a collective response. Councillor Miller also expressed the view that the proposals seemed to be focussed primarily around a branding exercise. The Service Director was asked about the costs involved in purchasing the cases and he confirmed that 150 units would involve expenditure of some £5.5 K. The unit cost would however reduce if a larger volume was purchased. The Service Director stressed that officers had interpreted the question of need based on Elected Member feedback. He equally accepted that members had a proper interest in ensuring that public monies were used to positive effect.

Councillor Miller then asked if the evidence base supported the proposals being made by the Service Director. In responding to this question, the Service Director stressed that the proposed actions were focussed primarily on providing effective support to Members. He did not feel that such actions would necessarily result in the public having an improved perception of our services. Councillor Cadman asked if it was the intention to issue the cases to just new or all Elected Members of the Council. The Service Director responded that the intention was to issue them to all Members of the Council at the start of the new municipal year in 2009. The Chairman commented that his experience was that other authorities issued the kind of packs now being considered; this was seen as part of a professional approach. Councillor Prescott opined that it was important for Elected Members to be viewed in a professional light by the public, and he illustrated this by reference to the expectations of individual constituents.

Councillor Cadman queried the utility of holding a stock of the cases and was also concerned more generally about the proper use of public monies. Councillor Miller reflected that a great deal of the work done by elected members was remote from constituents; this led him to query the value of the cases. Councillor Whittingham said that it was important for elected members to be viewed in a professional way by constituents, but he too was concerned about the value aspects. The Service Director acknowledged the views of Group Members, and suggested that a middle course would be to offer the cases to those Members who wished to make use of them.

7. **MEMBER DEVELOPMENT CHARTER:** The Resource and Development Manager summarised the aims of the Charter and the potential benefits accreditation would offer to Elected Members of all political groups. The council had been a signatory to the Charter for a number of years and was

now only one of a few authorities in the North West region still to achieve the award. A cross-party meeting of Elected Members had taken place on 20 August with the CEO of North West Employers to review the aims and objectives of the Charter. The outcome of the meeting was that there was a broad consensus as to the benefits of making an application for Charter approval. The only remaining barrier to the council gaining accreditation was the requirement for more than 50% of Elected Members to participate in formal development reviews.

Such reviews were viewed by NWE0 as the key evidence requirement in order for the council to demonstrate its commitment to supporting the ongoing development of Elected Members. The Chairman hoped that all the political groups would participate in the process. Councillor Splaine asked what action the groups needed to take in support of the accreditation process. Brian Leigh responded by saying that each group needed to organise and conduct the development reviews with their group colleagues. Some preparatory work had been done with the groups to explain the paperwork and the process for conducting the reviews. Brian Leigh said that he was happy to offer ongoing support and guidance to all the participants. Councillor George Fairhurst said that his group would ensure that training and development was available to its Members.

Political groups

Brian Leigh emphasised the importance of confidentiality in relation to the reviews. Each political group would manage the process for its Members and then communicate training priorities to Brian Leigh. He in turn would compile a composite training plan for all Members of the Council and this would be strong supporting evidence for the purposes of attaining the Charter. The Chairman urged all political groups to move forward with the process in order that the necessary resources for Member development could be put in place.

8. **ANY OTHER BUSINESS:** Councillor George Fairhurst raised the difficulty of hearing other Elected Members during discussion in committee, panel and seminars. Councillors Splaine and Miller shared this concern, adding that the problem was general to both committee rooms. Room layout was suggested as a contributory factor, but in general terms the lack of any dedicated microphone system was viewed as the key issue. Brian Leigh undertook to look at the options for a dedicated microphone system and then to report back to the Group at a future meeting.

B. Leigh

Councillor Fairhurst also made a request that questions during seminars and Member training sessions should be left to the end of presentations. His experience was that the tabling of questions during a presentation made it more difficult to follow the subject matter. He suggested that it would be better to leave questions until the end of the seminar/training session. Brian Leigh said that he would share this request with relevant colleagues.

B. Leigh

Brian Leigh updated the Group in relation to training for members of Planning Committee. A rolling programme had now been agreed and this would involve regular scheduled training sessions for Committee Members facilitated by external consultants.

Councillor Brian Merry had asked if the Group could give consideration to some form of award to elected members in recognition of their long service.

He had suggested 10 years service as a qualifying period and felt that some form of medal might be appropriate. The Group acknowledged the merit in Councillor Merry's suggestion but felt that the issue needed to be discussed more widely. Brian Leigh undertook to raise the issue with colleagues.

B. Leigh

Brian Leigh referred to the intention to hold a drop in session for Elected Members on the Modern Councillor e-learning facility. The software providers had offered to attend Wigan Town Hall on two dates in October. The latest date was Friday, 24 October and Members thought this was the most suitable time to hold the session. Brian Leigh confirmed that the session would be held between 12.30 p.m. and 2.00 p.m. in the Members Room at Wigan Town Hall. He would e-mail all Members of the Council with this information and urged Group Members to encourage their colleagues to attend.

B. Leigh

9. DATE OF NEXT MEETING: 26 November 2008.