

COUNCILLOR SERVICES GROUP

1 April 2009

Present:

Councillors G. Bretherton (Chairman), H. Cadman, J. Ellis, G.A. Fairhurst, Gareth Fairhurst, D. Hodgkinson, J. Miller, J. Moodie and N. Whittingham.

ACTION

1. **APOLOGIES:** Councillors S. Barnes, P. Prescott, R. Splaine and M. Winstanley.
2. **MINUTES:** The Chairman opened the meeting by asking all members of the group to respect the views of colleagues. The Chairman expressed the view that the Group had a tradition of friendly and positive debate, and he hoped that this approach could be maintained. Councillor Cadman drew the attention of the Chairman to a factual error on page 1 of the minutes from the last meeting on 4 February 2009. Brian Leigh undertook to make the necessary alteration to the minutes.
3. **URGENT BUSINESS:** The Head of IT updated the Group on the Blackberry trial and referred to the changes in the purchase costs. He stressed that the price information was commercially sensitive and that the council's contract with the provider included confidentiality provisions. Councillor Gareth Fairhurst referred to a recent press article on the costs of the Blackberry devices, and Councillor Ellis suggested that members should be alerted to any confidentiality provisions at the outset in the future. Group members asked a number of questions about the purchase and call costs for Blackberries, and the Head of IT responded by distributing a summary sheet containing relevant information. The Executive Director of BSS pointed out that the Group was not constituted in line with the rules on political balance. Whilst he acknowledged the range of honestly held views of Group members on the merits and costs of Blackberry devices; the absence of any consensus necessitated that he should now seek direction on the trial from Cabinet.

B Leigh

DJ Smith

Councillor Ellis asked if all members participating in the trial had returned their mobile phones to the communications team. The Head of IT said that not all members had yet done so, but this was required of all members participating in the trial. Councillor Cadman asked for confirmation of the the date on which the first member Blackberry costs were incurred and the total expenditure on the devices to the present.

4. **EVALUATION OF TRAINING PROVISION 2008/09:** The Principal Officer, Member Support referred to the summary of training provision for the last 12 months. Members of the Council had participated in a wide range of training and development activity to aid learning and to support them in the discharge of their duties. A regular programme of member seminars formed part of planned training activities for all councillors, together with specific

training for Planning and Licensing Committees. The ongoing programme of Equality training for all members of the council would be subject to a separate evaluation exercise. Additionally, members had attended regional and national seminars, participated in the Modern Councillor E-Learning provision and several had undertaken formal qualifications. Ongoing IT training and support was available to all members of the council, and this was commented on very favourably.

Ongoing evaluation of the training opportunities offered to elected members showed that training was generally well received and valued by elected members. There were however some issues around the venues for training together with its timing and duration. Councillor Ellis suggested that venues other than Wigan Town Hall might be worth considering. He referred to the particular issue of parking provision, particularly for day time events when availability on Civic Centre was limited. Councillor Moodie pointed out that parking provision was also available adjacent to the former police station.

The Chairman acknowledged that parking could be problematic when attending day time training events, and went on to stress the need for training to be member led. Councillor Miller said he was grateful for the efforts of IT staff in providing support to elected members. Councillor Ellis suggested that it might be useful to look at some BBC learning materials on planning and B Leigh undertook to do this. Councillor Ellis also suggested that short aide memoirs from training sessions would be a useful resource for elected members. The Head of IT reported that his team was currently working on short IT video guides for members.

B Leigh

The Chairman expressed the view that some form of nationally recognised diploma qualification would be useful for elected members to work toward. Councillor Gareth Fairhurst questioned how a qualification would help, and the Chairman responded by saying that a formal qualification would evidence the skills acquired by members; this could assist when applying for jobs. Councillor Ellis said that qualifications per se did not make for a better councillor, and also suggested that council tax payers might not equate expenditure on councillor training with value for money. Councillor Hodgkinson felt that all learning was valuable; however the issue for members was one of availability and the timing of training. Councillor Moodie endorsed efforts to make training available to members; he felt that rate payers would understand the need to invest in councillor training.

5. **WORK SHADOWING:** The Executive Director of BSS introduced the agenda item by referring to the ongoing debate about the induction arrangements for new members. A key issue central to the induction process, was how to best exemplify key officer contact points and also to explain areas of responsibility. The Executive Director acknowledged that there had been significant changes in areas of responsibility consequent to the Support Services Review, and he recognised that this made for a degree of confusion; even for existing members of the council. The Executive Director acknowledged that members wanted to hold officers to account, and he was keen to ensure that an appropriate balance was struck; this could be achieved by improved understanding of appropriate officer contact points.

Councillor Ellis felt that the approach adopted by Environmental Services to

member enquiries worked well. Councillor Whittingham asked which system was used by Environmental Services, and Brian Leigh responded by saying that it was the corporate Member Enquiries System. The Chairman said that there was a need to adopt a consistent approach, and Councillor Gareth Fairhurst said that he channelled his enquiries through the Chief Executive. Councillor Whittingham felt it inappropriate for all member enquiries to go to the Chief Executive, and Councillor Hodgkinson said that stability was required in the structure of the council's service departments. Councillor Fairhurst asked if there would be a search facility, and the Executive Director responded by saying that the aim was to ensure that the member intranet pages matched the A-Z data. One suggestion put forward was to arrange a seminar to explain key officer contact points, and the Chairman suggested that departmental open days might also be productive. The debate closed with an understanding that any arrangements would need to serve the interests of both existing and new members of the council.

- 6. DRAFT PROTOCOL FOR THE USE OF COUNCIL BUILDINGS BY ELECTED MEMBERS:** The Principal Officer, Member Support had circulated a draft protocol covering the use of Council buildings by elected members. The Executive Director of BSS acknowledged that all members of the council worked within a group structure. However, the council was a public sector organisation which operated within a legislative framework. The draft protocol had been drafted with advice from the Borough Solicitor, but there was recognition of the difficulties involved in differentiating as between community and the political use of council buildings.

Councillor Ellis said that a local standards committee publication was very clear in making the distinction, and he suggested that the protocol should be amended to include specific wording from it. Councillor Moodie felt that the draft protocol gave examples of appropriate use; he was comfortable with it as currently drafted. Councillor Gareth Fairhurst said that the imperative was openness and transparency, and he highlighted recent claims of abuse by council members. Councillor Miller said that it would not be proper for council buildings to be used to select candidates. Brian Leigh undertook to consider the comments of the Group, and to reflect these in amendments to the draft protocol.

- 7. MEMBER DEVELOPMENT REVIEWS:** The Chairman updated the Group and outlined the Councillor Development Review process. He said that it would be useful to have the review forms on line, and hoped that all members would participate in the process. Councillor Gareth Fairhurst did not endorse the review process; he questioned its value for elected members. The Chairman responded by saying that identifying and prioritising member training needs was important; he urged colleagues to adopt best practice.

- 8. A.O.B:** Councillor Whittingham referred to the responsibilities of elected members in relation to their panel /committee responsibilities. Councillor Whittingham felt that a significant level of non attendance made it pointless for an elected member to sit on a particular panel or committee. The Executive Director of BSS reflected that the Independent Remuneration Panel had considered this issue when the members allowance scheme was last reviewed. The Executive Director cited the practice of some other Authorities who had adopted 'contracts' between elected members and the

public. Such 'contracts' set out the work to be undertaken by elected members in terms of attendance at council meetings, surgeries and ward activities.

Councillor Ellis said that elected members frequently had conflicting obligations, and that it was not always possible to arrange meetings to suit individual members. This inevitably meant that members had to prioritise and make judgements about the best use of time. The Democratic Services Manager said that he was conscious of the timing of Township meetings and their conflict with meetings of council panels and committees. He would endeavour to ensure that such conflicts were avoided in the coming municipal year.

Councillor Gareth Fairhurst commented on the need to adopt an equitable approach in relation to the planning of the opposition leaders briefing. He wished to see a fair balance and consultation with the political groups. The Executive Director pointed out that there had been an opportunity for council to comment on the proposed annual schedule of meetings, the time to request amendments to the schedule had now passed.

Councillor George Fairhurst expressed concern about the conduct of some members in the Council chamber. He felt that the verbal abuse of some members was a cause for concern and made a plea for proper debate and mutual respect. Councillor Cadman responded by saying that council meetings involved 75 members and that it was essentially a public forum. The Chairman said that members would inevitably have different views on specific matters, but the code of conduct existed to ensure proper behaviour. Councillor Moodie observed that there would always be an element of 'rough and tumble' during council meetings, but he did feel that behaviour had improved significantly. He was however concerned about the abuse of procedural rules in relation to points of order/ personal clarification. In his view, such abuses of procedure functioned to interrupt the flow of debate. The Chairman said that a number of members had asked for clarification on the rules of debate, and he hoped that this would be forthcoming for the guidance of all members of the council.

Councillor Ellis said that he would like to see the application of the guillotine examined. In his view, its application made it difficult to participate in effective debate. Councillor Hodgkinson reflected that the introduction of the guillotine owed much to the time wasting practices of former members of the council. Councillor Cadman questioned how the council could deal effectively with the large number of motions that tended to be tabled for each meeting. Councillor Miller said that one approach might be to return to the six weekly cycle or to have specific meetings to deal with motions. The meeting closed and the Chairman thanked all members for their contributions over the course of the year.

9. DATE OF NEXT MEETING: 17 June 2009