

CABINET – 23 JUNE 2011

FUTURE ROLE AND REMIT OF THE MEMBERS' AFFAIRS GROUP

Report of the: Deputy Chief Executive and Director of Corporate Resources

Status: For Decision

Key Decision: No

Executive Summary: This report invites the Cabinet to consider the future role and remit of the Members' Affairs Group

This report supports the Key Aim of :

Effective management of Council resources.

Portfolio Holder Cllr. Peter Fleming

Head of Service Head of Legal and Democratic Services– Mrs. Christine Nuttall

Recommendation: The Cabinet is invited to provide direction and fresh instructions on the future role, remit and membership of the Members' Affairs Group.

Reason for recommendation: To seek clarity on the future role of the Members' Affairs Group following the May elections and the completion of the Group's previous work.

Introduction

- 1 The Members' Affairs Working Group was established by the Cabinet to advise it on matters of interest to Members and to carry out discrete areas of work assigned to it by the Cabinet from time to time.
- 2 The Working Group was Chaired by the Portfolio Holder for Safe Community supported by four Councillors drawn from the Groups represented on the Council (2 Conservative, 1 Liberal Democrat and 1 Labour). The Group has been supported by the Deputy Chief Executive and Director of Corporate

Resources, the Head of Legal and Democratic Services and the Democratic Services Team.

- 3 During the past year the Group has looked at issues including Member training and induction, CMIS and IT support for Members. The main focus for the Group however was conducting a review of the democratic decision making processes in recognition of the limited availability of resources to support this at the existing level and to better meet Members ongoing needs. The outcome of this review was reported to the Cabinet in March and clarification provided by the Cabinet in April which recognised that the Group had completed the work that it had been asked to carry out but that the Cabinet might ask the Group to undertake further work after the local elections. Extracts from the minutes of the March and April Cabinet meetings are appended to this report for information. Since these meetings took place a number of modifications to the Constitution were agreed by the Council including the deletion of oversight of the Constitution from the terms of reference of the Performance and Governance Committee.
- 4 The Cabinet is therefore invited to clarify the role and remit of the Members' Affairs Group to identify any further areas of work that it would like the Group to take forward and to issue fresh instructions. The Cabinet is also asked to consider the size and membership of the Group and to appoint Members to serve on it should it so wish.

Key Implications

Financial

The Group met on five occasions during the year and the only direct costs associated with this relate to any Members expenses and the provision of officer support for these meetings and the Group's programme of work.

Community Impact and Outcomes

This will depend upon the role and remit of the Group but advice provided to the Cabinet will inform sound decision making.

Legal, Human Rights etc.

None identified

Value For Money and Asset Management

As detailed under "Financial considerations"

Equality Impacts

None.

Conclusions

This report asks for fresh instructions from the Cabinet on constituting the Members' Affairs Group, its role, remit, membership and future work/projects.

Risk Assessment Statement

No risks have been identified.

Background Papers: Minutes of the Cabinet meetings on 17 March and 14 April 2011

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Dr Pav Ramewal

Deputy Chief Executive and Director of Corporate Resources

Extract from the minutes of the Cabinet meeting held on 17 March 2011

110. **STREAMLINING THE DEMOCRATIC PROCESS**

The Portfolio Holder for Safe Community presented the findings of the Members Affairs Group which had been asked by the Cabinet to consider options for delivering democratic processes in light of the reduction in budgetary and officer resource and to take a critical and reflective view of democratic arrangements. The work of the Group which had met on 25 November 2010 and 1 February 2011 was set out which had included an examination of current meeting and briefing arrangements, the possible restructuring of Select committees, a move to a quarterly cycle of meetings, the role of Working Groups, the need for “information” reports, the realignment of Committee terms of reference with Cabinet Portfolios, the role of scrutiny in general and the possibility of using IT solutions to enable Members to access ward specific information.

The principles which had guided the Group in its work were set out which included:

- The experience of Members on Select Committees could be improved;
- Every item tabled on an agenda had a cost to the tax payer and value for money should be the ethos of every activity undertaken by a Select Committee;
- The primary focus of Select Committees should be to scrutinise or oversee District Council Services, holding officers and portfolio holders to account;
- Inconsistencies or overlaps in Committee Terms of Reference should be tidied up as part of any restructuring of the Select Committees;
- Working Groups can perform vital scrutiny functions but should be guided by clear “task and finish” rules, and a value for money exercise should be undertaken to ensure the work will result in improved services for taxpayers or other monetary efficiencies;
- Reports for information or noting should be stripped out of the decision-making process and made available to all Members using IT more effectively;
- All reports could benefit from being briefer and more succinct, reflecting the fact that Members face significant time pressures and often do not have time to read extensive text; and
- An electronic Members Information Library should be established with a portal containing (i) reports regarding all statutory and non-statutory services provided by SDC, on an easily accessible, service-by-service basis; and (ii) information submitted by Members about the outside bodies on which Members sit (such as minutes of meetings, annual reports, and other documents).

It was noted that whilst the Group had not focused upon the localism agenda it had had regard to this and that this dovetailed with the group's concerns that the democratic process should deliver value for money, underpin efficient decision making, revitalise scrutiny and improve the interaction with the Cabinet whilst also allowing Members to undertake their wider community duties.

The Cabinet recognised that whilst current support arrangements were not sustainable in the longer term further consideration would need to be given to some of the recommendations made by the Group with regard to Member decision making structures which would require wider consultation with Members. It was agreed to press ahead with those recommendations which could be implemented immediately and which would not require constitutional amendments in accordance with the proposed action plan for implementation.

The Cabinet thanked the Portfolio Holder for Safe Community and the Members Affairs Group for the work that they had already undertaken and noted that the Group was also looking at arrangements for Member training and induction and it was felt that this, and training in relation to IT skills, was particularly important. The Cabinet felt that the Group's recommendations which would require changes to the Constitution should be subject to wider consultation with all Members of the Council in the new Municipal Year with a view to changes being introduced by the end of the next Municipal Year at the latest. It was recognised that the continued operation of existing democratic processes would need to be adequately resourced and that the temporary staffing arrangements, including the extra Officer, within the Democratic Services Team would need to continue until new arrangements were implemented. The Cabinet asked the Members Affairs to continue to take forward the review of democratic processes and Member training and to develop, with Officers, a timetable for completion of the review and the implementation of any changes agreed following consultation. The review would also need to factor in changes arising from the functions of the new locality boards, which could result in changes to the terms of reference of Select committees, the role of the Chairman of the Council and take a reflective look at the work of the Cabinet. The Leader of the Council agreed to write to the Chairmen and Vice-Chairmen of the Select Committees to emphasize the need for any Working Groups to take a focused and task and finish orientated approach.

Resolved: That

(a) a Members' Information Library should be made available on SiMON to contain items of interest to Members and any Ward specific information

(b) reports for noting can be listed on agenda items but would not be presented formally to the committee by officers. This links to the Members' Information Library and will enable all Members to have information and not just those Members on a particular committee enabling an improved way of disseminating information.

(c) Officers be asked to produce succinct reports containing the key information and points for consideration. These could take the form of "executive summaries" with any additional information and Equalities Impact Assessments being contained in appendices.

(d) the Council should no longer provide officer support for Town Forums.

(e) an improved programme for Members training be developed. This could include rudimentary IT training, irrespective of whether Members use their own IT kit or not, and provision for mentoring for new Members. The first meeting of each Select Committee could be used to deliver training in “effective Scrutiny”.

(f) Working Groups can provide an effective means of influencing the decision making process and should continue to be supported but that this should be done within clearly established parameters. This should include clear terms of reference, defined outcomes and completion dates, and a requirement for clear benefits to local taxpayers or social benefit to be demonstrated.

(h) no more than one pre-meeting briefing should be held for any committee meeting to avoid current instances of multiple briefings being held and supported.

(i) the frequency of Standards Committee meetings be reduced from three to two per annum.

(i) the Members Affairs Group be asked to continue to oversee the review of democratic decision making processes and should develop, with Officers, a timetable for the completion of the review, appropriate consultation with Members and implementation of any agreed changes. This work should be completed by the end of the next Municipal Year at the latest.

Extract from the minutes of the Cabinet meeting held on 14 April 2011

113. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING

Councillor Fleming provided clarification on the last paragraph of minute 110 on the work undertaken by the Members’ Affairs Group (MAG) on the Review of Democratic Decision Making Processes. He confirmed that the MAG had completed its work on this review for the moment but Cabinet may ask for further work after the elections in line with any proposals coming from Cabinet, he understood that the Cabinet would need to provide clear instructions on how this should be progressed.. The Cabinet noted that the MAG had completed its review of the Members Induction and Survival Guide and suggested a number of improvements. The Guide should however make clear that the Cabinet was appointed by the Leader of the Council rather than by the Council itself as suggested in the minutes of the MAG meeting on 7 April.

Resolved: That the minutes of the meeting of the Cabinet held on 17 March 2011 be approved and signed by the Chairman as a correct record.