

EAST DEVON DISTRICT COUNCIL

Report of a Meeting of the Member Development Working Party held at Knowle, Sidmouth on 6 November 2007

Present: Councillors:

A T Moulding (Chairman)

Miss V Ash

Mrs C E Drew

G Godbeer

Mrs P A Graham

J Humphreys

Also present: Diana Vernon, Democratic Services Manager

The meeting started at 9.00 am and ended at 11.10 am

***1 Terms of reference**

RESOLVED that the terms of reference of the Group, attached at Appendix A to this report, which include its aims, key objectives, roles and responsibilities, be approved.

***2 Member Development and Training Strategy**

The Strategy had been approved at the meeting of the Council in July. The Strategy set out the Council's commitment to supporting its Members in developing the necessary skills to serve the community they represent and the District Council as a whole to the best of their ability. Appended to the Strategy was a Skills Framework devised through the Devon Improvement Programme which would help identify Members' individual strengths and be used as a basis for devising a rolling programme of development for all Councillors. Recognising the importance of the Skills Framework (amended and attached at Appendix B to this report), Members of the Group discussed the skills requirements against each of the competency areas and made the following comments:

Political Understanding/Governance

- It was important for Councillors to have Officer contact details.
- It would be helpful for Members to be advised of the significance of key timetabled meetings held throughout the year, for example the meeting when the budget is set,
- There is not a general understanding of the 'call in' process.
- It was acknowledged that the scrutiny function within the Council was improving – Members supported the practice of inviting experts and interested parties to speak to the Committee and answer questions,
- The Knowledge was useful in providing information on national issues and how these affected the local position.
- Clarify point (f) which should refer to regulatory and quasi-judicial (not non-political) decision making.

Integrity

- The amount of information given to newly elected Members was discussed later in the meeting. It was important to get the balance right between having the right information to hand and being over-loaded.

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Member Development and Training Strategy (cont)..

Community Leadership

- Members would benefit from a communications/public speaking workshop
- The value of attending meetings of the Executive Board and having the opportunity to speak at those meetings was acknowledged as very important and effective.
- Members needed to be kept informed of what was going on in their own Wards.
- Members are finding it less convenient now to keep up to date with planning applications in their own Ward. Now they had to remember to check on line - the previous arrangement where weekly planning lists were sent electronically was preferred.

Leadership

- Recognise importance of media training
- All Chairmen had now had chairmanship training.

Communication

- Recognise the importance of developing skills to engage with young people,
- Local Democracy work with local schools and colleges was positively supported.
- The presentation at Council on the heads of terms of the new community had been appreciated and further presentations, (such as recycling, cultural activities, Leisure East Devon, affordable housing, the role of Housing Review Board and service performance) to keep Members up to date and to improve the relevance of the Council meeting, were suggested.
- The news up-dates sent to parish and town councils and to the editors of parish magazines was helpful. District Councillors were copied in.

Partnership working

- The role of Champions was a way of developing Councillor experts in different areas of knowledge and service delivery.
- Need to identify the role of Members on Outside Bodies and establish a reporting process.
- Conferences and learning opportunities were often specific to a Councillor role, such as Champion, and it was important for these opportunities to be offered to the right Councillor and to monitor their value.

Performance Management

- Recognised as a key issue.
- There was a need to know where to find information and to be able to track the implementation of decisions made.

ACTION

1. All Councillors be e mailed with up-dated lists of Officer contacts on a quarterly basis,
2. Expand the detail on the timetable of meetings, for example, to show when service planning will be discussed and when the budget is set,
3. When decisions are reported in the Knowledge and reference made to 'call in', add that Members can seek advice on this process from the Democratic Services Team in addition to reference already made to the relevant pages in the Council's Constitution.

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Member Development and Training Strategy (cont)..

4. An item be included in the next Team Brief to remind all Officers to keep Members informed about what was going on in their Wards,
5. Ask Planning to re-visit the possibility of providing Councillors with electronic planning lists so that they are better able to keep up-to-date with applications relevant to their Ward,
6. Investigate the possibility of two training sessions on communications, one for all Councillors to cover good communications skills, public speaking and media issues and to include diversity and the other to be media specific training for Council spokespeople including the Portfolio Holders and Chairmen.
7. A report on the role of Member Champions and relevant protocol to be referred to the next meeting of the Executive Board.
8. The role of Members on Outside Bodies and reporting process needs to be clarified,
9. Relevant presentations to be included within the Council meetings to increase their relevance and to keep Members up-to-date with key issues
10. Learning opportunities, including conferences/seminars, to be referred in the first instance to the Democratic Services Officer and Portfolio Holder – Resources for decision and allocation within budget constraints.

Members discussed the welcome and refresher programme for Councillors following the May 07 election. Feedback had been collated. Members noted the positive comments and discussed lessons to be learnt. They particularly discussed the following points:

- Make sure that the skills of Councillors are used for the benefit of the Council and community. These would be identified through the personal development review referred to, and approved, in the Member Development Strategy. The reviews would help to identify Members' objectives, existing skills, areas of interest and their personal development needs.
- Providing all Members with photographs of Councillors and key officers was helpful. As a way of getting to know more about individual Councillors, it was suggested that the idea of 'Snapshot' interviews for the Knowledge be pursued.
- Some Councillors felt that there was an information over-load for new Councillors during the welcome process. It would have been useful to have a session going through the information pack and explaining the relevance of each document.
- A tour of leisure facilities was being arranged.
- Tours of the district in respect of specific services would be helpful, such as housing and planning.
- Some basics were missing including how to respond to planning applications. This had now been clarified with a letter issued by the Head of Planning and Countryside Services.
- The buddy system was useful. This was arranged through the political groups. It was suggested that providing newly elected Councillors with an officer buddy (such as the Democratic Services Team) would also be helpful.

*3 **Feedback from the 3 month welcome/induction (cont)..**

- Consideration be given to refresher sessions and giving Members the opportunity to go through the information from seminars that they had missed,
- Tours of offices would be helpful.
- Advice about what meetings Councillors were expected to attend.
- Further enforcement and licensing training would be welcome.

*4 **Learning Opportunities**

Members recognised that learning was not just about attending courses and that there was a range of alternative opportunities for learning:

- e-learning
- courses
- work books
- conferences
- mentoring
- coaching
- learning groups
- shadowing
- visits

On the welcome/refresher forms, Members were asked for feedback on the on-line learning opportunities through the 'modern councillor' initiative. There was some positive feedback. LIFT South West Partnership had purchased 2 years membership of the Learning Pool's new Modern Councillor e-learning portal on behalf of all the regions elected members. The resource had been extended and further modules would be included in the new year.

A trial group, including newly elected and experienced Councillors had piloted a learning package on behalf of Solace which had been well received. This was work-book based with Councillors who successfully completed a programme being sent a certificate. Solace had now extended the range of learning packs but due to the cost, Members felt that this was not an option to follow up at this stage.

Members were also advised of a recommended learning resource promoted by South West Regional Assembly which was relevant to all Members. The user-friendly learning modules could be downloaded and reproduced with copyright restrictions allowing photocopying and distribution to Members within the purchasing authority.

ACTION

1. DV to send a further letter to all Councillors to encourage them to log on and take advantage of the LIFT SW Partnership learning modules (modern councillor),
2. No action be taken at the present time in respect of the Solace workbooks,
3. A trial module, 'Councils with a Cabinet' be purchased through South West Regional Assembly at a one-off cost of £50 and distributed to all Councillors inviting feedback, with a view to purchasing a suite of relevant modules if feedback was positive.

*5 **Next Meeting**

RESOLVED

that the next meeting of the Working Group be held on 5 February 2008 when how to introduce Member personal development reviews would be considered.