

COUNCIL BUSINESS COMMITTEE

Supporting Councillors Declaration 23rd April 2009

Report of the Head of Democratic Services

PURPOSE OF REPORT

To advise Members of a request from the I&DeA to sign up to their Supporting Councillors Declaration.

This report is public

RECOMMENDATIONS

That the Committee consider whether this Council should sign up to the I&DeA Supporting Councillors Declaration.

1.0 Report

- 1.1 The I&DeA has recognised the responsibility of Councils to give Councillors the tools they need to do their job as leaders of the community, encouraging and supporting local initiatives and through this make local democracy more relevant and accessible to people. The White Paper 'Communities in Control: Real People, Real Power' (July 2008) places considerable emphasis on the importance of the role of councillors as community leaders and the need to properly support them in this important public service.
- 1.2 It is the view of the I&DeA therefore that Councils that properly support their councillor will find that they can get:
 - A better understanding of the needs of their local communities
 - Greater public involvement in local initiatives
 - Greater interest in the role of the council
- 1.3 As the empowerment agenda rolls out the role of the councillor will become more important and the demands placed on them will increase. Their effectiveness will depend upon the quality of the support they receive.
- 1.4 The I&DeA is therefore inviting and encouraging all Councils to commit to the 10 statements included in the Declaration which set out the standards of support for councillors which they will undertake to provide. It is suggested that this be used in conjunction with their Supporting Councillors Framework to review existing support functions.
- 1.5 It is accepted that the need for effective member training and development has now been generally recognised, the issue of member support has not been addressed so

systematically and yet the effectiveness of councillors depends upon the quality of such support.

- 1.6 The I&DeA has therefore launched the declaration and framework for councils to sign up to and pledge their commitment to giving councillors the support they need, whether as leading member or in a frontline, representative, or scrutiny role. The declaration is as follows:

That this Council undertakes to:

- 1 Assist existing and prospective Councillors so they are aware of what is expected of them.
- 2 Provide all Councillors with administrative support to meet their individual needs, including the provision of adequate support staff to meeting Councillors; scrutiny, information and research needs.
- 3 Ensure that all Councillors are kept advised on how decisions are made and the opportunities open to them to influence these decisions.
- 4 Be aware of how much information we send to Councillors.
- 5 Provide space for Councillors to hold ward surgeries, meetings with constituents and to discuss Council business.
- 6 Identify the “democracy” budget; current expenditure that funds Councillor support and development, supports scrutiny research and consultation, etc. Consider delegated budgets for improvements within the ward.
- 7 Ensure that all support is appropriate for individual Councillors and that there is clarity of what support and development opportunities are available.
- 8 Ensure all Councillors have stationery and office equipment available to them both at home and when on council premises, to provide access to appropriate ICT and help Councillors to use such technology to improve efficiency and communication.
- 9 Conduct interviews with Councillors who are standing down/retiring/resigning.
- 10 Identify the personal development needs of Councillors, provide a member development programme.

- 1.7 Members will recall that last year the LGIU launched a Supporting Councillors Manifesto which set out a dozen similar measures which it felt could better support existing and future councillors. In considering this the Committee agreed that whilst the Council was supportive of most of the general principles contained within the Manifesto, it was not in a position to commit further resources to any of the proposals. It was agreed however that the Head of Democratic Services should keep the matter under review and report back to the Committee on the action points listed to enable consideration to be given to reviewing the delivery of support to Members in order to strengthen local democracy in the future.

- 1.8 Set out at Appendix A is the current position in relation to both the action points contained within the LGIU Manifesto and the actions listed in the I&DeA declaration.

2.0 Options

- 2.1 The Terms of Reference of the Council Business Committee provide for this committee to determine the method of response and where necessary ratify responses on behalf of full Council to consultations.

2.2 Whilst a process is in place to deal with government and other consultation exercises in an efficient manner, these more 'ad hoc' issues are best considered on an individual basis.

2.3 The Committee is therefore requested to consider:

Option 1 – to support and sign up to the I&DeA Declaration on the basis that existing Member support meets the requirements of the declaration.

Option 2 – to take no action regarding the request to sign up to the I&DeA Declaration.

Option 3 – to refer the matter to full Council for a full debate by all Members.

2.4 In addition Members may wish to review the actions contained within both the LGIU Manifesto and the I&DeA Declaration as set out in Appendix A and identify any elements which should be further progressed by the Head of Democratic Services.

3.0 Officer Preferred Option

3.1 The Officer preference is option 1. Many of the actions within the Declaration are already in place or are being acted upon and unlike the LGIU Manifesto there are no issues which are not in line with existing practices or are not already being addressed. Any issues identified by Members for progression beyond what is currently underway can be considered as part of future work on either Member Development or Democratic Renewal.

CONCLUSION OF IMPACT ASSESSMENT

(including Diversity, Human Rights, Community Safety, Sustainability and Rural Proofing)

One of the underlying objectives of the Declaration is to ensure equality of opportunity for anyone considering standing as a Councillor.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

There are no direct financial implications to signing up to this Declaration. Existing levels of support for Councillors as funded in current budgets meet the requirements of the Declaration as set out in Appendix A.

Any issues identified by Members for further development may have financial implications and should this prove to be the case would be the subject of a future report and a growth bid before any commitment to action could be made.

SECTION 151 OFFICER'S COMMENTS

The Section 151 Office has been consulted and has no further comments.

LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

None as a direct result of this report.

MONITORING OFFICER'S COMMENTS

The Monitoring Officer has been consulted and has no further comments.

BACKGROUND PAPERS

Letter from I&DeA – 22nd December 2008

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LGIU Supporting Councillors Manifesto

Suggested Action	Current Position at Lancaster
1 Promote greater awareness and understanding of what a Councillor does so that more people know why they are needed and why they are important.	General information made available prior to the last City Council elections could be retained and kept permanently available on the website.
2 Provide information to all those who work closely with the Council to know more about how Councillors can get things done and the limits of their powers.	No specific facility in place to address this.
3 Provide clear information that explains how to become a Councillor and the responsibilities involved.	A leaflet and information on the website was made available prior to the last City Council elections. It is anticipated that this will be extended and improved for the 2011 elections and that information sessions for prospective candidates will be held at an earlier stage than in 2007.
4 Provide training after Elections so that Members are able to become excellent Councillors with a good understanding of the role and responsibilities.	An extensive induction programme was delivered after the elections in 2007. This includes a Member Handbook and other information permanently available on the intranet for Members to access as required. All Members have the opportunity to request additional support and/or development via the Personal Development Plan.
5 Call upon Government to revise the Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity so that Councils can more actively encourage and better support Councillors to communicate with the public.	Lancaster City Council has not formally stated its support for this proposal. Government Consultation is ongoing on proposals to revise publicity codes.
6 Call upon Government to ensure Councillors and Local Government have all the powers and constitutional reforms they need to be able to get things done.	No direct contact has been made on this issue although the LGIU were advised of the Council's in principle support.
7 Develop mechanisms that devolve resources so that Local Councillors can effectively influence spending in their locality in line with their community leadership role.	This will be addressed through reports to Overview & Scrutiny in the first instance and then to the Audit Committee on the implications of new legislation coming into force in 2009 and the options for implementation.
8 Support the development and implementation of a charter containing minimum standards of support to help Local Councillors carry out their Councillor responsibilities effectively.	The Council has signed up to and been awarded the North West Member Development Charter. Standards must be maintained to retain Charter status which is reviewed every three years.

Suggested Action	Current Position at Lancaster
<p>9 Develop with Councillors a clear role definition which sets out the main functions and duties and typical demands of being a Councillor. The role definition should also help to explain the Council's role to the public.</p>	<p>Work has been undertaken in the past to develop a 'job description' for Councillors in general and those carrying out specific roles such as Cabinet Members but this has not been brought to a conclusion.</p>
<p>10 Support the development of a voluntary national framework of allowances set by an independent panel. The panel should take into account differences in types and sizes of authorities and duties of Councillors to benchmark allowances. Councils should consider the framework when setting their own allowances scheme.</p>	<p>This Council's Independent Remuneration Panel utilise a well developed set of principles and comparisons with other authorities on which their recommendations for allowances are based. If Council were minded to support such a development, the views of the Independent Panel should be sought.</p>
<p>11 Review arrangements for working with Councillors so that Councils adopt modern ways of working, including making the best use of technology.</p>	<p>Lancaster City Council is well placed in terms of the use of technology by Councillors. The electronic publication of Council documentation is relatively advanced and progress is being made to utilise more of the committee management computer system as time allows.</p>
<p>12 Work with businesses to help working Councillors to manage their work/council time better; work with local employers to support employees who become Councillors as part of their corporate social responsibility programmes and to help them gain public recognition for it; and publicise the many skills that being a Councillor brings to the workplace, to the local authority, to the employee and the benefits that this can bring to employers.</p>	<p>No actions in place to address this.</p>

I&DeA Supporting Councillors Declaration

Suggested Action	Current Position at Lancaster
1 Assist existing and prospective Councillors so they are aware of what is expected of them.	A leaflet and information on the website was made available prior to the last City Council elections. It is anticipated that this will be extended and improved for the 2011 elections and that information sessions for prospective candidates will be held at an earlier stage than in 2007. For existing Members a Member Handbook and other information permanently available on the intranet.
2 Provide all Councillors with administrative support to meet their individual needs, including the provision of adequate support staff to meeting Councillors; scrutiny, information and research needs.	A small Members' Services section of Democratic Services provides specific support to Members – dealing with all Member enquiries and research in addition to the Democratic Support section who support meetings and member development needs. All Members have the opportunity to request additional support and/or development via the Personal Development Plan.
3 Ensure that all Councillors are kept advised on how decisions are made and the opportunities open to them to influence these decisions.	An explanation of the decision making process is provided as part of the Member Development programme and advice on specific opportunities provided by the Head of Democratic Services as required.
4 Be aware of how much information we send to Councillors.	A Member information section is provided on the intranet for Members to access as required. A newsletter is also provided keeping Members up to date with new information. Officers provide briefing notes to relevant members when necessary and are constantly aware of the need to strike the right balance between keeping Members informed and 'information overload'. A protocol is in place regarding the provision of information and consultation with Ward members.
5 Provide space for Councillors to hold ward surgeries, meetings with constituents and to discuss Council business.	Member rooms are available at both Town Halls and rooms are set aside for each Group prior to Council meetings. Rooms can also be booked for Council business if required. Rooms can be provided for ward surgeries although these would have to be privately booked and paid for. The Council is not able to provide these free of charge.

Suggested Action	Current Position at Lancaster
6 Identify the “democracy” budget; current expenditure that funds Councillor support and development, supports scrutiny research and consultation, etc. Consider delegated budgets for improvements within the ward.	All aspects of democratic expenditure are separately identified in the Democratic Services budget. The issue of delegated Ward Councillor budgets will be addressed through reports to Overview & Scrutiny in the first instance and then to the Audit Committee on the implications of new legislation coming into force in 2009 and the options for implementation.
7 Ensure that all support is appropriate for individual Councillors and that there is clarity of what support and development opportunities are available.	The Member Development Charter is reviewed on an annual basis and is available on the intranet. The Member Development Programme is similarly available for Members at all times and forthcoming opportunities are highlighted via the Newsletter and on Member Notice boards. The Strategy and Programme are influenced by personal development interviews with all Councillors.
8 Ensure all Councillors have stationery and office equipment available to them both at home and when on council premises, to provide access to appropriate ICT and help Councillors to use such technology to improve efficiency and communication.	All Councillors are provided with a laptop, broadband access to the Council’s computer network and a printer. Printer cartridges and copying paper are available on request. Stationery and computer equipment is available in the Member rooms at each Town Hall. IT ‘drop in’ workshops are provided on a regular basis to assist members with the use of computers.
9 Conduct interviews with Councillors who are standing down/retiring/resigning.	‘Exit’ interviews have been conducted with Councillors who have resigned from Cabinet. This could be done for those resigning from the Council although there may be a capacity issue during the run up to City Council elections when the majority of these would be required.
10 Identify the personal development needs of Councillors, provide a member development programme.	All in place as part of the Member Development Strategy.