

COUNCIL BUSINESS COMMITTEE

Attendance at Training and Member Briefings 12th January 2012

Report of the Head of Governance

PURPOSE OF REPORT

To bring member briefing attendance figures to the Committee's attention; to consider a request to make attendance at Member Briefings mandatory for all Councillors, to put forward an officer recommendation that Planning training be mandatory for all Councillors, and to consider whether financial training should be mandatory for all Councillors.

This report is public

RECOMMENDATIONS

- (1) To note the report and consider a means of boosting attendance at member briefings and other Member training and development events.**
- (2) To recommend to Council that Planning training be mandatory for all members of Council.**
- (3) To consider whether financial training should be mandatory for all members, and if so, to make a recommendation to Council.**

1.0 Introduction

Member briefings are held on a monthly basis and, to date this year, have featured an overview of each council service from the relevant Service Head. Whilst these events are particularly helpful to new members of the Council, they are designed to be of equal use to returning members who may appreciate a refresher on how the Council delivers services.

Officers recently received a request from a Member to make attendance at these briefings mandatory for all councillors. The elected member was disappointed that only seventeen councillors had attended a member briefing on shared services, held on the evening of 31st October 2011. This represents 28% of all councillors.

In the context of attendance at briefings and training, officers have also been considering the need for all members of Council to have a knowledge and understanding of the work of the Planning and Highways Regulatory Committee, given that members who are not members of the Committee will on occasions attend to speak at the Committee.

2.0 Attendance in 2011/12

The table below gives an oversight of the formal member briefing sessions which have been held this year, subsequent to the induction programme:

| Topic of Briefing | Date | Number of councillors in attendance |
|--------------------------|-------------|--|
|--------------------------|-------------|--|

| | | |
|--------------------------------|--------------------------------|----------|
| Environmental Services | 7 th July 2011 | 14 (23%) |
| Health and Housing Service | 8 th September 2011 | 12 (20%) |
| Community Engagement | 6 th October 2011 | 18 (30%) |
| Planning / The Local Plan | 3 rd November 2011 | 19 (32%) |
| New Leader Model of Governance | 1 st December 2011 | 9 (15%) |

Below is a table of informal briefings held since the induction. It shows only the non-mandatory and non-committee specific training sessions.

| Topic of Briefing | Date | Number of councillors in attendance |
|---------------------------------------|----------------------------|--|
| Housing Needs Survey | 6 th July | 12 (20%) |
| Local Government Finance | 26 th July | 11 (18%) |
| Morecambe Area Action Plan | 12 th September | 27 (45%) |
| Treasury Management | 20 th September | 8 (13%) |
| Town Hall Tour, with Stephen Metcalfe | 28 th September | 10 (17%) |
| Guide to Budgeting | 17 th October | 11 (18%) |
| Civil Contingencies | 19 th October | 3 (2%) |
| Shared Services | 31 st October | 17 (28%) |
| Procurement | 22 nd November | 8 (13%) |
| Changes to Housing Revenue Account | 25 th November | 15 (25%) |

Average attendance stands at 21% across the two tables.

3.0 Mandatory training

Training which the Council deems obligatory almost always relates to specific committees and is mandatory because it is considered necessary for members to carry out their role on the Committee properly and effectively, for example Planning, Licensing and Personnel. If a member were to fail to attend the training then they would not be able to serve on the committee, so this is a simple matter for Democratic Services to regulate through Group Leaders and Administrators.

In July 2010, Council resolved “that Community Cohesion (equalities) training be mandatory for all newly elected Councillors as part of the induction process with effect from May 2011 and all Councillors be encouraged to renew this training every 4 years.” This resolution was implemented after the elections this year. An external trainer delivered several sessions of Community Cohesion training over many weeks to ensure coverage of all 60 Councillors at dates and times that they could attend.

Planning

With regard to planning training, this has in the past been mandatory for those serving on the Planning and Highways Regulatory Committee because to allow untrained members to make decisions on planning issues would leave the authority more open to challenge through the courts.

However, officers are mindful that there are often occasions when ward Members attend the Planning Committee to express views on behalf of local residents or applicants either

against or in support of applications. It is likely with forthcoming major infrastructure projects such as the National Grid upgrade that even more Members will be motivated to attend and speak at the Planning Committee. As ward members are not obliged to restrict themselves to proper planning considerations, there is a risk that they could unintentionally seek to influence the Planning Committee to consider matters which are not material to the planning decision to be taken. In such cases if the Planning Committee decision was so influenced this could leave the Council open to complaints of maladministration and the Committee's decision open to legal challenge. It is felt to be highly desirable therefore that all Members of the Council should be required to have some training on material planning considerations to provide them with sufficient background knowledge should they wish to speak at Planning Committee.

Finance

The question of whether some degree of financial training should be mandatory has also been raised with the Section 151 Officer by some Members in recent briefings. **This will be appraised in due course but in the interim, the views of the Committee are sought.**

4.0 Options

Briefing Sessions

The suggestion put forward that attendance at member briefing sessions should be compulsory for all councillors would not be possible to enforce. Briefings sessions are held once and it would be impractical to demand that every Councillor be available to attend on that night.

However, should the Committee wish to improve the attendance levels at these member briefings and information sessions, it may wish to discuss ways in which the sessions could be made more convenient to Councillors. The timing of the meetings (evening sessions) has already been addressed, but officers would be happy to take forward any other suggestions from this Committee to improve attendance. For example two different dates/venues could be offered for each briefing

Alternatively, the Committee may also wish the Chairman to send a letter to group administrators which brings the current low level of attendance to light, highlights the benefits of member briefings, and encourages greater participation over the coming months.

Planning Training

With regard to planning training, the officer recommendation is that this should be mandatory for all members of the Council, and the Committee is asked to recommend full Council accordingly.

CONCLUSION OF IMPACT ASSESSMENT (including Diversity, Human Rights, Community Safety, Sustainability and Rural Proofing)

There are no direct implications.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

There are no direct financial implications as a result of this report. Planning training would be undertaken internally, and the cost met from existing budgets.

SECTION 151 OFFICER'S COMMENTS

The s151 Officer has been consulted and her comments are incorporated in the report.

LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

Mandatory planning training would help to reduce the risk of challenge of planning decisions.

MONITORING OFFICER'S COMMENTS

The Monitoring Officer has been involved in the preparation of this report in her capacity as Head of Governance.

BACKGROUND PAPERS

None.

Contact Officer: Peter Baines

Telephone: 01524 582074

E-mail: pbaines@lancaster.gov.uk

Ref: