

**Final Report of the Member Support in the Locality Task Group**

**Purpose**

1. To present the conclusions and recommendations of the Member Support in the Locality Task Group.

**Background**

2. On 25 March 2010, the Organisation & Resources Select Committee established the Member Support in the Locality Task Group “to consider the level of local support provided to Councillors.” This followed a meeting between the Chairman and Vice-Chair of the Committee and the Service Director for Legal & Democratic Services, which helped to highlight various Councillor support issues that could be investigated through a scrutiny review.
3. The Task Group met on 15 May, 16 July and 6 September 2010. The Group represented a cross-section of Councillors with membership drawn from around the county:

Cllr Desna Allen  
Cllr Richard Britton  
Cllr Jeff Ody  
Cllr Jonathon Seed (Chairman)  
Cllr Bridget Wayman  
Cllr Ian West  
Cllr Fred Westmoreland

4. In order to survey views on the current support arrangements, the following question was circulated to all Councillors: "Do you have a view on the support currently available for helping you to resolve casework issues and community area issues?" A breakdown of the responses was then considered by the Task Group and used to guide their discussions. Findings from the survey are attached at Appendix A.
5. The Task Group were briefed on the background to the current support arrangements and received written and verbal evidence from officers on on-going and prospective work relating to Councillor support from the following Councillors and officers:

Cllr Laura Mayes – Portfolio Holder for Organisational Culture  
Cllr John Noeken – Cabinet Member for Resources

Laurie Bell	–	Director for Policy & Communications
Phil Durston	–	Corporate Maintenance and Facilities Manager
Deborah Farrow	–	Service Director for Business Transformation, ICT & Information Management
Steve Milton	–	Head of Community Governance
Sean Moore	–	Technical Architect – Telephony
John Quinton	–	Head of Democratic Services
Paul Redford	–	Senior Team Leader – Customer Services
Marie Todd	–	Area Board and Member Support Manager

6. All documents considered by the Task Group are listed in the Appendices and Background Documents sections below.

## Summary of Discussion and Conclusions

### Communications

7. Members initially expressed concern that the Elected Wire contained too much information, resulting in important information being swamped and therefore sometimes missed. It was suggested that the Elected Wire would benefit from better prioritisation or a separate ‘executive summary’ version containing only essential information. Following consideration of more recent editions, however, the Task Group acknowledged that the Elected Wire had recently reduced in size, with less important issues now being omitted.
8. The Task Group suggested that a table of contents at the top of the Elected Wire, listing every story in that edition would help Councillors avoid missing important dates and events (**Recommendation 1**). The Director for Policy & Communications was happy to include this and indicated that any further suggestions from Councillors regarding the Elected Wire would always be gratefully received.
9. There was agreement that the automated emails informing Councillors of Cabinet Member delegated decisions did not, by themselves, contain enough information to establish what decision was being made. Councillors were therefore forced to ‘click through’ to the website for more detail. The Task Group therefore recommends that a brief description of the nature of each delegated decision is included within the email itself (**Recommendation 2**).

### Press and Media Support

10. Following some concern that the Council does not sell its achievements effectively in the media, the Task Group received a briefing from the Director for Policy & Communications on the communication team’s recent work in this area. The Council had recently received increased national media coverage due to proactive work in this direction. Relationships with the local media were also being strengthened through joint initiatives such as the Salisbury Journal’s Local Hero Awards. The Director added that it is essential that the link between the communications team and Service Directors is maintained so that the team can manage emerging news proactively rather than reactively. Members acknowledged that the Councils’ relationship with the media would inevitably

always be somewhat volatile, and acknowledged the difficulty in obtaining coverage for positive news stories.

11. Following concern that the media team had, on one occasion, slowed the release of a local news story by a Councillor, the Director reported that the communications team were trained to be acutely aware of media deadlines and should therefore never be impeding the release of time-critical stories. She acknowledged that due to a reconfiguration of the team there had been some 'bedding-in' time, but each Area Board had now been allocated their own communications officer to help Boards' relationships with the local press. The Task Group acknowledged the improvement this had made and agreed that negative examples of the kind discussed were isolated incidents.

#### Councillor queries

12. Members expressed frustration at how difficult it was to establish who the appropriate officer was to resolve any given query. This was also reflected in responses to the survey of Councillors' views on current Councillor Support arrangements (Appendix A).
13. The Task Group received a briefing from Cllr Laura Mayes, Portfolio Holder for Organisational Culture, and Paul Redford, Senior Team Leader – Customer Services, on progress with the development of an improved web-based contacts directory. It was reported that the directory will feature a Google-style search function where search terms such as 'trees' or 'social care' will identify the appropriate officers to deal with that nature of enquiry. The new directory may also have a hierarchical structure making identification of officers at the appropriate level easier. In future, there may also be scope for individual search profiles, whereby Councillors' searches bring-up only those officers relevant to the Councillor's local area. A survey of Councillor and officer suggestions for the new contacts directory will conclude on 10 September 2010 and it is expected to be up-and-running by April 2011.
14. The Task Group welcomed the development of an improved electronic directory, but felt that it did not negate the need for a paper directory. A paper version has the advantage of being transportable, does not require access to the internet and could be produced long before April 2011. Councillors would hand-write any necessary amendments in their paper copies (to reflect changes to personnel), so they would not immediately become out-of-date. It was suggested that the pocket-sized 'white book' given to all Councillors during the induction in June 2009 would be a good model for this paper directory. Like the 'white book', the directory should contain other helpful information such as meeting dates. It should include contact details for all Councillors, and officers from Heads of Service up to the Chief Executive (plus PAs).
15. The Head of Democratic Services confirmed that a paper directory of the sort described would be provided but emphasised the difficulty in collecting up-to-date contact information. The Task Group requested that they be circulated by 1 November 2010 (**Recommendation 3**).

16. The Head of Democratic Services confirmed that Councillors would also be provided with a paper diary on request. It would, however, have a soft cover and more slimmed-down format than the green, hardcover diaries provided in 2009/10. Sheets containing the contact details and headshots of Service Directors and Corporate Directors in each directorate were also in development. These will be circulated to all Councillors within the next two weeks.
17. With the exception of a few individual cases, Members were satisfied that the response times specified in the Councillor / Officer Protocol were being kept to by officers (Councillors can expect an initial response from officers within 2 days and a substantive response within 7 days). Councillors often direct their queries either to Democratic Services or to their Community Area Manager and were very happy with the assistance provided.
18. The survey of Councillors' views (Appendix A) highlighted that the Highways and Planning departments were considered least prompt/helpful in responding to Councillor queries. Of 28 respondents, 3 mentioned that they were unhappy with the support from Highways and 3 had similar concerns regarding Planning (although, conversely, 2 praised Planning specifically). Mark Boden, Corporate Director for Neighbourhood & Planning, has forwarded these concerns to the appropriate Service Directors and Heads of Service so that the situation can be rectified.
19. The Task Group was less satisfied with the time it took to receive responses from Cabinet Members and Portfolio Holders. They therefore recommended that a protocol be included in the Constitution stipulating that Councillors can expect an initial response from Cabinet Members and Portfolio Holders within 2 days and a substantive response within 7 days (**Recommendation 4**).

#### Councillors' ICT

20. The Task Group received a report from Deborah Farrow, Service Director for Business Transformation, ICT & Information Management, on Councillors' ICT provision. The Task Group was generally satisfied that the situation with Councillors' ICT was slowly improving and would continue to improve once ICT was brought in-house.
21. The main area of concern with respect to ICT was the reduction to Councillors' mailbox limits. Members noted that the majority of casework is received electronically and it often needs to be stored for reference. It was suggested that Councillors' limits either be increased, or guidance and training should be provided on the archiving of emails to hard drives rather than to the network.
22. The Service Director reported that during the transition to One Council, mailbox limits were removed in order to amalgamate all electronic mail from the five previous councils. It had always been intended to revert back to the original policy of a fixed limit. The total cost of ownership for each terabyte of data storage in Outlook is approximately £30,000 so it is not possible under the current budget pressure to allow an indefinite increase in mailbox size for Councillors. In response to the Task Group's concerns, the Service Director reported that training and assistance would continue to be provided to ensure compliance

within these limits. David Vane, ICT Member Support Trainer/Technician, has been providing training and help to those Councillors who's mailbox is exceeding the limits in order to manage this problem.

23. The Task Group accepted this approach and requested that David Vane's outstanding contribution to providing ICT support for Councillors is acknowledged and applauded.
24. Task Group members felt that Councillors received too many emails containing attachments when links to the relevant document on the intra- or internet would significantly reduce the storage space required on the network. The Cabinet Member for Resources has indicated his agreement with this suggestion and has asked the Head of Democratic Services to communicate this approach to all departments via the Electric Wire. The Cabinet Member has also specified that emailed links should always be accompanied by an explanation of what is being linked to.
25. Historically, some Councillors had requested that links to their personal websites be included on the Council website. This request was refused on the grounds that the Council could not control the content of external sites. The Head of Democratic Services subsequently advised that this could be solved by adding a disclaimer when 'clicking through'. The Task Group therefore recommends that this option be made available to all Councillors (**Recommendation 5**).

### Telephony

26. The Task Group received a briefing on the consolidation of the Council's telephone system from Sean Moore, Technical Architect – Telephony. The old telephone exchanges are currently being removed from Council hubs and the telephony system is being converted to Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP). For officers, all home workers will eventually receive a VoIP handset and mobile workers a 'soft phone' (for use through a laptop). All officers will receive a unique telephone log-in number, plus access to voicemail if required.
27. It was reported that Councillors could also have this facility. This would allow Councillors to log-into any Council telephone, instantly forwarding their calls to that location, free of charge. Calls could also be forwarded to home numbers, mobiles or several phones at once, with the first one picked-up cancelling the others. Members agreed that this provision would be useful to some Councillors and therefore recommends that it be made available on request (**Recommendation 6**).
28. Some Members expressed concern that Councillors' telephone calls to the Council sometimes ring and ring but are not picked up and do not transfer to another officer. It was agreed that there was no obvious technical solution to this problem, other than the routing of all calls to Customer Services. The Task Group did not consider this to be a desirable solution.

## Councillor Induction and Development

29. Members felt that that the Councillor Induction in June 2009 was too overbearing, though aspects of it were good and it was acknowledged that the induction had represented a significant challenge. They agreed that future inductions should therefore be tailored to fresh, though not necessarily totally inexperienced, Councillors. The Task Group also felt that more information on the location of Councillor and Group rooms and the availability of ICT support should be provided at the induction stage (**Recommendation 7**).
30. Members agreed that the identification and meeting of Councillors' development needs was now being done effectively.

## Councillor Accommodation

31. The Task Group suggested that Councillors should be able to access Council hubs with a single entrance pass. In response, Phil Durston, Corporate Maintenance and Facilities Manager, provided a briefing on the work being done to achieve this. He reported that it was already the case for County Hall, Bradley Road and Browfort, and will be the case for George Ward and Pewsey Library when they become operational. The Workplace Transformation Team is also working with the PFI provider for Monkton Park make that system compatible.
32. Unfortunately, at Bourne Hill the installed system is not compatible with the system adopted for the Council's other buildings. At present, altering this would be prohibitive for both technical and funding reasons and therefore Bourne Hill will need a different access system requiring separate access cards. The situation will be reviewed as the building becomes operational over the next 12 months and, should it be feasible, the system changed to match that of the other hubs. The Task Group acknowledged the reasons stated and agreed that the current situation was not a cause for grave concern.
33. More information was requested on whether schools and other public buildings could be used as venues for Councillors' ward surgeries. The Head of Democratic Services suggested that Democratic Services Officers could research appropriate venues for Councillors on request and the Task Group supported this suggestion (**Recommendation 8**).

## Councillor Casework

34. The Task Group received a briefing on a pilot project where six Councillors referred casework to the customer services team, who referred, tracked and monitored the issues raised. The Head of Democratic Services reported that the system had been very lightly used by those Councillors taking part, suggesting there was little business case for extending the pilot or for purchasing specialised software to help Councillors manage their casework. The Task Group agreed with this conclusion.
35. The Task Group received an update on the Community Issues System (CIS) from Steve Milton, Head of Community Governance. The System had been further

refined and reviewed following the Leader's Review of Area Boards with a view to achieving better response times and greater clarity on outcomes delivered.

36. The Head of Community Governance reported that Community Area Managers (CAMs) were now able to email an issue to the local Councillor before it was added to the Issues Log. This prevents old issues, which the Councillor may already be dealing with, from being repeated on the System. The System also now emails the 'issue raiser' with a progress update when any action relating to the issue is taken. This was not an automated email, but one that could be tailored by the CAM as appropriate, and containing a link to the issue on the CIS. Each issue also now has a unique reference number, details of the issue's location and a reference to the nature of the issue (e.g. 'Highways'). Issues are also searchable by service area, and would soon be searchable by postcode. It was anticipated that in future it would be possible to extract information from the System for analysing issues data.
37. Members suggested that the System would be better if all issues raised generated a simple tick-box email, sent to the local Councillor, allowing them to request a course of action quickly and easily. This would be more efficient than the CAM having to write an email to the local Councillor for every issue. The automated email could also contain a progress trail detailing who had taken what action and when.
38. Following a recommendation from Task Group, the Head of Community Governance and Head of Democratic Services agreed to look into the suggestions detailed above, as well as the possibility of adapting the System to allow Councillors to use it for managing their casework (**Recommendation 9**).
39. There was some concern that the CIS could be used by some Councillors as a cheap secretary, resulting in CAMs dealing with a great deal of casework. The Head of Democratic Services suggested that there may be a role for Democratic Services Officers (DSOs) in helping to resolve the less complex local issues, leaving CAMs to deal with the more complicated, multi-agency issues. Responses to the survey of Councillors' views on current support arrangements showed a strong presumption against CAMs undertaking Councillor casework.
40. The Task Group considered the different definitions of an area board issue and councillor casework, and the appropriate forums for resolving these. The experiences of Task Group members and respondents to the Councillor survey indicated that the support provided by CAMs to resolve local issues was generally good.
41. The Select Committee Chairman and Vice-Chairman's meeting with the Service Director for Legal & Democratic Services (referred to in paragraph 2) included a discussion of concerns regarding confusion between the roles of CAMs and DSOs. Following this, the Task Group was briefed on a 'one year wash-up' meeting between the managers of the two teams where these responsibilities were discussed and re-agreed. It was suggested that confusion over the two roles had arisen partly due to the number of vacancies in Democratic Services at the commencement of Area Boards, particularly in the south of the county. This had led to some CAMs performing democratic services duties and inconsistency

between Area Boards in who performed what role. Following the wash-up meeting, the teams' joint Roles and Responsibilities document was re-circulated and a number of other measures implemented to ensure consistency of practice across all area boards. Neither the Task Group nor respondents to the survey of all Councillors (Appendix A) held great concerns regarding this issue.

42. The Task Group received a request from the Councillor Development Group to consider the guidance documents listed below. These were designed to help Councillors identify and follow the appropriate route for resolving local issues and had already been considered by the Local Service Review Task Group.
  - a. Helping Councillors to Get Things Done
  - b. Community Issues Triage Checklist
  - c. Area Boards Issue Flowchart
  - d. Councillor Call for Action (CCfA) Flowchart
43. The Task Group were happy with these documents in their current form.

#### Future Work

44. Members of the Task Group agreed that Councillor support is a constantly developing service and therefore this Task Group should be re-established in one year's time to review the progress made with Councillor support arrangements (**Recommendation 10**).

#### **Recommendations**

##### **The Task Group recommends that:**

- 1. Every edition of Elected Wire includes a table of contents at the top listing each item contained within that edition; (paragraph 8)**
- 2. Automated emails informing councillors of Cabinet Member delegated decisions are amended to contain a description of the decision within the body of the email; (paragraph 9)**
- 3. A paper contacts directory, containing the contact details of officers from Heads of Service up to the Chief Executive, is provided to all Councillors by 1 November 2010; (paragraph 15)**
- 4. The Constitution to include a protocol stipulating that Councillors can expect an initial response from Cabinet Members and Portfolio Holders within 2 days and a substantive response within 7 days; (paragraph 19)**
- 5. Work is undertaken to include links to Councillors' personal websites on their generic Council-provided webpage by request (with an appropriate disclaimer regarding the content of external sites); (paragraph 25)**



6. **Councillors are given the option of receiving Voice Over Internet Protocol (VoIP) telephones and a unique telephone log-in number on request; (paragraph 27)**
7. **Future Councillor inductions are tailored to fresh, though not necessarily totally inexperienced, Councillors. They should include more information on Councillor accommodation and the various options available regarding Councillor ICT. The induction programme should also be reviewed regularly; (paragraph 29)**
8. **Democratic Services to identify suitable venues for Councillors' ward surgeries on request; (paragraph 33)**
9. **The Head of Community Governance and Head of Democratic Services to take forward the Task Group's suggestions for improving the Community Issues System (CIS), including making it suitable for Councillors to use to manage their casework; (paragraph 38)**
10. **The Member Support in the Locality Task Group is re-established in one year's time to review Councillor support arrangements. (paragraph 44)**

## **Proposal**

45. Members are asked to endorse the recommendations of the Member Support in the Locality Task Group.

---

**Cllr Jonathon Seed – Chairman, Member Support in the Locality Task Group**

**Ian Gibbons – Director, Legal and Democratic Services**

Report author: Henry Powell – Senior Scrutiny Officer  
01225 718052      [henry.powell@wiltshire.gov.uk](mailto:henry.powell@wiltshire.gov.uk)

## **Appendices**

Appendix A – Summary of Councillor Responses to a survey on Councillor Support in the Locality

## **Background documents**

- Council/Officer Relations Protocol (Protocol II, Appendix II of the Constitution)
- Area Boards - Roles and Responsibilities document (DSOs & CAMs)
- IDeA declaration: 'Giving councillors the tools for the job' (a 'best practice' guide for local authorities detailing sixteen areas in which they can support their councillors)
- Councillor guidance documents:

- a. Helping Councillors to Get Things Done
- b. Community Issues Triage Checklist
- c. Area Boards Issue Flowchart
- d. Councillor Call for Action (CCfA) Flowchart