

SERVICE EFFECTIVENESS, COMMUNITY SERVICES AND EXTERNAL AFFAIRS IMPROVEMENT AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

REVIEW OF INFORMATION FOR MEMBERS

1.0. Introduction

1.1 Background

The Local Government Act 2000 required local authorities to introduce new democratic arrangements which created new and challenging roles for Members.

The new political structures set out different roles for Executive Members and the remaining Members of the Council. The Act creates a separate scrutiny function whose role is broadly to review the work of the Executive by reviewing and developing policy, making budget proposals to council, reviewing individual decisions through call-in and performance monitoring.

The majority of Members, under the new arrangements will therefore, have no responsibility for the day to day decisions affecting service delivery. These non-executive Members will for the most part undertake the Council's Improvement and Scrutiny function. This is a significant change from the old committee system of decision making where the majority of Members regardless of political group had some involvement in decision- making.

One of the main criticisms of the new democratic arrangements is the potential danger that non-executive Members feel they have no worthwhile or meaningful role in the decision-making process and are isolated working within their own individual wards. It is important therefore that all Members are fully engaged in their new roles and that the County Council provides them with the support and information they require to undertake what is required of them. This is particularly the case with non-executive Members, if they are not to feel isolated from the decision-making process. It is essential that Members have access to relevant and up to information on the work of the Council as a whole.

1.2 Scope and terms of Reference of the Review

The Service Effectiveness, Community Services and External Affairs Improvement and Scrutiny Committee at its meeting held on 8 May 2003, considered the scoping report of the review of the way the County Council communicates with its Elected Members. A copy of the report is attached at Appendix 1.

To oversee the review, a working group comprising Councillors K T Armstrong, G Mills and W Pickford was established. The working group heard evidence directly from:-

2.0 What information do Members receive?

Members receive a considerable amount of information in a variety of formats details of which are set out below.

2.1 Meeting papers

The introduction of the new decision-making arrangements has meant that the use of meeting papers as an information source from many Members has significantly reduced. For the most part, meeting papers are restricted to circulation as a matter of course to Executive Members only. It is important therefore, that backbench Members have access to meeting papers through Dnet (see below).

In support of meeting papers, decision digests (the mechanism for activating call-in) are distributed by email to all Members and are published on Dnet.

2.2 Dnet

Dnet is the County Council's intranet site for use by officers and Members. It provides a wide range of information on line on matters such as :-

- Individual departmental pages
- Council plans
- Council policies
- Members biographical and ward details
- Financial information
- Change Management
- News items
- Current and past committee papers
- Future Council meeting details

Under the old committee system, Members received a lot of their information from committee papers which were circulated widely. The new democratic arrangements mean that day to day decisions are taken by individual portfolio holders or by Cabinet. Far fewer Members are involved in the process and fewer copies of reports are circulated. It is important therefore, that particularly backbench Members have access to up to date and comprehensive information on the decision-making process.

Dnet is a potentially useful tool through which Members can be provided with the information they require to undertake their roles. The Democratic Services Section pages on Dnet, should provide Members with an effective and sustainable way of accessing this information. By browsing these pages, Members (and officers) should be able to access all agendas, reports and

minutes. Officer time, paper and copying costs and postage costs will be reduced if Members access and read reports on line.

If it is to achieve this purpose however, it is important that the information contained on it is up to date and complete. Otherwise it is likely that those using it will quickly become disillusioned and stop using it. They will then either not access the information at all, making it difficult to effectively undertake their role or they will revert back to using hard copies of papers.

The working group overseeing the review looked at Dnet in mid June 2003 to assess its usefulness to Members as a source of information on the decision-making process.

This snapshot view showed that whilst most pages were as up to date and complete as possible, there were some significant omissions which impacted on the usefulness of the system as a whole. Some examples of the omissions are set out below:-

Full Council

- Only one meeting listed in 2003 to date

Cabinet

- Out of 14 meetings to date in 2003, only 6 decision digests have been published on Dnet

Strategy, Policy and Budget Cabinet Member Portfolio

- Out of 11 meetings listed on Dnet to date in 2003, on 2 occasions no agenda, digests or reports are published
- Over the same period, only one decision digest has been published
- 2 meetings which were held are not recorded on Dnet at all

Local Area Committees

- Amber Valley – no meetings listed between 15/03/02 and 22/05/03
- Bolsover – no meetings listed between 28/03/02 and 19/06/03
- Chesterfield – no meetings listed between 14/05/02 and 23/05/03
- Derbyshire Dales - no meetings listed between 21/03/02 and 12/06/03
- Erewash - no meetings listed between 18/03/02 and 07/06/03
- High Peak - no meetings listed between 19/03/02 and 09/09/03
- North East Derbyshire - no meetings listed between 11/03/02 and 19/05/03
- South Derbyshire - no meetings listed between 07/03/02 and 15/05/03

The Head of Democratic Services also reported problems of publishing the following documents on Dnet:-

- Documents too large to receive in electronic format
- Documents not available in electronic format such as appendices

2.3 Members Newslines

Councillors also receive information through the Members Newslines. Newslines are produced on a daily basis by the Policy and Research Division of the Policy Unit and they provide information on:-

- National Local Government news
- Local Government news
- Local economic news
- Government press releases

A recent survey of the Newslines service has shown that in general Members make use of Newslines as an information service. Following the survey, a report has been agreed by Cabinet on 18 November 2003 which proposes:-

- National local government news, Government press notices and professional journal articles will be published on a daily basis on newly created pages on Dnet. Members will be advised of the availability of the information by email containing links to the relevant Dnet pages. Copies of articles will be able to be requested electronically.
- Derbyshire local government news will continue in its present paper format and continue to be published daily. Members will now have the choice of receiving the full article issue or as an alternative, a summary bulletin.

The revised arrangements will result in a reduction in paper, photocopying and postage costs as well as reducing the impact on the environment.

2.4 Cabinet Circulars, Service Development Diary and News Reviews

In response to the new democratic arrangements, the Council has introduced three communication and information initiatives which are designed to ensure that Members are aware of policy decisions and service developments. These are :-

- Cabinet Circular – providing elected Members and chief officers with the latest policy decisions and developments within 24-48 hours of Cabinet meetings. Links are also provided to Cabinet reports.
- Service Development Diary – informs elected Members and chief officers of what is about to happen strategically and locally. This facility also provides electronic links to contact emails and relevant websites

- News review – provides elected Members and chief officers with an overview of what the County Council has done over the last 6 -12 months with links to press releases.

Again, all Members have been surveyed regarding their use of these initiatives. The results of the survey show a general level of satisfaction with the documents.

2.5 Press Releases

Members also receive copies of press releases issued by the Public Relations Division. Press releases are distributed either in hard copy or email format depending on Members preferences. Some Members choose not to receive copies of press releases at all.

Members are surveyed by the Public Relations Division on an annual basis.

3.0 Issues and Recommendations

3.1 Members Information

The review concludes that overall, the information provided to Members to support them in undertaking their role as councillors is in general useful and well used. This is evidenced by the results of the recent surveys.

There are however, issues arising out of the review and these are set out below.

3.2 Electronic Meetings papers

The working group accepts that the County Council is not in a position to adopt a paperless meeting system. There is not a willingness on the part of the majority of Members or the overall IT competency to do so.

However, the working group considers that given time, this position will be achieved in Derbyshire and other authorities. It is considered important that the County Council should be aware of systems that are available and also the experiences of other authorities. There may be scope for pilot studies to be introduced to trial such systems using willing Members. The Head of Democratic Services indicated that alternative paperless systems had not been examined in any detail.

Recommendation 1

- (a) That the Head of Democratic Services examine alternative paperless meeting systems in liaison with the working group overseeing the review.

3.3 Extending the use of electronic means of information provision

The County Council has provided Members with computers and it is considered that wherever possible and practical, they should be utilised as the main means for Members to access information. It is accepted however, that competency in the use of information technology varies considerably from Member to Member. At present, it would be impractical to seek to move towards fully electronic means of providing Members with information.

The working group considers it important however, that electronic means of information provision should be encouraged and promoted. Use of the internet, intranet and email accesses information quicker, reduces paper, photocopying and postage costs and also supports Council policies on environmental sustainability. Members should be offered the opportunity to receive information electronically, accepting that this means electronic and hard copy paper systems will need to run alongside each other until the point, probably in the longer-term, where all Members are able and happy to use IT to access information electronically. The recent initiatives to extend the use of electronic information provision are welcomed by the review.

The recently completed Improvement and Scrutiny review of Member Training highlighted the need for Members to receive more intense one to one training and support in the use of IT. This review supports the conclusions of the Member Training review. Hopefully, as the reviews recommendations are implemented, more Members will gain the ability and also a willingness to use IT to access information.

The review considers that it is important that the County Council should strive towards all Members receiving information as a matter of course, either by email or the intranet/website. It is accepted that this process will take time to achieve, but the working group considers that the County Council should ensure that those Members who wish to receive information electronically should be able to do so.

Officers who are responsible for the provision of information to Members regularly review the services they provide. It is recommended that the working group overseeing the review should work with the officers in reviewing these services and that monitoring reports and proposals for change be considered by the Improvement and Scrutiny Committee.

Recommendation 2

(a) That the recommendations of the Member Training Improvement and Scrutiny review on IT training be supported.

(b)

- (c) That the working group overseeing the review work with officers providing information to Members in reviewing information services and that proposals for change and monitoring reports be presented to the Improvement and Scrutiny Committee.

3.3 Dnet

As detailed above, the review looked at the information provided on Dnet, particularly the Democratic Services pages relating to agendas, reports and minutes. There is no doubt that this information is potentially of great use to Members in undertaking their role as councilors. Accessing agendas, minutes and reports via Dnet is quick and also has the benefits of reducing paper, copying and postage charges as well as being more environmentally friendly.

However, for Dnet to maximize its potential as an information source for Members, it has to be kept up to date. If there is information missing there is a danger that Members (and officers) will become disillusioned with the site and not use it. The working group looked at the site in mid June and found several areas where there were papers omitted. Having met with the Head of Democratic Services, an undertaking was given to try to maintain the pages as up to date as possible.

At the time of writing the final report, the working group reviewed the position and noted the information on the Democratic Services pages on Dnet had improved. There continued however, to be omissions, for example:-

Council

- Of the 4 meetings of Council, on two occasions no reports had been published and on 1 occasion some but not all reports had been published.

Cabinet

- Out of 11 meetings, digests had only been published on 5 occasions.

Strategy, Policy and Budget Cabinet Member Portfolio

- 2 digests have not been published

The working group, whilst acknowledging that the information relating to reports agendas and decision digests published on Dnet had improved, considered that there remained significant and unacceptable gaps in information provision which needed to be addressed. It is recommended that the Improvement and Scrutiny Committee monitor the information published on Dnet.

The working group considered that potential solutions existed to the technical problems presented by large documents and appendices. It is noted that the Head of Democratic Services acknowledged that possible solutions to the technical problems had not been examined or costed. In many cases therefore, these documents are simply not published on Dnet at all. It is recommended that the Head of Democratic Services examine possible solutions to overcome the problems of large documents and appendices.

Recommendation 3

- (a) That the concerns of the working group regarding the continuing omissions of information on the Democratic Services pages on Dnet be noted.
- (b) The Committee receive a monitoring report in six months
- (c) The head of Democratic Services examine solutions to the technical problems posed by large documents and appendices.

5. The Next Stage

The report will be referred to the Cabinet for consideration. It is recommended that:-

- (1) the Chair of the Improvement and Scrutiny Committee presents the report to the Cabinet.
- (2) following consideration of this report and subject to the Cabinet agreeing to the recommendations, it is suggested that the Improvement and Scrutiny Committee receives a report at a date to be determined, to outline progress made.

Appendix 2

Notes of a meeting with David Tysoe and David Molyneux on the Improvement and Scrutiny Committee Review of Information to Elected Members held on 8 July 2003.

Present: Councillors K T Armstrong, G Mills and W Pickford; Mr David Tysoe, David Molyneux and Mr R Ackrill.

Members expressed concern that the information contained on the Democratic Services pages on Dnet was not up to date and had serious omissions. Evidence to support this was presented. Particular problems areas were meetings of the full Council, Cabinet, and local areas committees. Concern was expressed that decision digests appeared not to have been published at all in some cases.

The Head of Democratic Services pointed out that in the main the problem was one of resources with no one officer being available to publish documents on a regular basis. Technical problems existed in dealing with large reports that were too big to send by email and also appendices which were not supplied in electronic format. In some cases departments also failed to supply reports so officers were unable to publish them on Dnet. It was noted that no investigation of how to overcome these technical problems and the potential costs involved, had not been undertaken.

The Head of Democratic Services was surprised with the position with regard to decision digests. In respect of Cabinet, it was usually aimed to publish the digest by Thursday at the latest following a Tuesday meeting. The Section had recently decided to distribute digests by email and to publish copies on Dnet rather than distribute hard copies to all members. It was felt that members were using Dnet as an information source as the number of requests for hard copies of committee reports had reduced significantly.

A commitment was given to take steps to ensure that the information on Dnet was kept up to date. It was noted that it would be important to keep information up to date on the website once this information was published on the County website.

The Head of Democratic Services stated that the Section was actively working towards introducing a paperless system of contact with Members outside of meetings. It was felt that the idea of moving to a system of using lap tops pcs at meetings instead of reports in paper format was achievable but only in the long term. At present there was a lack of commitment from Members to introduce such a system and also some Members were not sufficiently proficient in the use of IT to make it practical to introduce. The Head of Democratic Services agreed that it was important that the County Council keep abreast of developments in order to ensure that the County Council was not left behind.

Appendix 3

Notes of a meeting with Michelle Archer, Members Secretary on the Improvement and Scrutiny Committee Review of Information to Elected Members held on 8 July 2003.

Present: Councillors K T Armstrong, G Mills and W Pickford; Ms Michelle Archer and Mr R Ackrill.

It was estimated that out of the 43 Majority Group Members, 6 did not use email or the intranet at all. Members Secretaries manage emails on their behalf. Other Members used their PCs on a limited basis.

Training in IT is a big issue. Members want one to one training to increase their competency, not group training sessions. Technical difficulties and frustrations with the IT Helpdesk cause Members to be disheartened. A dedicated team with responsibilities for members may be the answer. The new system with easier access from members homes should improve the situation.

Backbench members under the new structures valued information more. It is very important they get it. Many Members considered the Democratic Services pages on Dnet to be so incomplete that they refused to use. Members are frustrated when trying to access information this way and have given up using it.

All the information received by Members is used to varying degrees, particular by back bench Members. Cabinet Members tend to receive more information in the course of undertaking their portfolio responsibilities.

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