

Minutes

Local Government Reform - Cabinet Sub Group

11th October 2007

Present:

| Members | Present |
|-------------------------|----------------|
| Councillor J Abbott | Yes |
| Councillor Mrs J Beavis | No |
| Councillor G Butland | Yes |
| Councillor Dr R L Evans | Yes |
| Councillor M Gage | Apologies |
| Councillor N McCrea | No |
| Councillor J McKee | Yes |

8 **DECLARATIONS OF INTERESTS**

INFORMATION: Cllr J Abbott declared a personal interest in respect of the report relating to the Role of Members of the Planning Committee as he is a member of that Committee. Cllr J Abbott did not vote in relation to that item.

9 **MINUTES**

DECISION: That the minutes of the meeting of the Group held on 10th July 2007 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

10 **THE ROLE OF MEMBERS OF THE PLANNING COMMITTEE**

INFORMATION:- The Sub-Group considered a report highlighting the additional work and development needs for members of the Planning Committee following the change to the decision making process at the AGM. It was noted that a number of local authorities across the country pay a special responsibility allowance (SRA) to their members for determining planning applications and the Sub-Group were referred to a list showing the level of allowance paid. It was also noted that under the current scheme of Members' Allowances, members were restricted to one SRA and if this restriction remained, the additional work would not be recognised.

The Sub-Group considered that for the Planning Committee to perform their functions, members must spend additional time on preparation (from travelling around the District to visit application sites to reading papers), attending meetings every fortnight and maintaining a sound and up-to-date knowledge and understanding of planning law and policies. In light of this increased workload and the use of special skills the Sub-Group considered that a SRA should be paid to all members of the Planning Committee. The Head of Law and Governance advised the Sub-Group that before any decision could be

made to amend the Members' Allowance Scheme, the Council would need to have regard to the recommendations made by the Independent Remuneration Panel. The Chairman of the Panel has requested that the Council recommend an appropriate level for the Panel to consider.

DECISION:-

(1) That the Planning Committee be required to develop and implement suitable annual training which covers planning procedures, issues of current importance and specialist training on particular topics or to look at matters in greater depth.

That it be recommended to Cabinet:-

(2) That the Independent Remuneration Panel be advised that a SRA payment of £800 be made to each member of the Planning Committee subject to the following conditions:-

- mandatory training; and
- a minimum attendance level of 75% of the total meetings of the Planning Committee in each civic year

(3) That the restriction in the current Members' Allowance Scheme be disapplied to those members of the Planning Committee who are already entitled to a SRA.

11 **CONSTITUTIONAL CHANGES.**

INFORMATION:- The Sub Group considered a report comprising two main issues; Public Question Time and the appointment of the Monitoring Officer.

Public Question Time:- With regard to Public Question Time, the Sub-Group looked at its application at Planning Committee, Local Committees and in relation to issues which were the subject of court proceedings. Firstly the Sub-Group endorsed the current rule which provides for a separate item on every agenda. Members felt that this gave the public a clear steer of when they could address the Committee. At Planning Committee, this facility was considered very useful and offered a good insight into public feeling and material planning considerations. Whilst other local authorities may have felt it appropriate to limit public speaking when determining planning applications, this was not supported by the Sub-Group who were concerned that such restrictions would be undemocratic. The Sub-Group acknowledged that there were rare occasions where the Council did not have an answer to a material planning consideration but a member of the public present did. In those instances it was felt that the Chairman should be empowered to allow that person to interject.

At Local Committees, the Sub-Group took the view that retaining Public Question Time enabled the public to raise an issue that was not covered by the agenda. It was noted that the role of the Chairman was vital to encouraging participation and that this was working particularly well at Braintree Local Committee. The Sub-Group was advised that some local authorities had introduced a rolling list of questions for their Local Committees as a way of promoting participation. This idea raised no concerns or objections from the Sub-Group.

The Sub-Group was asked to consider whether or not there should be limitations on Public Question Time when the subject matter concerned or was related to court

proceedings. It was felt that some restriction would be appropriate.

Appointment of the Monitoring Officer:- The Sub-Group noted that the current Monitoring Officer will retire on 31st March and were asked to consider the appointment of a new Monitoring Officer.

DECISION:-

- (1) That the current rules on Public Question Time be amended to reflect the discussions of the Sub-Group and that the revised draft rules be considered by the Sub-Group at the next meeting.
- (2) That the Head of Law and Governance prepares a paper on the use and success of a rolling list of questions for Local Committees and this be presented to the next meeting of the Sub-Group.
- (3) That it be recommended to Council that Sharon Lowe, the Head of Law and Governance be appointed as the Monitoring Officer with effect from 1st April 2008.

12 **MEMBER DEVELOPMENT**

INFORMATION:- The Sub-Group were reminded that the Council had given a commitment to the EERA Charter for Elected Members and that this needed to be achieved by 2009. Members were referred to the five key stages and a brief proposal as to how this could be achieved.

DECISION: That the proposal as outlined in the report be approved.

13 **UPDATE ON THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT IN HEALTH BILL**

INFORMATION:- The Sub-Group noted the update attached to the agenda and were advised that the Act would receive Royal Assent in November.

14 **LOCAL DEMOCRACY WEEK**

INFORMATION:- The Sub-Group noted the briefing note attached to the agenda.

15 **ANY OTHER BUSINESS**

INFORMATION:-The Chairman raised the issue of ward surgeries and in particular the facilities available to members outside of Causeway House. It was felt that there should be a level playing field for members not using Causeway House and the Chairman asked that a paper be prepared on the various options for the next meeting of the Sub-Group.

16 **DATE OF NEXT MEETING**

INFORMATION: -The next meeting will take place on 5th December 2007 at 7.15pm.

The meeting commenced at 7.15pm and closed at 8.15pm.

G BUTLAND (Chairman)