

WEST DUNBARTONSHIRE COUNCIL

Report by the Chief Executive

Council: 27 June 2007

Subject: West Dunbartonshire Council – Review of Decision Making Process

1. Purpose

- 1.1** This report presents the results of the recent external study of the Council's decision making processes, and proposes a revised structure for consideration.

2. Background

- 2.1** The Audit Scotland Review of Best Value & Community Planning noted a number of concerns about the arrangements for decision making in the Council. These included:-
- Transparency and openness of decision making
 - Scrutiny arrangements
- 2.2** At a special meeting in January 2007, Council agreed to accept the recommendations of the Accounts Commission which followed the Audit Scotland report, and also agreed an Improvement Plan which aimed to address the issues raised. This meeting also agreed to set up a cross party member officer working group to develop the Plan and monitor progress, and to delegate authority to the Chief Executive to engage appropriate external assistance as required.
- 2.3** Among other things, the Improvement Plan reflected the Accounts Commission view that the Council should engage external assistance to review its decision making and management structures. Following a tendering exercise, this work was awarded to Brodies Consultants.
- 2.4** The team from Brodies have been working with elected members and senior staff over recent months, and has produced a report setting out its findings and recommendations. This is attached as appendix 1 to this paper. The senior consultants from Brodies will also be in attendance at the Council meeting to present the report.

3. Main Issues

3.1 The features of a good system of decision making, as recommended by the Accounts Commission, and which form the basis of the Brodies' report are as follows. It should:-

- be open and accountable
- support timely and informed decisions
- be based on appropriate consultation with stakeholders
- encourage partnership working
- identify clear roles and responsibilities for all participants.

3.2 The 4 main types of system examined by Brodies are:-

- Traditional service committees
- Thematic committees (which focus on outcomes)
- Cabinet model (executive/scrutiny system)
- Area based committees

Over the past 10 years West Dunbartonshire Council has operated versions of all 4 models, therefore, in addition to the recommendations from the consultants, members and officers are well placed to consider the advantages and disadvantages of each. (An analysis of these is set out in paragraphs 6.30 – 6.41 of Appendix 1)

3.3 The report recommends that West Dunbartonshire Council retains a version of the current thematic committee system – although with some amendment.

3.4 A summary of the reasons for rejecting the other models includes:-

- Most Councils are now moving away from the traditional service committee model – which does not easily support the cross cutting nature of much service planning and provision. Brodies also suggest that the Accounts Commission would be likely to see a return to this model as a regressive step.
- The Cabinet model tends to be adopted in Councils where there is a large single party majority, decisions are taken by the Executive and this can lead to members outwith the Executive feeling excluded from decision making
- The Area Committee model does have the benefit of bringing decisions closer to local communities, but can lead to inequalities in both strategic planning and service delivery across the area as a whole. This system tends to operate in areas with a much bigger geographical area than West Dunbartonshire.

3.5 The reasons for recommending the thematic system in West Dunbartonshire include:-

- Both members and officers generally feel that the system has been working effectively, (and do not find there is a significant problem with Directorates reporting to more than 1 committee)
- The system is well suited to and Authority of the size of West Dunbartonshire
- The system is open to public scrutiny (although some amendments would be developed to improve this)
- It would support stability in delivering on the Best Value Improvement Plan.

3.6 The amendments proposed by the Brodies report include:-

- A refinement of the committee titles and remits (as set out in paragraph 7.3 and Figure 4 of appendix 1). Remits of the committees should reflect an agreed programme of work – rather than an ad hoc series of reports. This would streamline the work of committees, and could be supported by detailed work done in sub committees, member / officer working groups and other forums. It is suggested that specific services may have a direct link with one committee – but could report to all, depending on circumstances
- Developing the scrutiny function, using the results of additional work which has been commissioned to support the review
- A rationalisation of the number of conveners, such that there is one convener associated with each committee – rather than a variety of spokespersons
- New structural arrangements to facilitate more direct links between the Chief Executive, Corporate Management Team and Group leaders.

4. Personnel Issues

4.1 There are no immediate Personnel issues arising from this reports.

5. Financial Implications

5.1 The main financial implication identified in the Brodies' analysis are the resources for training and support for elected members to allow all to participate fully in the decision making process.

6. Risk Analysis

6.1 The main risks identified by the Brodies Report are the potential for lack of involvement by some members, and/or that there may be a low impact in terms of realising the benefits around the cross cutting nature of the model.

6.2 The other main risk for the Council would be if it did not act on the review of Decision Making, then it could be subject to further action by the Accounts Commission.

7. Conclusions

- 7.1** Based on a wide ranging review, the report and appendix set out the case for Council adopting a revised version of a Thematic Committee system.

8. Recommendations

- 8.1** The Council is asked to:-

- (a) agree to accept the recommendations of the Brodies' Report and adopt a Thematic Committee system, as outlined in paragraph 7.3 and Figure 4 'Proposed Decision Making Structure';
- (b) instruct the Chief Executive to prepare a report which details the revised remits and protocols for the Committees to the first meeting of Council following the recess. Revised timetables are the subject of a separate report to this meeting; and
- (c) instruct the Chief Executive to prepare a report that presents proposals for revised scrutiny arrangements to the first meeting of Council following the recess.

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Date: 20 June 2007

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Appendix: Brodies Report – Decision Making Structures

Background Papers: Audit Scotland - Review of Best Value and Community Planning
Best Value Improvement Plan – Special Council 17
January 2007 and Update to Council 25 April 2007

Wards Affected: All