

WEST DUNBARTONSHIRE COUNCIL

Report by the Executive Director of Corporate Services

Council : 25 February 2009

Subject: New Political Demographic of West Dunbartonshire Council

1. Purpose

- 1.1** The Council Meeting on 17 December 2008 instructed Officers to prepare a report for the February Council advising how the new political demographic of the Council should be reflected in the political balance of committees. Council further resolved that until the report was forthcoming there would be no change to committee representation unless a Member resigns, whereupon Council will decide who fills the vacancy.
- 1.2** The purpose of this report is to detail political changes which have occurred and the impact of these changes on the political balance of committees.

2. Background

2.1 On 10 November 2008, Councillor Marie McNair resigned from the Labour Group and is now an Independent Councillor. On 31 January 2009 Councillor William McLaughlin advised that he was no longer a member of the Labour Party and would be continuing as an Independent Member of the Council.

2.2 Prior to these changes there were ten Labour Members, nine SNP Members, One SSP Member and two Independent Members. Following these changes the political make up of the Council is nine SNP Members, eight Labour Members, four Independent Members and one SSP Member. The present political balance is therefore as follows:-

SNP – 41%
Labour – 36%
Independent – 18%
SSP – 5%

2.3 Appendix 1 details the number of Members on each committee and the political balance on every committee, both prior to and after the changes. The average percentage representation of each Group on Council Committees is now as follows:-

SNP – 48%
Labour – 35%
Independent – 15%
SSP – 2%

3. Main Issues

3.1 There is no legal requirement in Scotland for committee membership to be representative of the political balance on the Council. The present committee membership gives the SNP Administration 50% of the seats on most committees, including the main service committees. The key exception is in the Audit and Performance Committee where Labour as Opposition hold 50% of the seats. The obvious reason for this is to ensure that the Administration (or Opposition in the Audit and Performance Committee) have a working majority on committees.

3.2 Consideration of changes to political membership of committees is essentially a political matter for Council to decide. In doing so the following points are worthwhile to take into consideration:-

- Does Council wish the Administration (or the Opposition in the case of Audit and Performance) to keep a working majority of 50% of committee membership on most committees, including the main service committees. Alternatively does Council wish to consider a committee membership in line with the political make up of the Council. This would not allow any party to have a working majority on committees.
- If Council wishes the Administration (and the Labour Opposition on Audit and Performance) to retain a working majority of 50%, does Council wish to allocate the remaining seats according to the political balance on the Council. This would result in the remaining 50% of seats being held 62% Labour, 30% Independent and 8% SSP. In the case of Audit and Performance, it would result in the remaining 50% of seats being held 64% SNP, 29% Independent and 7% SSP.
- If the Council wishes all seats to be allocated according to the political balance on the Council (i.e. not to retain a working majority) then it should be noted that this would involve a 6% reduction of the number of SNP Members on each committee and a commensurate increase in the number of other Members on committee.
- Councillors McNair and McLaughlin serve on ten committees between them. There are 123 committee places available, meaning that members serve, on an average, five and a half committees. It could be argued that as Councillors McNair and McLaughlin have taken their fair share of committee memberships from the Labour Group to Independent, that the changed political demographics are already represented in committee memberships.
- Councillor Willie McLaughlin intimated his resignation from the Licensing Committee and West Dunbartonshire Sports Council on 6th February. Council needs to make new nominations to this committee and body.

4. Personnel Issues

4.1 There are no personnel issues.

5. Financial Implications

5.1 There are no financial implications.

6. Risk Analysis

6.1 To move to a committee membership representative of the political balance on the Council would result in a fairer system. However in the absence of coalition arrangements, it would be more likely to introduce political instability. This could have a detrimental effect on decision making.

7. Conclusions

7.1 Two Councillors have changed from Labour to become Independent. A decision on whether to amend committee memberships in light of these changed political demographics is essentially a political one.

8. Recommendations

8.1 It is recommended that Council consider whether they wish the Administration to retain a 50% membership of most committees (or the Labour Opposition to retain a 50% membership of Audit and Performance) in order to retain a working majority. If so Council may wish to consider whether the present allocation of the remaining seats on each committee reflects the political balance of the other parties. If Council does not wish the administration to retain 50% working majority on committees does it wish to look to a committee membership based on the political balance in the Council.

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Appendices: Appendix 1 – Percentage of Committee Membership

Background Papers: None

Wards Affected: ALL