

WEST DUNBARTONSHIRE COUNCIL

Report by the Chief executive

Council : 28 November 2007

Subject: Improving Member / Officer Relations

1. Purpose

- 1.1** This report provides members with a copy of the independent report, produced by the Improvement Service, on 'Improving Member / Officer Relations', and asks members to consider the recommendations for further action.

2. Background

- 2.1** The Best Value Audit process noted a number of issues regarding the relationships between members and officers. The Best Value Improvement Plan identified that external assistance would be sought to help the Council address these issues.
- 2.2** The Improvement Service was asked to undertake a review in August 2007. Although this was in part a response to the audit of Best Value report on the Council, more importantly, the aim was to ensure that there were strong, positive relationships which would support the delivery of the Improvement Plan, particularly in the context of the financial challenges likely to be facing the Council.
- 2.3** The review was based on a combination of desk research, interviews with senior officers and elected members, and focus groups.
- 2.4** The report, (appendix 1), has now been received from the Improvement Service, and members are asked to consider the key findings and recommendations

3. Main Issues

- 3.1** The report begins by stressing the positive findings, from both member and officer viewpoints, of the current state of member / officer relations. The report did however note that these are still early days, and that forthcoming difficult and complex decisions may test these relationships. In general, the report expressed the view that these early relationships provided a sound basis, but that other factors would also need consideration.

Governance, Decision Making & Scrutiny Structures

- 3.2** It is noted that the new governance structures, decision making and scrutiny will require careful development, particularly in relation to the officer support given to administration and opposition groupings. The report suggests that officers should fully advise and support all elected members across all stages of the decision making process – with a view to optimising consensus on key decisions, and minimising adversarial politics.
- 3.3** It is suggested that the development of all major decisions on issues such as strategy, budgets, and improvement should be planned and resourced at an early stage. An appropriate mechanism may be some form of member / officer policy development forum or board. It is further suggested that such a mechanism should not just be led by officers, but should include direct input by elected members.
- 3.4** In terms of pre agenda meetings, it is suggested that conveners, vice conveners and their opposition shadows should be briefed together.
- 3.5** With regard to the decision making stage, it is suggested that there should be an opportunity for members to request clarification or further information, between the issue of agenda papers and the council/committee meeting, with any further information being made available to all members.
- 3.6** The issue of scrutiny contains several elements, most particularly the distinction between the ability to ‘call in’ or challenge decisions, as opposed to the ability to question the process or the outcome. The options suggested in relation to scrutiny will require further consideration of the role and remit of the Audit and Performance Review Committee, and possible consideration of additional scrutiny mechanisms. This would require further, and more detailed reporting.

Cultural Issues

- 3.7** The report then proceeds to examine wider issues such as the culture of ‘ambition and discipline’, and the ‘culture of West Dunbartonshire’. It is suggested that although there is a basic wish to develop good and respectful relationships, the ambitions should be greater. This could include aspirations for better strategic leadership, partnership working and the development of external relationships. It is also suggested that discipline will be needed to steer some of the more difficult decisions, combined with a commitment to adopt new ways of working within a new political structure.
- 3.8** In terms of the culture of West Dunbartonshire, it is proposed that there should be an attempt to work across the strong, separate historical identities of the different communities – which, it is suggested, are a barrier to longer term strategic decisions. It is proposed that this might be done both by giving a high profile to ‘focal issues’ which can only be addressed on a West Dunbartonshire wide basis, and by developing the opportunities offered by

multi member wards. It is further suggested that local MPs and MSPs should be involved in these processes.

Way Forward

- 3.9 The Improvement Service has offered to work with the Council to develop these recommendations. It notes that the report is only a starting point for a process of change. It provides examples of some of the actions which might be taken, but the implementation will require more detailed discussion.
- 3.10 It is suggested that the Improvement Service should be asked to facilitate a seminar for members, which will allow more detailed discussion of the processes which will be necessary.

4. Personnel Issues

- 4.1 There are no Personnel issues at this stage.

5. Financial Implications

- 5.1 There are no financial implications at this stage.

6. Risk Analysis

- 6.1 There is a risk that, if the Council does not address the issues of Member / Officer relations, then it will not be in a position to deliver the best services for West Dunbartonshire. There is also a risk that the Best Value Audit process will not be satisfied if appropriate action is not taken.

7. Conclusions

- 7.1 The Improvement Service report on Member / Officer Relations provides a number of recommendations, both in relation to improvements in the governance, decision making and scrutiny processes, and in the overall culture of the Council. Members will now require to consider how this should be developed.

8. Recommendations

- 8.1 Members are asked to consider the findings set out in the report by the Improvement Service.
- 8.2 Members are asked to request that the Improvement Service be invited to facilitate a seminar for all elected members, which will allow further exploration of the recommendations – most particularly in relation to the most viable means of implementation.

8.3 Following this, members are asked to agree to receive proposals on the further development of the governance, decision making and scrutiny structures; and also on mechanisms which aim to improve the culture in which the Council operates.

.....
David McMillan
Chief Executive
Date: 20 November 2007

Person to Contact: Liz Cochrane, Principal Policy Officer 01389 737271
liz.cochrane@west-dunbarton.gov.uk

Appendices: Improvement Service - Report on Improving Member / Officer Relations, November 2007

Background Papers: Best Value Improvement Plan

Wards Affected: All