

BRECKLAND COUNCIL
MEMBER TRAINING PANEL – 18 February 2008
POLICY DEVELOPMENT AND REVIEW PANEL 2 – 28 February 2008
REPORT OF THE EXECUTIVE MEMBER FOR CABINET PORTFOLIO
(Author: Annalisa Graziano, Committee Officer)

COUNCILLORS WARD INFORMATION

Summary: The last Comprehensive Performance Assessment asked Breckland Council to review the Training, Development and support provided to its Elected Members. The Local Government Information Unit has undertaken a review of Member Support and produced a report identifying possible areas for improvement. Officers have analysed the report and produced a draft action plan to deliver the improvements. One of the areas for improvement was to supply Councillors with a robust information source for advance notice and consultation on issues affecting their Ward. Members are asked to consider and approve either the arrangements for Councillors Ward Pages or an IT Option.

1. BACKGROUND

1.1 In March 2004, the Comprehensive Performance Assessment report found that:

“Councillor training and support is inadequate. Some Councillors feel excluded from the Council’s activities and as a result do not represent the Council positively.”

1.2 The objective of this report is to reach a view on how Councillors should receive information and consultation on issues affecting their Ward, in particular how this will be implemented and sustained within Breckland Council.

1.3 A number of councils have mechanisms in place to provide, in advance, information to councillors regarding any matters likely to impact upon wards. A number of authorities have initiated ward information, such as Gateshead and Tower Hamlets. Responses were received from Braintree, Swindon and Norwich on how they communicate and send information to their councillors. These are shown in Appendix 1.

1.4 A questionnaire on how Members receive information regarding their wards was circulated to all Members and 36 replies were received. The questions Members were asked and their responses are shown in Appendix 2.

1.5 The final report from the Local Government Information Unit on “All Members Matter” identified the following as a possible area for improvement:

“Introduce automatic ‘triggers’ to ensure that ward councillors are given advance notice and are consulted on issues that affect their wards.”

2. KEY DECISION

2.1 This is not a key decision.

3. COUNCIL PRIORITIES

3.1 The matter raised in this report falls within the following Council priorities:

- A safe and healthy environment
- A well planned place to live which encourages vibrant communities
- A prosperous place to live and work.

- 3.2 Improving the support and the information supplied to Elected Members will enable them to fulfil their Ward Councillor role better.

4. COUNCILLORS WARD PAGES

- 4.1 Although a number of councils have mechanisms in place to provide information to Ward Councillors regarding any developments likely to impact upon their wards these can vary widely and, in fact, intersect with systems already in place at Breckland Council (e.g. Members' Information Bulletin).
- 4.2 On evaluating the questionnaires (appendix 2), the main objective was improving direct communication particularly with Councillors, staff and stakeholders not only to support the Councillor role, but to support business efficiency and team-building.
- 4.3 A new communication channel is needed that will be easily accessible, fast, responsive and act as a catalyst for a radically improved dialogue between Councillors, Officers and in turn the Public.
- 4.4 The pages could offer a concise digest of ward information that Councillors currently feel they are not receiving.
- 4.5 The electronic ward pages could be built, branded and populated within the Council, recognising that Breckland Officers are the Council's ambassadors. By implementing the pages internally through the work of the Web Editors and Communications Team it is believed this translates into better internal relations and a stronger corporate identity. Population of the pages will be the responsibility of Service Managers to ensure their team are passing all information regarding any developments in any ward and emailing it to their service area Web Editor to upload onto the relevant Ward(s) page(s) (e.g. correspondence between Planning Officers and Parish Clerks/the public).

5.0 IT OPTION

- 5.1 Following the Member Training Panel on 2 October 2007, consultation took place with representatives from the ICT Department who advised Committee Services representatives they had concerns regarding the production of website pages for ward information. The following points were made:
- This would take up resources already being prioritised on the Parish Council Web Project, Web upgrade and future Public Facing Web enhancements. There are resource difficulties on delivering content for Parish Websites currently.
 - Production of web pages would incur additional costs through the required use of Amaze.
 - Would duplicate a communications method already in place. Email is currently in use and offers an effective form of communication.
 - A continuation of communications problems and the potential for worse communications if the organisation had two methods of electronic communications.
 - Methods of storing the information potentially not as reliable and accessible as Email.
 - We may not be able to guarantee one method of communications to please all, when some Members have already confirmed they prefer Email.
- 5.2 ICT offered Email as an IT Solution for Members' consideration, based on examination of the Appendix 2 of the Report which clearly suggests that Members

would be happy with email communications to receive information/updates. The following reasons were given in support of using email:

- Email is accessible, fast and responsive at no additional cost.
 - This is the chosen, recommended and simplest method of auditable communications for the organisation.
 - It is already in place so it is cost effective.
 - We already have a Members' Distribution group set up for email.
 - A designated email address could be established to easily identify all ward updates to Members.
 - Everyone uses it. The organisation has a high ratio of staff using IT.
- 5.3 There is a need to investigate the need to prove whether Emails have been sent from a sender to a recipient, in case there are issues around whether a Member has been informed. ICT are investigating this as an option.
- 5.4 Email was identified as the worst form of communication regarding emotional content and the timely factor (e.g. cannot guarantee people receive it or read it at the time you want them to and there is no emotional content). On this basis, face-to-face communication, which is encouraged by the Communications team, is the best. However, email should be recommended as it is the best method for receipt/audit purposes.

6.0 STAFFING AND COMMUNICATION

- 6.1 The importance of providing communication to Members needs enforcing across the Council as a whole. It should be the responsibility of Service Managers to ensure their teams are keeping Members up to date. The organisational structure allows this to happen.
- 6.2 The Communications Team need to be involved, in addition to Service Managers, as they need to be responsible for ensuring that Officers and Managers are updating Members using the correct method e.g. Email. If Members agree with the recommendation of the report, the Council's method of updating Members of developments within their Ward is something that should be incorporated into the Communications Policy.

7.0 OPTIONS AVAILABLE

- 7.1 The options are:
- (i) To agree and adopt the Councillors' Ward Pages.
 - (ii) To agree and adopt the IT Option in conjunction with points 6.1 and 6.2 of the Report.
 - (iii) To do nothing.

8. REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATION(S)

- 8.1 The Local Government Information Unit has identified the need to introduce a system to ensure that Councillors are given advance notice and are consulted on issues that affect their wards. Implementing these recommendations will assist Members in fulfilling their ward representative role.

8.2 For reasons outlined in the report, the creation of individual Member Information pages would be too resource intensive. The IT option is the most cost effective method of providing this information to Members and is therefore the recommended solution.

8.3 It is not appropriate to take no action.

9. RISK

9.1 I have completed the Risk Management questionnaire and this report does not require a risk assessment because the issue covered by the recommendation is not significant in terms of risk.

10. RECOMMENDATION

10.1 To agree and adopt the IT Option in conjunction with points 6.1 and 6.2 of the Report.

Appendices:

Appendix 1 - Responses collected from Braintree, Swindon and Norwich – How they consult with their councillors.

Appendix 2 – Results of Members' questionnaire.

This report has taken account of the need for compliance with the Council's Equal Opportunities Policy and the requirements of Section 17 of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 and the Human Rights Act 1998. This report raises no matter to which attention specifically needs to be drawn under the legislation.