



Report of the Head of Scrutiny and Member Development

Standards Committee

Date: 16 October 2008

Subject: Learning and development for parish and town councillors

Electoral Wards Affected:

Ward Members consulted
(referred to in report)

Specific Implications For:

Equality and Diversity

Community Cohesion

Narrowing the Gap

Executive Summary

This report updates the Committee on progress with the project to review learning and development provision for parish and town councillors.

As the role of parish councillors is extremely varied, the report puts forward a number of learning options; some joint with city councillors, and others specifically tailored and delivered on an area basis.

This report seeks views on how best to prioritise and deliver the training, and also gives details of other learning resources available to parish councils.

1.0 Purpose Of This Report

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to update members of Standards Committee on progress made in identifying learning and development needs for parish and town councillors.

2.0 Background Information

- 2.1 The Standards Committee is responsible for ensuring high standards of conduct within parishes and that every Member is aware of their responsibilities under the Code of Conduct. As part of its role, the Committee makes arrangements for training for parish and town councillors in Leeds. It keeps the training received by these Members under review, and has supported the development of new methods to make the training more accessible, such as e-learning and pocket guides.
- 2.2 At its meeting of 14 April 2008, the Committee stated that the current training provision to parish and town councils needed to be reconsidered due to findings in the Ethical Audit Action Plan 2006. It was agreed that the Head of Scrutiny and Member Development would work with the Parish representatives on the Committee to establish what types of training are appropriate for Parishes.
- 2.3 A consultation exercise with the parish representatives (and other groups) has now been carried out and an analysis of training needs undertaken. This report proposes a number of learning and development options for parish and town councillors based on those findings.

3.0 Main Issues

- 3.1 The role of parish councillors is varied and the range of activities they are involved in at a local level is immense. Essentially these activities fall into three main categories: representing the electorate, delivering services to meet local needs and striving to improve the quality of life in the area.
- 3.2 In order to carry out their duties effectively, parish councillors require a range of skills and knowledge. These can be grouped into the following competence areas:
- Ethical conduct
 - Planning
 - Financial awareness
 - Meeting skills
 - Understanding of the local government context (Council structure, how to access services, how to use the complaints/compliments system, local government finance etc).
- 3.3 Training and development proposals for each of the competence areas are outlined below, and summarised in Appendix A – Summary of training options 2008-9.

Ethical conduct

All parish and town councillors are required to abide by the Code of Conduct, and therefore require an understanding of it and how it applies to them. This is especially important for new councillors joining a council. As new councillors can potentially be elected or co-opted at any time, it would not be sufficient to offer training on an annual basis only. Therefore the following provision is suggested:

1. Training sessions at a local level provided by Democratic Services staff. These may be best provided on an area basis (North, South, East and West) and offered to the parishes who requested it in the Annual Audit in the first instance, with remaining places offered to other parishes. These sessions could be scheduled from January 2009 onwards.
2. Regular sessions at the Civic Hall, Leeds for those who request it, subject to demand. Running these periodically over the course of a municipal year would provide options for new councillors to attend. Sessions could be offered during the daytime or early evening.

Where parishes are keen to organise Code of Conduct training outside of the times offered by Leeds City Council, the Yorkshire Association of Local Councils (YALC) is able to run Code of Conduct training sessions. These can be held at a venue to suit the parish during daytime or evening and up to 30 councillors can attend. The cost is £30 per councillor for an evening session.

Where possible, clerks should provide new councillors (and existing councillors requiring a refresher) with guidance and support through the numerous Code of Conduct training materials available. For example, 'The Code Uncovered' DVD mentioned above is available to purchase at £45 and would be a useful tool to lend to new councillors. The Member Development team are happy to advise on appropriate materials and provide contact details.

Planning

One of the roles of parish and town councillors is to influence and shape the long term development policy for the parish, and as part of the planning process, comment on planning applications in the parish. It is important, therefore, that councillors understand the basics of the planning system and how to comment effectively.

It is suggested that councillors attend a course provided by Trevor Roberts Associates (professional training consultants who currently train Leeds city councillors) to include the following topics:

- Introduction to Planning (key elements of the planning system; discretion for local authorities)
- Basics of Development Control
- How Parish/Town Councils fit into this process – how to influence effectively
- Understanding material considerations
- Key policies and plans (eg UDP, LDF, Green Belt)
- The positive role of Parish and Town Councils.

The course is a practical one that includes case studies and real-life examples. The cost is around £60 per person. Up to 25 places are available on each course, which could run during the day or evening and lasts 3 hours.

Additional planning training

A number of planning events are held for Members of Leeds City Council and these could also be offered to parish councillors. Previous topics have included: planning enforcement, design awareness, the Local Development Framework and the Unitary Development Plan. Invitations to such events could be extended to parish/town councillors via communication to the clerks. All such events are held in the city

centre and generally at lunchtime, although evening sessions are also provided where demand exists.

In addition to the above, Planning Officers are happy to attend the annual Parish and Town Council Forum to present briefing sessions on planning and demonstrations of the Public Access system.

Chairing and meeting management

As part of their package of training, the Yorkshire Association of Local Councils provide a Chairing Meetings course entitled 'In the Chair' for current and prospective chairs, and, given that it is tailored specifically to parish council needs, this may be the most appropriate provider to use. Costs are the same for all YALC courses; £30 per delegate. The Member Development team would be happy to assist with arrangements or procure an alternative training provider on behalf on the parishes.

Financial awareness

Specific training on parish precepts and budgets is available via YALC or the Certificate in Local Council Administration (the qualification for clerks, aspiring clerks and councillors).

The Member Development team run a regular event on Local Government Finance which is also open to parish councillors. The event aims to:

Local Government context

Feedback from consultation has suggested that parish councillors would find events on the local government context useful and informative. Training in this area could include the following topics: How the Council works – Structures and Decision-making Processes and Understanding Local Government Finance. If this area of learning is felt to be useful officers could investigate additional topics such as:

- How to access Council services
- Focus on specific services (eg Highways, Recreation, Libraries, Sports facilities, Environment)
- Understanding the complaints and compliments system
- Local Area Agreements.

It is proposed that any training includes practical events, such as Question and Answer sessions with officers and tours/visits.

3.4 Training delivery and resources

It is suggested that any training sessions offered are concise and practical, using interactive tools such as 'The Code Uncovered' DVD for standards training, and are evaluated for their effectiveness and return on investment.

A number of training resources are currently available for parish councillors. These are summarised in a Learning Directory which is attached at Appendix B. The resources include the following:

- Planning guides consisting of a quick reference card containing material and non-material considerations and a list of main use classes. A guide to the Public Access system is being produced and will be available following updates to the system this autumn.

- 'Take the chair' audio CD – Chairing skills for successful meetings.
- Chairing Skills workbook.
- Modern Councillor e-learning courses (which include Chairing Meetings, Public Speaking, Dealing with the Media and Equality and Diversity)
- Local Government Finance Glossary of Terms (diary size)
- Understanding Local Government Finance e-learning course produced by Leeds City Council (topics include: Overview of Finance, Understanding Budgeting, Scrutinising the Budget).

3.5 This directory is available to all parish clerks, who can request copies of the resources at any time from the Member Development Team.

3.6 Funding

The sum of £1500 has been identified from Democratic Services existing budget provision, which will be used to match-fund training for parish and town councillors on an area basis. Consideration needs to be given to how this funding should be directed (ie whether to be used to deliver a specific programme of training such as Planning, or used for a selection of events).

Officers suggest that the most effective use of the funding would be to procure a programme of Planning training, as outlined in 3.3. Delivering this on an area basis would allow a large number of councillors to attend high quality training at reduced cost.

4.0 **Implications for Council Policy and Governance**

4.1 Governance of the parishes by parish and town councillors will improve following the training on the areas specified in this report.

4.2 There are no implications for council policy.

5.0 **Legal and Resource Implications**

5.1 The sum of £1500 has been identified from existing Member Development budget provision for the year 2008-9. This can be used to match-fund training for parish and town councillors on an area basis.

Funding for future years will be subject to budget availability.

Depending on the availability of necessary resources, the Member Development team will co-ordinate and administrate the events. The delivery of all ethical conduct training is subject to the availability of resources in Democratic Services.

6.0 **Conclusions**

6.1 Parish councillors require a comprehensive package of training and development in order to operate effectively in the areas of ethical conduct, planning and finance, and to keep up to date with Council matters. Much of this learning and development can be carried out in conjunction with city councillors, but some specific training should also be provided.

6.2 A number of options have been identified, and these are summarised in Appendix A. The Council has identified a sum of £1500 which would be used to match-fund some of these development activities.

6.3 In addition to traditional, classroom-based training a number of resources and electronic or audio learning methods are available. These have been summarised into a Learning Directory and copies of all materials are available upon request from the Member Development Team.

7.0 Recommendations

7.1 Members of Standards Committee are asked to:

- comment on the training options outlined in this report, specifically the options described in section 3 and summarised in Appendix A
- provide guidance on how to prioritise training and where to direct the funding identified by Democratic Services.

Background documents

Report to Standards Committee 14th April 2006 “Ethical Audit Action Plan 2006 - Member Development update on actions”