

CABINET – 21 DECEMBER 2010

SUPPORT FOR POLITICAL GROUPS

Report by the County Solicitor & Monitoring Officer

Introduction

1. This report seeks the Cabinet's views on the future support arrangements for the council's political groups in the context of the financial challenges facing the Council. Options are outlined for the Cabinet's consideration and to allow a recommendation to be made to full Council in January 2011.

Background

2. The Local Government and Housing Act 1989 (Section 9) allows authorities to employ up to three political assistants in support of a council's political groups. For some years, the County Council has incorporated this provision into its Constitution. Each qualifying group has then determined whether or not to exercise the option.
3. Political assistants have provided a range of functions in support of their respective groups, including the arrangement of party group business and the development of political policy. In addition, political assistants have also tended to provide an advice and research service to their councillors with regard to constituency and other matters and have assisted in maintaining communication between officers (and the public) and councillors. A recent job description is included as an Annex to this report.
4. The special nature of the role and the existence of political restrictions mean that other officers of the Council are not permitted in law to provide political support to party groups. It is in this respect that the political assistants have a different employment relationship with political groups than other officers. Each of the Political Groups have used their Assistants in different ways and with different emphasis and prioritisation within their job description.
5. The fundamental service review in 2009 and further restructuring within the Democratic Services Team this year means that there is limited scope to provide additional administrative support.
6. The Council's Business Strategy now presents councillors with the need to make significant savings across the council while protecting essential and statutory services. In addition to the savings already implemented, all Directorates are required to identify further savings

and it has been proposed that the support provided directly to political groups should be reviewed in these terms.

7. A consultation has therefore taken place about the potential deletion of the support to political groups. This consultation involved the three political assistants currently employed by the Council (providing support to the Conservative, Labour and Liberal Democrat groups), their line manager, the three group leaders and Unison.

Proposals

8. Given the significant service reductions being made across the council, the Council needs to consider whether the continued provision of support to political groups is justified and sustainable. It is not a legal requirement simply a discretionary power which some – which a significant number of local authorities have chosen not to exercise. This report therefore proposes a range of options for Cabinet to consider.
9. Establishment reductions through deletion of the three current posts would lead to a saving of: *£139,000 per annum* (this figure includes pension, NI contribution and on-costs but excludes potential redundancy costs).
10. This proposal was the subject of the recent consultation and is in no way a comment upon the effectiveness of the political assistants, who are held in high regard by councillors, senior managers and colleagues across the council and are known to be dedicated and hard working. Rather the financial pressures facing the Council have necessitated a review of all aspects of the Council's resources.
11. The main outcomes of the consultation are summarised below.

Consultation Summary

12. The comments provided in response to the consultation can be summarised under five headings. Indicative examples of points made during the consultation are included under each.

Councillor efficiency: the efficiency of councillors may be undermined if they are required to handle administrative work in addition to constituency business

- “this will exacerbate the situation where it is becoming increasingly more difficult for councillors not retired or of independent financial means to become or remain councillors”
- “[Political assistant] has afforded me more time to meet with local residents, groups etc meaning I have a broader understanding of needs in my area”

Communication: the flow of communication between members and officers and with other councils may suffer

- “[Political assistants] help the council function better by...internal and external links and by maintaining the flow of information to and from councillors”
- “councillors will be bombarding strategic directors with requests on which officer to contact”

Research and support: the quality of community and council-related member activity will suffer if there is no support for research, advice and information and perhaps be disproportionately felt by opposition parties

- “particularly hits the opposition groups...who have no access to the advice of the policy unit...but are still expected to be able to function as an opposition...No help is being offered to the Shadow Cabinet”
- “[They] keep the group informed of national policies and this is a crucial part of the ability of the Council to be well informed when taking decisions”
- “The Cabinet has access not only to a Cabinet assistant but also to a policy unit and a communications team...What provision will be made for opposition groups in the absence of political assistants?”

Democratic deficit: the effect of losing support to political groups may lead to a democratic deficit generally

- “there is no recognition that the opposition... will need some officer support compared with what the ruling group already receives”
- “I am concerned about the lack of diversity amongst councillors, particularly young women...The large number of daytime meetings...makes it difficult to combine working and being a councillor; without the support that a political assistant provides it will be much harder”

Impact on current officers/organisation: there are fewer resources in democratic services to absorb any non-political aspects of the support to members and other officers may also need to respond to more requests

- “frequent queries arising from meetings, papers and where to find information within the council...The outward looking part of the job cannot be absorbed by councillors and will fall on other officers, probably the already depleted Democratic Services”
- “at a time of enormous change...there will need to be systems put in place to keep all councillors up to date on the almost daily changes which impact on councillors”
- “I anticipate a greater burden will fall on officers. I will complain bitterly if it proves that officers do not have time to answer my legitimate queries”

Fairness: have the political assistants been treated fairly in comparison to other employees

- “this cut did not come as part of the overall look at how Democratic Services operate...They have now been treated differently both positively and negatively”
- “[This review] is being undertaken separately from the previous review of legal and democratic services...and should be looked at in the context of the broader services...to members”

- “Notwithstanding contractual periods of notice, it would be quite wrong to have a situation where one group continued to have support while other groups did not. Equality of treatment must be maintained.”
13. Copies of the consultation responses are on deposit in the Members’ Resource Centre.

Equality Impact Assessment

14. An Equality Impact Assessment has been undertaken as a result of the consultation and no issues of concern have been found.

Options

15. In the light of the challenges facing the Council and the consultation responses, Cabinet is asked to consider the following options for potential recommendation to Full Council:
- (a) no changes are made and current arrangements continue
 - (b) the posts of political assistant be deleted as from 1 April 2011 and all the work currently performed by the assistants be absorbed by members of the respective groups
 - (c) the posts be deleted as above with the political aspects absorbed by members of the respective groups, and with other officers absorbing non-political tasks
 - (d) the posts be deleted as above, with the political aspects absorbed by members of the respective groups, and with an additional post being created to undertake administrative non-political support to all members

RECOMMENDATION

16. **Cabinet is RECOMMENDED to consider the options in this report and to make a recommendation to full Council as regards the future support to political groups.**

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Background papers:
- Consultation Paper
- Consultation Responses
- Equality Impact Assessment