

Report of the Councillor Profile Working Group to Audit & Governance Committee – 13 January 2016

Summary

1. On 9th December 2014, the Council considered and endorsed the report of the Independent Remuneration Panel. The report acknowledged that allowances “*could not be the only means of overcoming obstacles to wider democratic representation*”.
2. At the request of Council, the Audit & Governance Committee was invited to form a Group, later named the Councillor Profile Working Group, to make recommendations on this point. The main purpose of the Group was therefore to identify actions that *this Council* could take, ahead of the May 2017 elections, which could feasibly encourage a wider demographic representation of elected members.
3. The Group first met on 9th July, to establish their terms of reference, and begin to consider the potential obstacles to wider democratic representation within Oxfordshire. Subsequent meetings were held on 28th September, 19th October and 18th November. The Group went on to consider the areas set out below which were perceived as potential obstacles.

Issues Considered

4. Representation from Younger People: The Group noted that the surrounding district councils, particularly Oxford City Council, attracted members of a younger age than the county council. The Group considered whether or not this was due to district councils generally being more accessible in terms of transport, coupled with the timings of meetings.
5. Age of Members: The Group noted that in the run up to recent elections, expressions of interest received locally for district councillor positions covered an age range of 23-69. It was observed that the National Census confirmed that just 18.3% of councillors were under the age of 50, whereas 60.8% were over 60.
6. Timing of Meetings: The Group considered that time pressures and the timings of meetings were key to time management issues for all members. Although candidates were aware of these issues upon selection, they became more pronounced once members had been successfully elected. The Group also noted:
 - the commitment to attend meetings regularly is difficult for some members to sustain once elected;
 - S.85(1) of the Local Government Act 1972, requires members to attend one formal meeting every 6 months as a minimum requirement.

Members should be encouraged to do more than attend only Full Council. Fewer than 50% of members are members of committees;

- The Group felt it preferable that meetings should start at 2.00pm, and should not finish later than 6.00pm, thereby allowing a 4-hour timeframe to deal with business. This would avoid all-day meetings, as well as clashes with parish and district meetings, many of which start at 7.00pm;
 - In light of the above, evening meetings were unreasonable for county council members, and were unlikely to be cost-effective for the council to run;
 - Meetings on a Monday morning were difficult for members who worked or had caring responsibilities, as this was a key time in organising their own schedule for the week. Difficulties were especially great for those who had to travel relatively long distances into County Hall.
7. Salary Sacrifice: The Group noted that those who were in employment, self-employed or running small businesses and not in receipt of a pension, sacrificed holiday/salary/income in order to attend meetings, yet all members receive the same basic allowance.
8. 2003 Members' Allowances Regulations: These consolidated the move away from the previous "attendance allowance" structure, ensuring that only a Basic Allowance of the same value for all members, and Special Responsibility Allowances reflecting instances where the burden is greater than the norm, are permissible. The Group noted that this resulted in councillors being members of many committees, or attending many other meetings, receiving the same Allowance as those attending just the legal minimum of meetings. There appeared to be no solution to this but a question was raised about registering councillors' attendance at meetings on the website, as is done by many Districts.
9. Employers: The Group were of the view that in the past, large employers had allowed staff time away from work in order to attend meetings. This practice seemed to have decreased, possibly with the increase of more flexible working practices for staff. The Group noted that S.50 of the Employment Rights Act 1996, provides a right to time off during normal working hours to carry out certain public duties, although there is no right to time off for all public duties. This must be 'reasonable', balancing the requirements of the employer, employee and the public. There is no right to paid time off, which is subject to individual contract of employment provisions.
10. Time pressures in relation to associated meetings: It was noted that complications and pressures are experienced by members who are dual hatters. Similar pressures are experienced by those members of council that have a large number of parish councils within their division. Members feel additional pressures when meeting dates are changed and additional meetings scheduled in at short notice, forcing substitutions to be made. The Group noted that members are often asked to read papers in excess of 300 pages for some meetings, which is a huge time commitment.

11. Childcare: The Group observed that this can be a difficult area, as the majority of school breakfast clubs do not start until 8.00am. Political Group Meetings prior to full Council meetings start at 9.00am; once travel time is factored in, this could be a deterrent to working parents becoming members.
12. The Role of Councillor: The Group felt that the role of an elected member is stereo-typed and receives little respect from the public. As such, the role should be explained by the Council so as to illustrate the full range of the councillor role and promoting the role to those who may be interested in standing for election.
13. Councillor Development: Although crucial, the Group noted that the ability to attend all the development sessions offered for members was often extremely difficult for some members, particularly those that were employed or running businesses. Attending daytime events involves travel time as well as, in some cases, additional time off work. Actions that increase accessibility, perhaps through more creative use of technology, should be considered.

CONSIDERATION

14. The Group invited a small cross-section of Council, reflective of the underrepresented younger members who work or who have caring responsibilities, to meet with them in order to expand their understanding of the issues which were already perceived to discourage recruitment from a younger age group.
15. This was followed by an email being sent to all members of council asking for their views on this subject. A summary of the feedback received is attached to this report, marked as Annex 1.
16. The Group's findings and the feedback received from fellow members of Council, have led the Councillor Profile Working Group to confirm that the main obstacles preventing people coming forward to stand as members are:
 - (a) the conflicting demands on time caused by the pressures of the role, family life and work patterns;
 - (b) difficulties in physically accessing meetings within Oxford City centre;
 - (c) difficulties in obtaining the support needed from employers to enable elected members to carry out the role of councillor effectively;
 - (d) difficulties in ensuring that members are supported in their role as carers, thus freeing up time to attend meetings;
 - (e) the stereotypical conception of councillors is not encouraging younger candidates to come forward.
17. In light of the above and in order to try to address, and improve, some of these issues in the lead-up to the May 2017 elections, the Councillor Profile Working Group, therefore RECOMMENDS as follows:
 - (a) That the "Becoming a County Councillor" webpages and –importantly including the video - on those pages be updated;

- (b) At that stage of the web-redevelopment:
 - (1) parish and town councils are liaised with, updating and promoting the connection between county councillors and their involvement with these bodies;
 - (2) a link to the LGA website be included, in order to provide further reading for potential councillors;
 - (3) a checklist of current issues that may be of interest to prospective members be included;
 - (4) non-political comments be included on the webpage about the role of councillors to inform and encourage potential members;
 - (5) the carers' allowance available to members be more widely promoted;
 - (6) an emphasis be placed on members' influence over how the Council allocates its budget and makes spending decisions
- (c) That consideration be given to the Council hosting an "Open Event" ahead to the May 2017 elections, for prospective members to learn more about the role of a county councillor and to have the opportunity to question existing members about the role;
- (d) Locality meetings be given a greater prominence so as to provide potential councillors with a better idea as to the role of members;
- (e) Members' briefings to be filmed and secure links posted on the members' intranet, for the benefit of members unable to attend a briefing in person or who wish to access the learning at a time of their own choosing. Ideally the events should be recorded live, unedited and include:
 - (1) audience reaction, so that members who are not present get a feel for how the presentation was received by others at the time;
 - (2) clear and audible recording of the presenters;
 - (3) a recording of any Q&A session following a presentation, so as to inform those watching the recording.
- (f) The use of Skype be promoted for informal meetings and discussion between members and officers;
- (g) Avoid scheduling formal meetings or member events on Monday mornings wherever possible;
- (h) That Council is recommended to start Full Council sessions at 10.00am (not 10.00 a.m.). This will assist working parents/carers by giving a greater cushion of time;
- (i) That the frequency all members attend formal council meetings be published on the Council's website, alongside the details of the individual member, in order to promote transparency.

Cllr Nick Hards (Chairman)
 Cllr Yvonne Constance
 Cllr David Bartholomew
 December 2015