Ashford Borough Council

Report of the Chairman of the Member Training Panel – 6th December 2016

1   Introduction

1.1   A Meeting of the Member Training Panel was held on the 6th December 2016

The Members present were:-

Councillor Wedgbury (Chairman);
Councillor Mrs Dyer (Vice-Chairman);
Councillors A Howard, Macpherson, Smith.

Apologies:-

Councillors Krause, Link.

Also Present:-

Danny Sheppard - Senior Member Services Officer.

2   Chairman's Report – 23rd March 2015 and Matters Arising

2.1   Members praised the final pack of Framework Documents that had been produced for new Members, which included the 'What to Expect as an Ashford Borough Councillor' document produced with input from this Panel. It was accepted that a lot of information was thrown at new Members, and this could initially seem overwhelming. There was an understanding that Members would find their own way and 'learn by doing' to a great extent, but it was also important to provide them with as much base 'ammunition' to get started as possible.

2.2   The idea of producing some sort of achievement portfolio to act as a record of training for each Member was raised. The Senior Member Services Officer said that this had not been taken forward thus far, but he did keep a record of all training undertaken and this was something that could potentially be pursued in the future.

2.3   **Resolved:**

        That the report be received and noted.

3   Member Training Update

3.1   The Senior Member Services Officer introduced the report which gave an update on Member Training undertaken in this Council term since the May 2015 Elections, and began to look ahead to the future. Since the appointment of the Panel's new Chairman Councillor Wedgbury in May, he had held numerous informal meetings with Officers and they had discussed or

commenced a number of training initiatives. Panel discussion on the key topics is grouped together below: -

Survey/Training Needs

3.2 Officers had long wanted to undertake some meaningful training needs analysis and have a more pro-active process in engaging Members on the issue of training. This issue had also been raised in a recent internal audit. The Panel agreed that Members should be contacted at least once a year and rather than a simple 'tick-box' survey, this should take more of a discussion format, either by telephone, e-mail or face to face.

Modern.gov

3.3 The Senior Member Services Officer advised that the Council was looking to introduce an externally hosted on-line Committee Management System – Modern.gov. Whilst formal approval had not yet been agreed, Officers and Senior Members (including the Chairman) had been given a demonstration of the system and fully supported its introduction. There were numerous benefits to the system which were outlined within the report, but one of the key factors for this Panel would be that it would allow for the creation of a bespoke training library for Members. Some sort of on-line portal of this type had been a long-standing desire and it was hoped that this area of Modern.gov would be able to house paperwork from all training provided by the Council or attended by Members, useful documents, fact sheets and links to e-learning opportunities. Whilst these were all clear benefits, it was also recognised that the introduction of Modern.gov would create a training need in itself as Members would need to be trained in its use.

Suggested Future Sessions

3.4 After discussion the Panel proposed the following topics as an initial programme of training to be pursued in 2017/18: -

- Planning and Licensing Committee Refreshers (Particularly for newly elected or appointed Councillors).
- Basic Planning Training from the Point of View of a Ward Member.
- Councillors Role as a Trustee or on Outside Bodies.
- Media Training.
- Data Protection.
- Equalities and Diversity.
- Safeguarding.
- Social Media.
- TBC – Issues associated with the potential introduction of Modern.gov

It should be noted that this list is by no means exhaustive and can be amended as the year goes on.

3.5 The proposed session on Planning for Ward Members was particularly welcomed. The Panel considered some basic awareness of legalities, dealing with constituents and others when a planning issue arises in a Member's Ward and what should/should not be said/done in the circumstances would be beneficial for all Members, not just those who sat on the Planning Committee.

3.6   Bespoke training for Cabinet Members and Media Training for Senior Members had both been suggested in the report. The Panel considered these may be a little Political and elitist and asked for bespoke training for Cabinet Members to be removed from the programme and for media training to be made available to all Councillors. The Senior Member Services Officer advised that media training may have to be held more than once to be targeted at the right groups, but he would propose that the topic be offered to all Members.

3.7   Some specialist training in Social Media was added to the list by the Panel. This was considered to be an increasingly relevant topic for elected Members and some guidance on the pros and cons and 'dos and don'ts' would be useful.

3.8   On the topic of Safeguarding, a Member wondered if all Councillors should be DBS (previously CRB) checked. Although this may not be a day to day aspect of life for a Borough/District Councillor, there may be instances where Members were invited in to family homes or found themselves in awkward situations, or may witness something that required further investigation. A DBS check would safeguard that individual and the Council. It was agreed that this was something that could be covered as part of any training on the subject.

General Comments

3.9   A Councillor who had recently been elected in a by-election said that he did find the amount of information he was given initially to be a little overwhelming. Given his experience, he thought more consideration should be given to breaking down the salient information in to a more easy to digest format as building blocks to get new Councillors started. Perhaps in the style of 'the top five things you may come across in your early days'. The Panel considered that the Modern.gov library could assist with that.

3.10   Members commented on the Prevent (Counter Terrorism) training that had taken place earlier that day. Whilst the topic itself was extremely important and the training had been delivered particularly well, there was some concern that the course had been a little political and some of the information given about where to look for potential terrorists appeared to be misleading/inaccurate. Perhaps the course needed to be geared slightly differently.

3.11   It was recognised that e-learning was not a universally popular option, but it did have its place and was another tool that the Council had at its disposal. It was considered that e-learning would be more useful for some of the more standard or legislative topics and could tie in well with any training library.

3.12   The benefits of training delivered by webinars were also emphasised and a Member volunteered to participate in one and give her feedback.

3.13   **Resolved:**

        That

        (i)   the contents of the report and the ongoing work on Member training and development be noted.

(ii)   Members should be contacted at least once a year to assess training needs and review training in general. Rather than a simple 'tick-box' survey, this should take more of a discussion format.

(iii)   the list of potential training sessions listed in this report form the basis of the Member Training Programme for 2017/18.

Councillor J N Wedgbury
Chairman – Member Training Panel

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