

## ITEM 4

### DEMOCRATIC STRUCTURES WORKING GROUP

20 OCTOBER 1999

#### MEMBERS SEMINAR ON NEW POLITICAL MANAGEMENT STRUCTURES - FRIDAY 10 SEPTEMBER 1999

In an attempt to highlight the forthcoming political management arrangements, a seminar was convened to allow all Members to discuss their thoughts and concerns about the future organisation of the Council. Members discussed a range of issues and were asked to structure their discussions within workshop groups around a number of questions, namely :

- (a) What do you see as the main role(s) of a Councillor?
- (b) What frustrates or prevents you from fulfilling those roles now?
- (c) What can be done about it?
- (d) What principles should guide the Council's representational/scrutiny/executive roles?
- (e) How would you apply them?

In looking at the first question, 'What do you see as the main role(s) of a Councillor?', Members expressed that they were advocate, communicator, arbiter, pacifier and visionary. Upmost though was the view that the role was to represent the public and some questioned the extent to which they were doing this if they spent too much time in Committee meetings. It was also important to listen and be aware of local issues in order that these can be fed into the policy-making process. There was also a role for Members facilitating the involvement of voluntary groups and individuals in this process. Indeed, in this way, Members were empowering the public in what was referred to as the 'community role'. Further, the view was expressed that it was for Members to find (and action) ways of encouraging public participation.

Other roles were to stimulate political debate, provide strategic management and direction, implement political agendas, challenge officers, prioritise resources and represent the Council outside the organisation. Hence, Members clearly felt that although the key role is to represent the public, the more political/management role is also important.

In looking at the second question, 'What frustrate or prevents you from fulfilling those roles now?', Members provided a number of issues. Time was a key factor for most as many Members hold down full-time jobs. Also, a mismatch of the expectations of service delivery by the public and the resources available to deliver them led to frustration by the public and Members. Technological limitations on the way Members carry out their work - IT provision is varied and effectively unsupported by the Council. Also, officers provided a major source of frustration through inaction, prevarication, inflexibility and unavailability. Central Government control and constraints also provided an obstacle to being effective - clearly local authorities don't have sufficient political and financial freedom. In fact, the decision-making process itself is bureaucratic and cumbersome. Obligations to the political party both nationally and locally also provided a frustration. Finally, the Council suffers from negative perceptions both by the public and by Government through its opinion of local government as a whole.

The third question, 'What can be done about it?' raised a number of potential solutions. The most frequently stated was that Members should be provided with better, more wide-ranging services. There should be designated officers tasked with helping Members with their constituency work. This could include putting constituents in touch with the correct people/departments at the Council, general administration, research and attending surgeries. Clearly, this is linked with the concept of freeing-up Members time to make policy and have careers. Training for new and more experienced Members was also an issue. A further solution referred to was the construction of a political management structure that allowed Members both to specialise in particular areas of service provision and involve themselves in general strategic issues. There should also be more opportunity to reflect on policy development through more highly focused working parties and commissions with less formal meetings on special subjects involving users. Formal meetings don't seem to be the best way to conduct the majority of business. Further, the system should be less adversarial to produce more mutual respect between politicians. The issue of decentralising some of the powers of the authority to Parish/Town and Neighbourhood Councils was also explored.

In looking at the fourth and fifth questions, 'What principles should guide the Council's representational/scrutiny/executive roles?', and 'How would you apply them?', many of the issues overlapped. The main characteristics included openness, boldness, genuine accountability, integrity, inclusivity, effectiveness and responsiveness. The Executive and Representational roles should both be characterised by a desire to provide leadership and some concern was expressed about the mechanisms available for multi-party decision-making. The issue of training for Members was also raised again.

In terms of the representational role, many of the issues explored during the discussion on the first question re-emerged, such as Member support, how Members feed parochial issues into the policy-making process and how Members can reflect local opinion in a more general sense.

In terms of the Scrutiny role, there was some concern expressed about the nature and extent of the scrutiny process and how those Members outside the Executive can be properly

empowered. Some expressed the view that as the authority had established a Scrutiny Committee over 3 years ago, it had helped them to grasp the issue perhaps more quickly than Members from other authorities might have done. Perhaps for this reason, Members concept of how the scrutiny process might work was very much based on the current Scrutiny Commission model - a selective scrutiny of key issues driven by Members. Members were clear that the Scrutiny bodies, whatever form they took, would need to be properly empowered and that those outside the Executive should not be marginalised. The idea of having a senior officer tasked with the operational side of the scrutiny process with power to call other officers to account via the Scrutiny bodies, was also raised.

The role of the Executive prompted some concern mainly about processes. Firstly, the power of the Executive needs to be tightly defined. Some Members were of the opinion that the decisions of the authority should ultimately rest with Council. Others were concerned that the Executive could become remote from the public. Further, the powers and role of the Mayor or Leader in the process seems unclear in the draft Bill. There was some confusion about how the Cabinet Members would be chosen - by the Council or appointed by the Leader or Mayor. There was also some discussion about how Cabinet meetings would operate - in public or private; how decisions were to be published and how detailed they would be.

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