LONDON BOROUGH OF BRENT

Meeting of the Standards Committee
11 January 2005

Report from Borough Solicitor

For action	Wards affected: All

Report Title: MEMBER DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME

1.0   SUMMARY

1.1   This report provides members with feedback on the Member's Development Programme. The contents of the report were circulated to all Members of the Council in October 2004.

2.0   RECOMMENDATIONS

2.1   That Members note the report.

3.0   DETAIL

3.1   The Member Development Programme was reviewed from its launch in June 2003 to the end of its first financial year in April 2004. This report summarises feedback from personal development interviews held in March and April 2004 as well as covering more generally what has been done, evaluation of events, key achievements and suggestions for future improvements.

3.2   The member development programme was officially launched in June 2003. It provided for the first time a structured programme of events tailored specifically to the needs of members in Brent. The programme in 2003/4 year was based on interviews held with 45 members and focused around three themes: role development, personal skills and technical skills.

3.3   A variety of events were held including seminars, conferences, briefings, classroom sessions and visits. Sessions were run by internal staff, external training providers and councillors from other local authorities from the three main political parties. Councillors also attended external courses such as the Leadership academy and IT training. Feedback forms were filled in at the end of each event to establish the quality of individual events.

3.4   Nineteen events were held over the course of the year which provided 205 places for members. Attendance at events was variable ranging from 5 councillors to 25 councillors. The average attendance at events was 12 councillors. Only 11 Members attended no member development sessions – 9 Liberal Democrat, 1 Labour and 1 Conservative. 18 councillors attended five or more events and a massive 40 councillors attended 3 or more events. The average attendance by a councillor was 3.25 events over the year.

3.5   The cost of the programme over the first year was £29,500. Prices for courses ranged from those such as the Leadership Academy which is a residential course run over six days at the cost of £1,250 per member, to courses run in-house by external training providers which could cost from £600 - £1,500 per session. There were also numerous events run by the departments of the council which had no additional cost to the council. Most of the costs associated with putting on in-house events were fixed and therefore the more councillors that attended the better value for money.

3.6   All members were invited to take part in member development interviews in March and April 2004. Twenty-one councillors took part in this process. As part of these interviews members were asked about how events had improved their performance, and what their training needs were for the coming year. The subject of role descriptions and member's annual reports were also discussed.

3.7   As part of the interviews councillors were asked about events they had taken part in over the previous year. This was in addition to feedback forms filled in immediately after each event took place.

3.8   Councillors were mostly positive about events held over the year. There was quite a lot of variation in the quality of training providers for individual events, but it was felt that the general spread of topics and the type of events held were appropriate.

3.9   Particularly good feedback was received on sessions which tended to be more 'interactive' with a mix of presentations and some debate around the subject. Good examples of this were a Standards event organised in-house by the Legal Department using video extracts from a Standards Board video and a session on Questioning skills for scrutiny panels facilitated by a councillor from Liverpool City Council using reports from Liverpool as 'live' examples. One of the best personal skills sessions was Presentation skills which was carried out by a specialist training provider using a variety of training methods including filming of presentations.

3.10   Feedback from the European Computer Driving Licence course was mixed. Although most of the 18 members who started the course gained some skills, many members felt that the course was too fast paced and too advanced for their needs - many members dropped out before completing the whole course.

3.11   Events that were not so good included the Finance seminar at which it was felt that one of the speakers was particularly poor and that there was too much information crammed into too short a space of time. Chairing skills was too basic and not practical enough for members. The session for non-executive members (Labour Group) and the role of opposition members

(Conservative Group) proved not to be sophisticated enough for the needs of the members in these Groups.

3.12 Interviews were structured around five questions. The questions and main points raised by members were:

a) How can the member development Programme help you develop your role?

- Overview and Scrutiny - breaking down the processes of overview and scrutiny; clarity between health overview and overview; more understanding of how the scrutiny process should work in relation to the executive; the 'challenge' and 'critical friend' role of scrutiny.
- Non-executive members - how non-executive members can be more involved in decision-making; the role of the councillor in the community.
- Executive members – more on communications skills; best practice from other local authorities and how it can be implemented in Brent.

b) What skills do you need to help carry out your different roles as a councillor?

- Presentation skills – public speaking and making presentations.
- Questioning – how to question officers, members and residents to effectively gain information from them.
- Reporting back at meetings – accurately reporting summaries of outcomes of conversations and meetings.
- IT training – further basic IT training; using the internet as a research tool.
- Time management – how to effectively manage time and deal with conflicting priorities.
- Resolving conflict – recognising, analysing and attempting to resolve conflict and mediating between groups to improve outcomes.

c) What knowledge do you need to help carry out your role as a councillor?

- Finance - how revenue is generated and how the budget is put together; how things are prioritised; how revenue and capital budgets are made.
- Social services - corporate parenting; latest developments on the Children's Bill.
- Housing - housing benefits; housing allocations; the rights of a person to be accommodated; benefits for asylum seekers and refugees.
- Environmental services - waste and recycling; 'green' issues.
- E government - the implications for the council and councillors.
- Partnerships – information about partnerships Brent has, for example with the primary heath trust, voluntary organisations and neighbouring boroughs.
- Training for licensing, planning and staff appeals committees.
- Modernisation agenda – what is going through Parliament at the moment; emerging central government guidance; how it may affect the council.

d) How do you want your training and development delivered?

- A similar mix of events as last year.
- More visits to other local authorities etc.
- Could be some experimentation with small discussion groups of members with officers present to talk around different themes – groups of 'positive interest'.

e) Who do you want the events to be delivered by?

- A similar mix as last year of officers, councillors from other local authorities and 'experts'.

3.13 Some key achievements of the programme as a whole over the period June 2003 to April 2004 have been:

- Brent is well on the way to achieving the target of members attending an average of 5 member development sessions per year (as set out in the National Charter on Member Development).

- Brent compares favourably to other local authorities having been recognised as one of five local authorities to be short listed for the Municipal Journal Member Development Achievement of the year.

- Three councillors graduated from the highly acclaimed Leadership academy, a six day residential course run by the Improvement and Development Agency.

- Three members have successfully gained the European Computer Driving Licence an internationally accepted proof of competence with computers. A further three councillors completed three modules of the programme, three councillors completed two modules of the programme and six have so far completed one module.

- Brent was awarded corporate Investors in People (IiP) accreditation. The assessor's report commented very favourably on the Member Development Programme which was a key element in securing IiP accreditation at a corporate level.

3.14 Time. Some of the sessions could have gone into more depth but most sessions are limited to a few hours in the evening. There is pressure from other meetings in the calendar as to when events can be held. There is also an issue in terms of the amount of time members can and should devote to member development. This year a number of the sessions will be 'protected' in the meetings calendar especially for member development.

3.15 Training providers. While some of the personal skills sessions are relatively easy to find expert providers for such as presentation skills or time management (even though these training providers only have a basic understanding of the role of a councillor), other more specialised sessions are more difficult. It is especially difficult to find people with the skills and knowledge to carry out sessions particularly around the role of councillors.

Most of the sessions of this type have been a bit 'hit and miss' in terms of finding a suitable 'trainer'.

3.16 In the first year of operation the member development programme has provided opportunities that would not have otherwise existed for 52 members of Brent Council. Attendance at events is relatively good for a new programme such as this, especially with the amount of pressure already on Members' time. The second phase of the programme has now started and issues that will be looked at over the next year are:

- how can we better evaluate the success of the programme?
- how can attendance be improved?
- how can we get better value for money?
- how can we give the member development programme more of a community focus?

4.0 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

4.1 There are no direct financial implications arising from this report.

5.0   STAFFING IMPLICATIONS

5.1 There are no direct staffing implications arising from this report.

6.0   LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

6.1 There are no direct legal implications arising from this report.

7.0   DIVERSITY IMPLICATIONS

7.1 Officers believe that there are no specific diversity implications in this report.

8.0   BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Any persons wishing to inspect the papers in connection with the above proposals shall contact Jane Alver at jane.alver@brent.gov.uk, Town Hall Annexe, Forty Lane, Wembley Middlesex HA9 9HD – Telephone number 0208 937 1368