

Key Headline messages
Forest of Dean Member Survey
April 2007

OVERVIEW

Members were surveyed about 5 key themes. Findings are grouped under these themes and include analysis of the survey data, collation of comments under themes and some suggestions for addressing the issues raised.

The response rate of 59% was encouraging and responses by political group include;

- Conservative = 8
- Independent = 8
- Labour = 10
- Liberal Democrats = 1

Appendix 1 of this paper lists the comments received for information
And context

BEING A MEMBER

Key Survey Messages:

Members viewed being a member of a committee as important but saw their ward role of equal importance.

Members are clear about their role as decision makers and perceive the ward role as more important than making committee decisions

Member / Officer relationships are perceived to be good overall, however some comments received suggested that not all relationships were positive

Members are less clear of the lines of accountability between officers and members and rated the communication between officers and members as below average.

The effectiveness of council meetings is also perceived to be below average.

Members' Comments:

Members also provided comments on what they perceived to be happening now or required improvement. Four key themes emerged from the comments received these are;

1. Need for strong chairmanship
2. Need for clear understanding of member and officer roles and responsibilities
3. Improvement in conduct
4. Need for better communication

Suggestions for addressing issues raised:

Ensure the member development programme for 07/08 includes;

- Member / officer roles and responsibilities in future training
- Chairing skills and understanding of meeting rules and protocols
- Code of conduct training / raising awareness of behaviour

Post election assemble group of experienced and new members to examine and make suggestions on;

- Making council meetings more effective
- Training needs relevant to meetings
- Reviewing and improving current methods of communication with members

MEMBER DEVELOPMENT

Key Survey Messages:

Members consider member development to be important in developing their role and thought that a tailored approach to member development in the new council would be useful.

Members consider themselves to be clear about what their role entails and that their skills and knowledge are good to deliver their roles effectively.

Members also rated the support they had received from Democratic Services between good and excellent

Members' Comments:

Members' also added comments on their perceptions of Member Development and 3 key themes emerged;

1. Training is valued and needed by members
2. Recognise members' existing strengths and skills
3. Acknowledge that not everyone sees development as a positive thing

Potential issues to pick up:

Ensure that skills and knowledge that members already bring to the role are noted in the 1:1 sessions with Democratic Services.

Identify with the future Member Development group what skills and knowledge is essential for;

- a new member 3 / 6 and 12 months into the election term
- an existing member in the first 12 months

Consider how to 'sell' future member development via member champions and marketing material i.e. it is basic training or is it sharpening skills?

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY

Key Survey Messages:

Overall members perceived scrutiny to be operating below average. This included the effectiveness of Overview and Scrutiny decision making, its ability to develop policy, its links to the Executive and recommending improvements.

Members also felt that scrutiny was not dealing with the right issues.

Members' Comments:

Members' also added comments on their perceptions of Overview and Scrutiny and 4 key themes emerged;

1. Politics is getting in the way of scrutiny's effectiveness
2. Member understanding of scrutiny and its role is mixed
3. Not properly aligned to the Executive
4. Some suggestions for improvement offered

Potential issues to pick up:

Improve the understanding the role of Scrutiny, how it operates, links to Executive / Cabinet and building scrutiny skills through the member development programme post election

Consider mentoring for the new scrutiny function when it is appointed post elections as well as delivering training on skills

PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT**Key Survey Messages:**

Members considered themselves to have a good understanding of the Council's corporate priorities and thought that the performance against these priorities is clear.

Members perceived however that the resources invested into priorities are below average.

Members also thought that the level of member awareness of the Council's improvement planning process and its performance management arrangements was below average. This indicates that things need to be much better and understanding sharper.

Members' Comments:

Members' also added comments on their perceptions of Performance Management and 2 key themes emerged;

1. More effort is required to embed a performance management culture
2. Improved performance reports and awareness of the tools is required

Potential issues to pick up:

Ensure that performance management and the available tools is a theme in the member development programme post election

Work with members to identify the best way to communicate performance issues and the improvement journey achievements

LEADERSHIP AND VISION

Key Survey Messages:

Members were not confident that the Council was clear about its direction and what it wanted to achieve in the long term. They rated the political leadership of the council above poor but below average and the officer leadership as slightly exceeding below average.

Members also felt that partnership working fell short of good and needed improvement.

Members' Comments:

Members' also added comments on their perceptions of Leadership and Vision and 3 key themes emerged;

1. Being a hung council is a barrier to strong political leadership
2. Officer leadership and relations with members needs improvement
3. Better clarity needed of member and officer leadership roles

Potential issues to pick up through future Member Development Group:

Ensure that the member development programme provides training and awareness on;

- Community leadership
- Council leadership
- Clarity around leadership for members and officers

Work on embedding the member / officer protocols quickly post election

Work with new administration to ensure decision making and leadership are strong values well executed

Appendix 1

Comments received under each section

Being a Member

Comments received are shown below under relevant emerging themes:

1. Need for strong chairmanship

Chairmanship skill training is needed as many don't know anything about meeting protocols.

Membership of committees is subjective and depends on individual circumstances. Good chairing skills are however essential

Chairs need to be stronger and some officer papers clearer about what decision is required.

Chairs of committees should know the rules of debate and the standing orders - if not training is needed.

Chairs must not dominate the agenda.

Political groups should or could appoint proposer and seconder for motion to speak on behalf of the group as it may prevent the repetition that now occurs.

There should be no secrecy or behind closed door meetings - more openness needed.

2. Need for clear understanding of member and officer roles and responsibilities

Members and officers seem to concentrate on meetings and decisions instead of members creating policy and officers working to it.

Good professional back up and decisions based on informed discussion seems to be lacking in the democratic process at present. Process and contents need to be simplified and staff / member roles complement each other.

Members need to be made aware of the different roles they will need to fulfill and that they are equally important. Members also need to be aware that one of their roles is to challenge officer decisions and recommendations and to encourage officers to look for alternatives where what has been suggested is expensive or unlikely to be acceptable for the community.

Members should give clear leadership, advised by officers. More clean lines of responsibility is needed for Members.

Members should lead not officers!!

Concerned that some councillors find it difficult to balance their parochial issues with the greater good / best interests of the council

The ward role is only very important when an item under debate affects that ward or a few wards e.g. sheep nuisance otherwise district implications take precedent over ward interests.

3. Improvement in conduct

Too much grandstanding and going off the point at some council meetings.

There is far too much whipping on some topics - more members being informed and adding to the debate would help.

Leave party politics and policies outside the chamber and concentrate on who elected you. Stop the weekly photographs and letters to the press - remember they don't represent many!!!

4. Need for better communication

Member communication on ward issues still not good enough

Communication is can help only if its taken up!!!

Communication depends on people being receptive - often difficult to get the balance right.

Member Development

Comments received are shown below under relevant emerging themes:

1. Training is needed

*Sometimes unclear about how much to do and whether should be stronger
Planning training is needed at the start of the council as the lack of it shows.*

Until I attended IDEA BTEC course at Bristol City Council, my understanding of my role in a modern context was very fuzzy. This was a very good course and something similar would be useful for all Councillors, new and old.

Members need to understand that their role is changing and they will have to change too

Democratic services have offered excellent support but members have to take it up!!

2. Recognise Members' existing strengths

Common sense and learning by experience is all you need to be a good councillor!

Council is failing to recognise the considerable professional and life experience that members have. Any future development needs to recognise this and where areas of strength and weakness lie in development needs of members

3. Acknowledge that not everyone sees development as a positive thing
There is suspicion amongst members that officers regard them as a nuisance

There is a danger that training is tailored to get members to agree with officers and make their decisions for them.

Overview and Scrutiny

Comments received are shown below under relevant emerging themes:

1. Politics are getting in the way of scrutiny's effectiveness

Political agendas in a hung council always reduce these interfaces.

Sometimes a party political agenda can take precedence at these meetings

Politics at this level shouldn't be entered into

2. Member understanding of scrutiny and its role is mixed

Not all members have accepted or totally understand the value and power of scrutiny. More effective training and induction is needed post elections on this to improve it.

Scrutiny is either not understood or not seen as a useful tool by members. They have failed to look at how best to use it for improving the council and mount a strong challenge to the Executive and professional staff.

3. Not properly aligned to the Executive

Executive has not used scrutiny effectively to do some of its work for it - executive has therefore acted like scrutiny at times

Scrutiny is getting better but doesn't fit with the Executive - the Executive does not work well itself

Scrutiny has become invisible in the council and contributes little as a result. It might as well not exist. It does not link its activity to corporate strategic objectives and instead focuses down on narrow topics than taking a wider view. Chairs of scrutiny need to be good to make it work.

4. Suggestions for improving Scrutiny

Scrutiny should be an effective sounding board for the Executive or cabinet.

Scrutiny is a very important aspect of Councillors work but it is not a substitute for the old committee system. All councillors should have training in effective scrutiny, especially if we move to a more group lead style of governance

Scrutiny chairmen should expect to attend Executive meetings to keep an eye on what is going on and so their knowledge can be called upon if required.

Scrutiny should be looking at every decision of the Executive and maybe calling in more decisions.

Sometimes the suggestions from scrutiny are not deliverable with the funds that are available. A more realistic approach would help.

Performance Management

Comments received are shown below under relevant emerging themes:

1. Embedding performance management culture

Performance management must be more focused and embedded in the day to day work of the Council and Councillors

This seems to be improving but was a struggle to implement throughout the organisation.

Not all members are engaged in the change and improvement journey

PM process is not transparent in the council's workings and not seen to be linked to what needs to be achieved. Performance measures and the way customer surveys and consultations are conducted need to be based on sound technical and statistical principles.

2. Improved performance reports and awareness of the tools is required

A greater breakdown of reports required to make it easier to understand i.e. key priorities.

Too many papers with jargon - need concise bullet points of what has and hasn't been achieved more regularly.

Too much time and resource spent on targets set by Central Government

Members need to be more aware of what is going on and to own the Council's agenda. Greater use of intranet would be helpful with publication (indexed) of documents that are being used to direct Council spend and also things like the improvement plan. It would have to be simple to use

Leadership and Vision

Comments received are shown below under relevant emerging themes:

1. Being a hung council is a barrier to strong political leadership

When the largest political group refuses the responsibility of leadership and asks only power to support their MPs publicity campaigns, we make no progress. It is just not the system of governance.

Being a hung council has been a disaster - an overall majority would have more effective leadership

Despite being a hung council one group has prevented progress by having no vision and no collective direction.

Need an honest examination of the situation at the council and make a new beginning - concentrate on what is essential and do it well.

Impossible to have political leadership without a political leader and until leader has decision making powers

There is no effective political leadership with a hung council and no clear administration.

2. Officer leadership and relations with members needs improvement

There is distance between some lead officers and members and it shows

Officer leadership has no control over outspoken and totally mad members.

An improvement is needed in the way senior officers reply (or don't reply) to ward members.

Council needs firm leadership from members - in its absence officers have filled the void.

Staff need to take pride in doing a job well and self examine strengths and weaknesses.

3. Better clarity needed of member and officer leadership roles

Decisions are often made by officers and members but members are not sure where responsibility lies.

Too many councillors, including independents, follow their own agenda and not what is best overall for the council.

Leadership of the council will not improve until members do take the lead and officers accept that they are to follow the members' lead.

Members must provide decisive political leadership. Officers must work with political leaders to achieve objectives present and future political leadership.