
SUPPORT SERVICES FOR MEMBERS (Min 478/99)

1 SUMMARY

- 1.1 This report invites Members to consider what support services they wish to be provided with in the future.
- 1.2 The provision of support services to Members is not a statutory requirement but is recommended by the Government and the Local Government Association.

2 INTRODUCTION

- 2.1 At the meeting of the Finance and General Purposes Committee held on 20 November 1999, Members requested that proposals be brought back to the new Council on the possibilities, including costs, for introducing additional support services for councillors.

3 CURRENT SERVICES

- 3.1 Services currently available to Members include
 - Typing, photocopying and printing
 - Researching past committee reports/decisions
 - Members Bulletin
 - Member training
 - Members lounge and meeting rooms at the Civic Suite
 - Access to a PC in the Members Lounge with word-processing software, internet and email accounts (from June 2000)
 - Provision of fax machines (Group Leaders and Committee Chairmen on request)
 - Member allowances
 - Confidential paper disposal

NB these services are only available for Council business

4 FUTURE SERVICES

- 4.1 At the meeting of the Finance and General Purposes Committee held last November, the services shown at Appendix A to this report were identified as meriting further consideration. Comments on how each service might be progressed are also shown.

5 ISSUES TO BE CONSIDERED

- 5.1 When considering the level of support for Members, it is important to consider not only the benefits that accrue immediately to existing Members but also the potential to attract people to stand for office who might not otherwise do so.

Parents with young children for example may presently be deterred from standing for election because of the difficulties that can arise with childcare. The availability of crèche facilities can overcome that problem.

- 5.2 The precise needs of each Member will vary and therefore the services offered by the Council should form a menu. Additional services could be added to this menu over time.
- 5.3 As an alternative to the Council providing services, consideration could be given simply to increasing the basic allowance received by Members. At present, the allowance stands at £54.65 per month and to increase it to a level that better reflects the costs incurred by councillors in performing their duties would be in line with the Government's modernising agenda proposals to abolish attendance allowances. An increased basic allowance would enable Members to buy in the support they need from wherever they chose. It also has the benefit of avoiding the administrative costs that would arise from procurement of equipment, provision of research etc. Whilst Members could increase the basic allowance immediately, there is no budgetary provision for this in the current financial year. However, further consideration could be given to this option at the next ordinary review of allowances in spring 2001 or it could be considered as part of the independent review of Members' allowances that will need to be carried out once the Local Government Bill becomes law.

6 ENVIRONMENTAL IMPLICATIONS

- 6.1 Increased use of new technology for those Members that prefer to use it has the potential to reduce the volume of paper used by the Council.

7 RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS

- 7.1 An indication of the costs associated with various support services is outlined in the Appendix. There is no budgetary provision for any further support to be provided or for an increase in Members' allowances.
- 7.2 Some of the proposals will result in additional administrative work. New posts of research assistants would be required if this option were pursued.

8 LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

- 8.1 The Council has power to provide Members with support to fulfil their duties as Councillors.

9 RECOMMENDATION

- 9.1 It is proposed that the Sub-Committee **RECOMMENDS**

Whether it wishes to provide additional support services for Members and, if so, what services and where these have resource implications, for these to be considered at part of the 2001/2002 budget making process. (HAMS)

Andrew Smith

Head of Administrative and Member Services

Background Papers:

None

For further information please contact Andrew Smith on (01702) 318135

**SUPPORT SERVICES FOR MEMBERS SUGGESTED AT THE MEETING OF
COUNCIL HELD ON 28 NOVEMBER 1999**

Provision of IT including computers and fax machines

PCs could be provided for use by Members at home. The cost of an appropriate machine is likely to be in the region of £1500. A printer could also be provided for around £150.

Fax facilities could be offered for all Members from the PC or by the provision of a separate machine. In the case of the former, software could be provided to those Members who already own their own PC but who do not have fax software at a cost of around £50 per copy. A suitable fax machine could be purchased at around £250.

Given the potential usage of the PC/fax, it may be appropriate to install a dedicated telephone line at £100 with quarterly telephone rental of £25. If the Council was to bare call costs, these would be in addition. As an alternative, the Council could simply provide a nominal contribution towards telephone costs of say £10 per quarter that could be paid to all Members with a telephone.

The main benefit of providing a PC/fax to those Members who do not already have their own, is the ability to communicate speedily and at minimal cost. Members would also be able to obtain information from the Council's web site or by email. For example, copies of committee agenda could be provided electronically with consequential savings in print costs – approximately £2.50 per 100 page agenda.

Later this year, it will also be possible to give Members direct access to the Council's new intranet which would provide access to a broad range of Council information currently only available to staff or to the personal caller. Remote access can be provided at no additional cost (the cost of the telephone call would fall to the individual councillor unless the Council made a contribution towards telephone charges).

Provision of office furniture and stationery

The Council could provide, or make available at cost, a range of office furniture and stationery. In particular, most Members find the need for additional filing equipment and the Council could assist with the provision of this.

The provision of handbooks summarising Council policies and other useful information, including ward profiles

The Council could make this available in paper format or electronically. Ward profiles could for example provide the Member with background information on ward demographics, income levels, unemployment, Council owned assets in the Ward etc. The Council already holds much information and the cost of making this available to Members would therefore be fairly minimal. Some staff time would however need to

be given to researching and collating the information in an appropriate format.

Research/Group Assistance

The Council has power to employ research assistants for each of the political groups. The cost of a dedicated officer for each group could be in the region of £15,000 - £18,000. Alternatively, a single researcher could be employed on the same salary to undertake research on behalf of all Members.

An advisory panel of external experts

The Council already makes use of advisers on Committees and Sub-Committees and the number of these could be expanded to cover other areas of the Council's activities. Alternatively, the Council could commission a panel of external experts to look into a specific subject and report back on behalf of the Authority. If the Local Government Bill before Parliament is enacted, the Council will be compelled to make use of such a Panel to advise on Members' allowances. Depending on the subject, it is sometimes possible to find people prepared to serve on such Panels in return for reimbursement of expenses. Otherwise, some payment regime may need to be established. Some authorities have experimented with citizen's juries where a panel comprising members of the public meet, discuss and report back on issues of concern to the District and to the Council.

Accommodation for surgeries

Many authorities either provide or reimburse the cost of hire of accommodation for Member surgeries. The cost of making accommodation available would depend on whether buildings in the Council ownership such as the Civic Suite were used or accommodation was hired. Based on experience with polling stations, the hire charge could vary from around £40 to £250 per day.

Arrangements for child care

It would be possible to explore the provision of subsidised spaces at local crèche facilities including that at the Mill Hall. However, given the potential costs and the difficulty of finding a creche service in the evenings when most Council meetings are held, this may not be a viable option. An alternative would be the possibility of assisting with carer expenses. This latter option may also be appropriate for assisting those who care for an elderly or disabled relative.