

SUPPORT SERVICES FOR MEMBERS

1 SUMMARY

- 1.1 This report invites Members to consider what support services they wish to be provided with in the future.

2 INTRODUCTION

- 2.1 At the meeting of the former Finance and General Purposes Committee on 13 July 2000, it was agreed to defer consideration of the support services to be provided for Members until after the introduction of the Council's new political structure.
- 2.2 At the Council Meeting on 26 February 2002 on considering the report of the Independent Remuneration Panel, it was agreed:-
- that the recommendation that the Council explores replacing the current practice of using a courier to transport paper to Members with dedicated landline/faxes or PCs with internet connection be noted and referred to the appropriate Overview and Scrutiny Committee;
 - that the recommendation that the Council give some consideration to offering a minimum of administrative support to local Councillors and that the savings in administrative costs resulting from the move from monthly to annual lump sum remuneration for some travel allowances be redistributed to provide a central administrative support to Members be noted and referred to the appropriate Overview and Scrutiny Committee.
- 2.3 As the new political structures have now been implemented and with a recent survey of Members having been carried out, this report now asks Members to consider the provision of support services.
- 2.4 The report also considers the issues of a carers allowance for Members and out of pocket expenses for advisers. Both of these matters were referred to the Finance and Procedures Overview and Scrutiny Committee for consideration.

3 DETAILED CONSIDERATION

- 3.1 The services currently available to Members include:-

- Members Lounge at the Civic Suite at Rayleigh (which contains useful information and tea and coffee facilities) and a smaller Members' Room at Rochford.
- Both rooms are installed with a PC with internet and email access.
- Personalised headed paper and 250 business cards have been supplied to Members on request and there is also general Members' headed paper in the above rooms.
- The Members' Bulletin is produced weekly.
- A typing service is available at Rochford, and there are photocopiers at both the Civic Suite and Rochford.
- A research facility for previous committee reports and decisions is available.
- A training programme is arranged, of which the induction sessions were the first part.
- Fax machines are provided on request to Group Leaders and Committee Chairmen.
- A scheme of Members' allowances is agreed on an annual basis.
- A confidential paper disposal service is available.

3.2 At the recent induction sessions it was suggested that a survey should be conducted amongst all Members seeking views on the provision of support services, including a survey of training requirements. 74% of Members responded and the summarised results are attached in Appendix 1.

3.3 Equipment

3.3.1 The results of the survey show some demand for personal computers, printers, fax machines, shredders, telephone line rental and filing equipment.

3.3.2 The costs are likely to be as follows:-

Personal Computer	£ 800 per machine
Printer	£ 150 per machine
Fax	£ 150 per machine
Shredder	£ 30 per machine

Telephone line rental	£ 100 installation (plus quarterly rental and/or call costs)
Filing equipment	Filing cabinets could cost up to £100, whereas wallet or box files would be less costly

3.3.3 The costs outlined above are considerable if all Members requests are met and are likely to exceed the saving of approximately £7,000 per annum that could be achieved if the twice-weekly courier service is withdrawn and instead papers are despatched electronically to Members, as suggested by the Independent Remuneration Panel.

3.3.4 However, there would still need to be a courier service, at least weekly, to get papers to Members who did not wish to use a computer, and also to all Members to distribute any outside post or items which could not be sent electronically.

3.3.5 The advantages of the current twice weekly courier despatch are:-

- Swift distribution of papers and reduction in paper bottlenecks
- A potential 6 day delay in delivery if the despatch is weekly
- Swift distribution of Policy Decision Notices
- The new constitution requires a quick turn-around between Policy and Overview and Scrutiny Committees.

3.3.6 In accordance with existing policy, the Group Leaders and Committee Chairmen who have requested a fax machine have had their machines installed and the costs have been met from existing budgets.

3.4 Training

3.4.1 The results of the survey in respect of training are being reported to the Standards Committee on 17 July 2002 as the Council has required the Standards Committee to determine the minimum level of competency training for Members.

3.4.2 The outcome of the discussion will be reported to this Committee.

3.4.3 Members may wish to consider the time of day and location of any future training courses, taking into account the responses to questions 3 and 4 of the survey.

3.5 Other Services

- 3.5.1 The results of the survey show that there is some demand for administrative assistance with research and support for accommodation for surgeries.
- 3.5.2 The Independent Remuneration Panel suggested that any savings in administrative costs resulting from the move to annual lump sum remuneration for some travel allowances be re-distributed to provide a central administrative support to Members. However, this resulted in only minor savings as it was a small proportion of a workload, and this has been re-allocated to other duties.
- 3.5.3 The provision of a single dedicated administrative assistant for use by all Members would be approximately £15,000 per annum for which there is no budget provision. However, as an initial measure, to gauge the level of demand for this service, the Committee Team can take details of Member research/administrative requests and progress them accordingly.
- 3.5.4 The Council also has the power to employ research assistants for each of the political groups.
- 3.5.5 Assistance could be provided on a trial basis for surgeries, in the form of the Council reimbursing the cost of hire of accommodation, which could vary, based on experience with polling stations, from around £40 to £250 per day. However, there is currently no provision in the budget for this.

3.6 Other Suggestions

- 3.6.1 The survey also asked Members for any other proposals for support which would be useful. The following were identified:-

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Tour of the District - | A tour of planning sites is arranged for 27 July, with separate tours of general key/interesting sites and leisure buildings involving Holmes Place scheduled for later in the year. |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Tour of Council Offices - | A tour was held on 25 June and 16 Members were able to attend. A further tour will be arranged in the Autumn for 9 Members who were unable to attend in June. |

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Members Lounge at Civic Suite for District Councillors only - | With the recent introduction of a number door lock to the first floor of the Civic Suite this should be achieved. |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Additional phone line for web/email access | See comments in paragraph 3.3 |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Access to Council intranet from home computer - | The Council's website has been expanded recently, and further development is planned in 2002/03 so that the website will contain much of the information on the intranet. There are currently limited dial-in facilities to the intranet. This could be expanded if the proposal in the report on IS/ICT and e-government initiatives to enable access via a virtual network is approved. |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Personal Computer Training- | This could be included in the training programme. |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Being able to speak to officers outside normal working hours - | Officers can be contacted by email or fax outside normal working hours, or at evening meetings. |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Local library to provide information on new relevant books available for borrowing - | Officers are often notified of new publications and this information can be included in the Members' Bulletin. Contact can also be made with the local library. |

4 CARER'S ALLOWANCE

- 4.1. Prior to the setting up of the Independent Members Remuneration Panel, the Department of the Environment, Transport and Regions issued a guidance note in relation to Members Allowances.
- 4.2. The guidance introduced a discretionary carer's allowance. The purpose of this allowance was to ensure that elected Members were not disadvantaged by having to provide care for children or dependent relatives.
- 4.3. The Independent Members Remuneration Panel accepted this guidance and made a positive recommendation for the adoption of a

carer's allowance. They took the view that by adopting this type of allowance, the Council would be sending a clear message that it does not wish to preclude any from membership.

- 4.4. The Panel suggested a payment of £3.25 per hour with a maximum allowance of 5 hours per month. The payment could only be claimed to reimburse the cost of service provided by a recognised body such as a registered childminder or care agency recognised by Social Services.
- 4.5. When the proposal was considered by Members there was a view that the proposed level of payment was too small and that, if a scheme were to be adopted, a step towards full reimbursement of cost would be required. There was an opposing view expressed that it was unnecessary to provide any such allowance as potential candidates would take their personal circumstances into account before standing for election.
- 4.6. As the scheme of Members Allowances has been adopted, it is not now possible to introduce a carer's allowance until a new scheme of allowances is decided upon. This means that the Independent Members Remuneration Panel will need to consider all aspects of Members Allowances again before any new scheme is introduced.
- 4.7. Members therefore need to consider what views they would wish to convey on this issue for the Panel to deliberate upon.

5 OUT OF POCKET EXPENSES TO ADVISERS

- 5.1. The Independent Remuneration Panel also considered the provision of out of pocket expenses to advisers. The Council on 26 February agreed that, subject to the provision of out of pocket expenses for mandatory visitors to the Standards Committee, the question of payment of out of pocket expenses to advisers be referred to a future meeting of the Finance and Procedures Overview and Scrutiny Committee for consideration.
- 5.2. The Council's decision was taken at a time when there were tenant representatives and other advisers on committees. In the new structure, the only advisers are currently those to the Standards Committee for whom out of pocket expenses have already been agreed.
- 5.3. However, with the establishment of Overview and Scrutiny Committees, to which Members may wish to invite outside advisers to assist in their deliberations, it may now be appropriate to consider the payment of out of pocket expenses.

- 5.4. Members may also wish to consider recognising the contribution made by tenant representatives to the tenant participation process. The Council has experienced under-representation of tenant groups, and the consideration of the payment of out of pocket expenses, honorarium or attendance allowance may assist in encouraging participation at the tenant liaison meetings.
- 5.5. As with item 4 above, Members now need to provide their views for consideration by the Panel.

6 ENVIRONMENTAL IMPLICATIONS

- 6.1. Increased use of new technology for those Members who 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 the various support services is outlined in the report. The only current budget provision is for the Member training programme and the courier service.
- 7.2. A bid has been made to enable Members to communicate electronically with residents, businesses and officers. This is included in the report elsewhere on the agenda on the IS/ICT and e-government strategy update. It is suggested that a separate report on options for electronic communication by Members is submitted in the next cycle of meetings.
- 7.3. The payment of out of pocket expenses to advisers and carer's allowance is likely to be a limited sum and provision could be made in the draft 2003/04 budget. The funding of any payment to tenant representatives could be met from the tenant participation budget in the Housing Revenue Account.

7 RECOMMENDATION

- 7.1. It is proposed that the Committee **RECOMMENDS**
- (1) To the Policy and Finance Committee which support services for Members it wishes to be provided in 2002/03.
 - (2) To the Independent Member Remuneration Panel its views in respect of carer's allowance and out of pocket expenses for advisers. (HAMS)

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Background Papers:

- (1) Report to Corporate Resources Sub-Committee – 4 July 2000 and Minute.
- (2) Report to Council – 26 February 2002 and Minute.
- (3) Members Questionnaires

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