

REPORT TO: POLICY AND RESOURCES COMMITTEE - 12 SEPTEMBER 2005
REPORT ON: WIDENING ACCESS TO COUNCIL MEMBERSHIP
REPORT BY: ASSISTANT CHIEF EXECUTIVE (COMMUNITY PLANNING)
REPORT NO: 517-2005

1. PURPOSE OF REPORT

To advise members of the report of the Widening Access to Council Membership Progress Group and to recommend a response.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that members:

- i) note the recommendations of the Widening Access to Council Membership Progress Group which are aimed at local authorities, as set out in Appendix One.
- ii) consider the draft response to each of the recommendations, also shown in Appendix One, and amend or add to these as required.
- iii) remit the Assistant Chief Executive (Community Planning) in conjunction with the Depute Chief Executive (Support Services) the Director of Education and the Head of Communities to implement the actions suggested in the recommended response in Appendix One.

3. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

There will be some costs associated with the recommendations in this report, for example in staff time and the production of training and publicity materials. These will be contained as far as possible within existing budgets, and any further expenditure required (e.g. on translation services and the production of materials in different formats or languages) will be the subject of a further report to Committee once details are known.

4. SUSTAINABILITY IMPLICATIONS

This report has an impact on the following key Local Agenda 21 themes - 'all sections of the community are empowered to participate in decision making' and 'access to the skills, knowledge and information needed to enable everyone to play a fuller part in society'.

5. EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES IMPLICATIONS

This report has an impact on the following key Equal Opportunities themes - 'special measures are taken to improve participation in civic and community life' and 'every opportunity is taken to make Dundee a more family-friendly and barrier-free city'. This issue has high relevance under the Race Relations Act 1976 (as amended in 2000) and the Disability Discrimination Act 1995, and a full Equality Impact Assessment will be carried out.

6. **BACKGROUND**

- 6.1 The Scottish Executive established the Widening Access to Council Membership Progress Group to consider ways in which council membership can be made more attractive to a wider cross-section of the community. The group's report identifies a number of factors which discourage people from standing for election (including low public awareness of the role of councillors; lack of knowledge about the process and support available; lack of opportunities for training for candidates; and the 'long hours' culture), but also identifies a number of practical measures that can be put in place to make council membership a more realistic opportunity for more people. Some of the report's recommendations are aimed at the Scottish Executive and political parties, but this report focuses on those recommendations aimed directly at local authorities.
- 6.2 The Minister for Finance and Public Service Reform has invited all councils to give their views on the issues raised and to indicate what action they are taking following the recommendations in the report. The recommendations, along with a suggested response, are set out in Appendix One of this report, and members are asked to note the recommendations, to consider the draft response and amend or add to this as required, and to remit the Assistant Chief Executive (Community Planning) to implement the actions suggested in the draft response in conjunction with other departments as required.
- 6.3 The Widening Access group's report stresses that all action points require equality and diversity related issues to be mainstreamed into their development and implementation. For example, in relation to publicity and communications, there is a need to consider how different communities (such as black and ethnic minority, disability, youth, women and lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender) are captured in the exercise. It is therefore recommended that the Assistant Chief Executive (Community Planning) liaise with the Head of Communities so that the Equality and Diversity Team provide assistance in implementing the agreed actions and carrying out a full Equality Impact Assessment.
- 6.4 Copies of the full report of the Widening Access to Council Membership Progress Group, which also contains the recommendations aimed at the Scottish Executive and political parties, are available in the members' lounge and from group secretaries.

7. **CONSULTATION**

The Chief Executive, Depute Chief Executive (Support Services) Depute Chief Executive (Finance), Head of Communities and Director of Education have been consulted on this report.

8. **BACKGROUND PAPERS**

Renewing Democracy: Report of the Widening Access to Council Membership Progress Group

Chris Ward
Assistant Chief Executive (Community Planning)..... 07/09/05

APPENDIX ONE

WIDENING ACCESS TO COUNCIL MEMBERSHIP RECOMMENDATIONS AIMED AT LOCAL AUTHORITIES

Action Point	Lead body	Timescale	Draft Response
Role descriptions should be put in place in all local authorities. These should include details of the minimum requirements that can be expected of a councillor. Equalities should be mainstreamed into councillors' role descriptions.	Local authorities	Now	The Council supports the idea of role descriptions. In previous responses, it has suggested that it would be most appropriate for COSLA to develop generic role descriptions which individual councils could then adapt to their individual circumstances if necessary, and this still seems a sensible approach. The Council notes the view of the Widening Access group that role descriptions should not be drawn up centrally, but still feels it would be useful if examples of good practice were identified and circulated, perhaps by the Improvement Service, in order to assist councils in producing a consistently high standard of role description.
Information on the roles and responsibilities of a councillor should feature prominently in council newsletters, websites and other relevant council publications, including ones that may be read by members of under-represented groups.	Local authorities	Now	Agreed. The section of the Council's website which contains details of councillors and their surgeries will be amended to include information on the roles and responsibilities of members. This information will also be included in any publications which give details of members, such as the annual performance report, and be made available in poster format at libraries, community centres and other places where people meet.
Local authorities should put in place arrangements to enable pupils from S3 upwards to shadow councillors as part of working experience placements.	Local authorities working with their schools	Now	Members already provide similar opportunities to school pupils on occasion, but any formal arrangements would require careful consideration of confidentiality issues as well as the time commitment expected of members.
Local authorities' newsletters and websites should explain the role of a councillor in relation to other elected members and members of public bodies.	Local authorities	Now	Agreed. This will be done as part of the information published on the website and in relevant documents on the roles and responsibilities of members.
Local authorities should ensure that their newsletters and website include information which draws distinctions between when it is appropriate to contact a councillor and when it is appropriate to contact a council helpline or council staff.	Local authorities	Now	Agreed. This will be done as part of the information published on the website and in relevant documents on the roles and responsibilities of members.

Action Point	Lead body	Timescale	Draft Response
Local authorities and the Scottish Executive should undertake work around 15 months before a local government election to publicise the opportunities to stand for election. We believe there is scope for a national 'recruitment' publicity campaign supplemented by information available locally to encourage more people to stand	Scottish Executive and local authorities in collaboration with key civic partners e.g. SCVO, STUC	From 2006	Agreed. The Council will be happy to make information available locally as part of a national publicity campaign. It might be useful to agree a standard format for this so that all authorities are providing similar information, clearly linked to the national campaign.
Local authorities with the support of the Scottish Executive should arrange pre-nomination seminars around 1 year before an election to offer delegates practical information on becoming a councillor.	Scottish Executive and local authorities	From 2006	Agreed. The Council will organise and advertise seminars. Clarification of the support referred to from the Scottish Executive would be welcomed. In particular, it is suggested that this could usefully take the form of funding the production of a standard package of seminar materials to ensure some commonality of approach across Scotland while still allowing this to be adapted for each local area.
Local authorities should facilitate arrangements for members of the public who express an interest in standing for election to shadow a serving councillor for a short period.	Local authorities	Now	It is difficult to see this being practical on other than a voluntary basis, as members will inevitably have concerns about being shadowed by potential opponents. However, any requests received from members of the public would be circulated to see if members are prepared to assist.
Local authorities should ensure that information on becoming a councillor features prominently on their websites and in council newsletters	Local authorities	Now	Agreed. Information on becoming a councillor will be added to the Council's website and any relevant publications.
The Scottish Executive and local authorities should consider whether the nomination procedures and associated paperwork could be made more user friendly	Scottish Executive and local authorities	Now	Procedures and forms are regularly reviewed and the Council will continue to do this. However, it is felt that these are already straightforward and there is little scope for improvement. Election staff are also available to provide advice as required. Online nominations are not currently practical due to the need for physical signatures.

Action Point	Lead body	Timescale	Draft Response
Local authorities should offer mentoring arrangements for those who have taken the decision to stand for election to enable them to adapt to the role more easily if elected	Local authorities	Now	As stated above, it is difficult to see this being practical on other than a voluntary basis, but any requests for mentoring could be passed to members for consideration.
All local authorities should offer training for candidates to assist them through the election process	Local authorities	Now	Although formal training is not currently provided, advice on the election process is available from election staff. If a formal training programme is to be offered, and in particular if this is to include non-procedural issues such as public speaking, dealing with the media and confidence building, it is suggested that this would be best delivered by the Scottish Executive commissioning an organisation or company to deliver a series of courses at venues across the country, thus ensuring a common approach and consistent quality of information. Local authority representatives could contribute to such a course on relevant topics, but other training providers would more appropriately deliver those parts of the training which relate to campaigning skills and techniques. It would also be useful for the Executive to commission the development of an online training package.
Local authorities should revisit the work carried out during the Leadership Advisory panel process in 2000/2001 to see whether further improvements to administrative arrangements and internal processes can be made to reduce the amount of time councillors need to spend in meetings, or travelling to meetings.	Local authorities	Now	The Council has already reviewed its arrangements and processes to minimise the time councillors have to spend in meetings. Steps taken include delegation to reduce the number of reports going to Committee and guidance on the length and format of reports to make clearer what decisions are required. Committees have also been combined into groups so that meetings only take place on three evenings per month. Travelling is not an issue in Dundee given the nature of the Council's area.

Action Point	Lead body	Timescale	Draft Response
Councils should examine the timing of their meetings and consider arrangements that best suit councillors and staff who are required to attend.	Local authorities	Now	The Council has adopted a policy of holding virtually all meetings in the evening, which allows people with work, study or caring commitments during the daytime to participate. The Council acknowledges the point made in the Widening Access group's report about people with evening commitments and the suggestions of a flexible approach to meetings, but has concerns about the practicalities of this, given the policy that all members sit on all committees. However, the programme of meetings will be kept under review to ensure this maximises the opportunity for people to participate.
All councillors should take part in an adequate induction process as soon as possible after election.	Local authorities	From 2007	Arrangements are always made for the induction of new members, which includes briefings on the structure and role of each department and their current policy issues; training on the exercise of quasi-judicial functions; and information on ethical standards. A leaflet has also been produced which explains the range of support services provided to members. Particular emphasis will be placed on induction in 2007 in anticipation of a higher than normal number of new members being elected, and this will cover the issues set out in the Widening Access group's report.
All new councillors should be offered a 'buddy' who can offer counsel and assistance on a confidential basis.	Local authorities	Now	It seems likely that this will continue to happen within political groups, and otherwise would depend on members being willing to agree to act in this capacity.
Local authorities should consider what practical issues would need to be overcome in respect of a councillor who needed constant carer support.	Local authorities	Now	The Council will develop an 'action plan' to advise potential candidates of the practical steps it would take to overcome any such issues, which could be implemented as required and adapted to meet the needs of the particular individual. The Council already offers disability etiquette training and will consider how this should be rolled out to staff and members.
Local authorities should hold informal 'exit interviews' with all councillors who choose to leave	Local authorities	Now	Agreed. The Council's Assistant Chief Executive (Community Planning) will arrange to meet any councillor who chooses to leave in order to identify whether the reasons for this include anything to do with how the Council conducts its business or provides support to members.