

## MEMBER SURVEY REPORT

### Introduction

As part of the on-going review of the support for Elected Members around their role as Community Leaders, a survey was undertaken to provide Members with the opportunity to develop their understanding of the level of support they receive and the improvements that they require to perform more effectively in the role. This report focuses upon the results of the survey, set within the context of a variety of activities and their outcomes which serve to add depth and balance to what needs to improve further, in terms of member and officer effectiveness in what can be broadly called the Council's Community Leadership role. The key outcomes of these activities that are identified to give further context and are relevant to this report are:

- A role definition for 'Front Line' Community Leadership Councillors in the context of Sunderland's Community Leadership Programme.
- Identification of the support Councillors need from officers to perform effectively in their role as Community Leaders.
- Identification of actual and potential ICT support Councillors (and officers) need to improve effectiveness.
- Identification of the 'top ten' issues faced by Councillors day to day and how to use this information to improve the customer service to Councillors.
- A Service Directory has been developed for both Front Line Councillors and Cabinet Members to facilitate more effective communication and responsiveness to member enquiries.

### Survey Methodology

All 75 Councillors were invited to respond to the questionnaire - available in electronic and paper format. A copy of the questionnaire is attached.

The main focus of the survey is upon the level and quality of the support Councillors receive from officers across the full range of roles, Cabinet, Chair and Vice Chair, as Area Committee Members, Front Line Councillors, and Members of the Local Strategic Partnership. The spread of different roles provides different perspectives e.g. that Cabinet members are able to record a higher level of satisfaction around the briefings they receive from officers than other groups, which can be interpreted as significant when set in the context of involvement in the decision making process.

## **Spread of Responses by Role**

- There were 45 responses from a possible 75, which is a high rate of return and reflects an interest in the issues facing Councillors in terms of the support they receive.

## **The Council as an Organisation and the Councillors**

### **Aware of Issues and Getting Involved**

Most respondents were sufficiently aware of issues of interest to them. However, that reduces when Councillors are responding to 'how' to get involved.

The improvements suggested by Councillors focused upon communications:

- that they be made in plain English, avoiding jargon,
- timely in supporting them in getting involved in the decision making process before it is too late.

Improvements made so far: the new Area Arrangement should keep Councillors better informed and briefed to improve their ability to influence decisions.

### **Front Line Councillor – Briefings**

Over half of respondents were kept briefed most of the time – a significant minority 38.2% occasionally – under 3% never given briefings.

The improvements suggested by Councillors – Briefings could be proactively arranged by officers for members using all media.

### **Cabinet Briefings**

High percentage of cabinet members receive the right levels of briefing all the time.

No improvements were suggested by respondents.

### **Chair/Vice Chair Briefings**

This does not present many problems.

Improvement suggested by Councillors – Plain English reports.

## **LSP Briefings**

4 respondents – main issue is around lack of briefing for non-labour members. Low response rate may be indicative of lack of awareness/interest amongst Councillors of their role in the LSP.

Improvement suggested by Councillors– greater transparency and engagement with all members.

## **Sub-regional Partnership - Briefings for members**

Significant majority state either briefed all the time or most of the time. See LSP briefings.

## **Satisfaction Level with Officer Support – Committee Meetings**

Significant minority are very satisfied 35.3%, slight majority satisfied 52.9%. However, 11.8% are unsatisfied.

Improvements suggested: 11 responses suggests that this is an issue, characterised by a perceived lack of proactivity by officers in support, a lack of understanding of organisation issues (the big picture) and more local priorities. Some Councillors suggested that members could be more proactive in articulating their needs.

## **Satisfaction level with Officer Support – Public Meetings**

Significant minority are very satisfied 23.3%, significant majority 66.7% satisfied, and 10% unsatisfied suggests that overall a pretty good picture. However, again there are 11 suggestions/comments -characterised by the perceived absence of support – which suggests that more active support might be useful.

## **Responses from Officers to Day to Day Queries**

About half the respondents stated that their queries were handled speedily and to high standard most of the time. However, a significant minority record query-handling only occasionally being handled speedily, with a further reduced number or responses that queries are handled to a high standard all the time.

In this question only 1 member recorded that their queries were dealt with speedily and to a high standard all the time.

This question received 12 suggestions for improvement or comment. The main suggested improvement is in terms of speed of response, that there should be more consistency of speed and quality of response across directorates. Delay is a main factor of responses, and with priority and urgency also identified as an issue – these need to be clarified and defined.

The Service and Cabinet Directories that have been developed by officers, should improve speed and quality of responses to queries.

### **Quality of Information from Officers to Members**

A significant majority 58% responded as very good (16.1%) or good (41.9%). However, a significant minority 32.3% responded average and 9.7% poor. There are 8 responses to improvements/comments, many echo the previous question responses, e.g. inconsistency across the directorates, some officers responding more effectively than others.

### **Survey on Members Performance and Effectiveness**

#### **On Understanding Policy**

A significant majority score themselves highly or well in this. Fewer members score themselves so well when they place themselves in the context of a meeting. One reason for this might be that some specific policies pose more challenges to their understanding than others e.g members may need extra support in understanding financial matters or budget allocation.

#### **On Personal Role and Position**

Most members consider themselves to be very or fairly clear in this context – although there is less confidence recorded by members in their role in their ward or community.

#### **On Using Information Provided**

The responses suggest an overall confidence in using information on specific issues in meetings.

#### **On Skills to be Effective**

Overall responses suggest members are confident they have most of the skills most of the time to be effective. Specific skills identified requiring intervention – speed reading, public speaking.

#### **On Techniques and Processes.**

Most respondents are confident that they have the skills that they need all or most of the time. However, problem solving has lowest score in rating personal performance which suggests that support is required in this area – especially if linked to the lower confidence of members in the clarity and understanding of their role at ward and community leader level.

#### **On Influencing Decisions**

Most members record a confidence in being able to influence decision making at ward level – however, there is less confidence in that ability to influence officers. The improvements suggested are around involving members in the decision making process earlier, and rebalancing the Councillor/officer influence in the decision making process.

## **On Being an Effective Community Leader**

Most respondents feel confident in their effectiveness as community leaders, with 93.9% rating themselves effective all or most of the time. With 6 responses to improving effectiveness. This correlates to the level of understanding skills respondents have rated themselves to – however, given that a main skill for the community leadership role is (should be) problem solving, and a lower level of confidence in effectiveness in that area, suggests development of understanding of the community leadership role is required.

## **Community Engagement and Getting the Message Across**

### **Holding Ward Surgeries**

- Most members hold monthly surgeries 60.6.% with 21.3% more frequently and only 12.3% less than monthly.
- Most use community based facilities, with Community Centres as the most used facility.
- Most respondents consider the facilities to be very good or good.

Improvements suggested by Councillors – a frequent response to the question around improving ward surgeries is for better publicity – the implication is that they are not well attended.

- Alternative methods of engaging communities – while electronic media are used (over half of respondents) there are plans to improve Councillor connection with electronic media, email, texting, and messaging.
- Recognition in the role – a significant minority responded that they get the recognition they deserve only occasionally. See bullet point above – these improvements apply just as much to this issue.

## **The Council's Role in Promotion of the Work Councillors Do**

The highest responses rate the Council as average, then poor, then very poor, then effective, and last, very effective. In terms of improvements, most respondents make the case for non-political publicity or at least non-partisan emphasis.

## **The Councillor's Role in Promoting the Work they Do**

Most respondents rate themselves as - highest - effective, then very effective, then average, then poor, then very poor. The overall view on improvements focuses upon a more even handed non-partisan approach to publicity material.

## **Conclusion**

The survey has

- highlighted areas of improvement to the support for Councillors from officers
- confirms the Councillors levels of satisfaction with support they receive are overall good – but that improvements are necessary

- that the structural changes to processes and procedures, and the development activities that Councillors and officers have undertaken and are planned for the future, are taking the Community Leadership agenda in the right direction of travel.