

AGENDA ITEM

REPORT TO CABINET

17TH OCTOBER 2019

**REPORT OF
CORPORATE
MANAGEMENT TEAM**

CABINET DECISION

Leader of the Council - Lead Cabinet Member – Councillor Bob Cook

**REACCREDITATION FOR NORTH EAST CHARTER PLUS FOR ELECTED
MEMBER DEVELOPMENT**

SUMMARY

The report summarises the recent 'light touch' inspection which resulted in the Authority being Reaccredited Charter Plus Status for Member Development by the LGA.

REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATIONS

To inform members of the outcome of the recent independent assessment of the Council's Member Learning & Development approach and to consider any further suggestions to improve the service.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. That Cabinet note the positive outcome of the Council's reaccreditation as achieving LGA Member Development Charter Plus Status;
2. That Cabinet approve the recommendations and further action suggested as part of the verification report.

DETAIL

1. The North East Charter Plus for Elected Member Development sets out standards for local authorities that ensure they have a clear commitment to develop and support elected members, which benefits not only councillors individually but ensuring that elected members are better placed to serve their local communities. In May 2012 the Authority achieved North East Charter Plus Status for Elected Member Development, having earlier met Charter Status standards in 2007, becoming only the second local authority in the region to do so. In 2016 the Authority was reassessed and accredited the award again.
2. A further reassessment took place on 2 September 2019 and North East Regional Employers Organisation and Member Peer, who carry out the

assessment process on behalf of the LGA, suggested it would be a fairly 'light touch inspection', given our proven track record in meeting the required criteria and initial discussion held with the verification team regards the direction our approach to Member Development has taken since our last assessment. The assessment therefore lasted one day and consisted of a review of supporting evidence alongside informal discussions led by their Associate Jill Rouse and LGA Member Peer Malcolm Brain from Gateshead MBC with the following Members and officers:

- Cllr Bob Cook, Leader of Council and Chair of MAP
 - Cllr Sylvia Walmsley, MAP Member
 - Cllr Jean O'Donnell, MAP Member
 - Cllr Tony Riordan, New Member
 - Reuben Kench, Director of Arts, Leisure, and Culture and Deputising for the Interim Managing Director
 - Margaret Waggott, Assistant Director of Administration, Democratic and Electoral Service
 - Nigel Hart, Team Leader Civic, Democratic & Member Services
 - Stuart Levin, Democratic Engagement Officer
 - Michelle Jones, Member Development Officer
3. The evidence provided for the assessment highlighted the significant investment in support for Members by the Authority and the breadth of learning and development opportunities made available to Members to build their capacity and take on greater responsibilities. This included the Member Induction Pack incorporating the Member Induction Programme that all Members received upon election, the report assessing the Member Briefing Sessions Programme for 2018/19 and setting the 2019/20 programme, along with the following case studies:
- Investment in Member ICT;
 - Development into Role of Cabinet Member;
 - Health & Wellbeing;
 - Support for our Armed Forces Community;
 - Scrutiny of Safeguarding;
 - Licensing E-Learning.

ASSESSMENT FEEDBACK

4. In their assessment report submitted shortly after their inspection, the assessors highlighted their key findings as follows:-
- i) The Authority had demonstrated that it had a clear commitment to councillor development; a commitment reinforced by both the Managing Director and the Leader of the Council, and by the all-party Members Advisory Panel (MAP) which had continued to review on a regular basis the Member Learning & Development Strategy presenting it to both Corporate Management Team (CMT) and ultimately Cabinet for approval.

The process for identifying priorities in Member Learning & Development was found to have links to the Council's overall corporate priorities through a two-way process between MAP and CMT. Specific topics were explored in greater detail if required, not least for example the recent refresh of ICT provision for elected members which was overseen by an all party Members ICT Task & Finish Group established by MAP.

The Authority's continuing commitment to supporting members was further evidenced by additional officer resource added to the Member Development Section in order to deliver the comprehensive Member Induction Programme post elections, and to continue to assist members in their use of technology as the refresh of Members ICT equipment is rolled out.

- ii) The Authority had shown itself to have a strategic approach to Member Development, a process overseen by members themselves which had seen a recent review undertaken of the content of the Member Induction Programme, and the need for a comprehensive refresh of Members ICT. National research had been considered by members when formulating their strategic approach and investment in national learning programmes had continued with several members having accessed LGA Leadership Activity Programmes including Planning, Adult Social Care and the generic Leadership Academy, as well as being given individual support according to their needs.

Reference was made to the new Assistant Cabinet Member roles with a case study provided demonstrating how one member had been assisted in making the transition from scrutiny member to scrutiny chair; to then Assistant Cabinet Member and then Cabinet Member.

The Authority had also shown a desire to regularly review legislation and key policies upon which monthly briefings would be provided to members, with members having the opportunity to influence the Policy Briefing programme.

- iii) The Authority successfully demonstrated that its learning development had been effective in building capacity, as evidenced by the evaluation taken by MAP of the Member Induction Programme which found that the training delivered had been extremely worthwhile.

Particular reference was made to the benefits shown of the Authority continually seeking to review its approach to Member Development which had led to IT provision and training being improved, the E-Learning offer expanded, the beneficial impact of mandatory training in specific areas of activity, and how valued by members was the availability of one to one support and the opportunity to identify their own Personal Support Plan.

CONCLUSION

5. Having reviewed all of the evidence presented, and having had the opportunity to hear from senior, long serving and newly elected members, as well as the Interim Managing Director, Assistant Director and senior officers from within Democratic Services, it was the view of the verifiers that this Council continued to meet the standards set down in the North East Charter for Member Development.
6. It was recognised that the Authority had a genuine culture of learning and development amongst its elected members, which had been shown to produce real positive outcomes that had benefitted from continuous review and quest for improvement as demonstrated by its recent comprehensive Member Induction Programme and its commitment to a refresh of Members ICT.

7. The verifiers noted the following views expressed by interviewees during the assessment:-
 - Ensure good access to the E-Learning offer;
 - Expand the E-casework facility and integrate it better with Council systems;
 - Empower Members to use technology to do more for themselves;
 - Continue to encourage more Members to participate in development activity and having a PSP;
 - Expand the mandatory training input for new Members.
8. It was noted also that it was timely post Induction at the start of the Council term and with 13 newly elected members on the Council, for officers and members to review its communication and consultation protocols as currently set out in its Concordat for Consultation with Elected Members.
9. This verification visit also coincided with the LGA Corporate Peer Challenge which took place during the same week. Feedback from this particular review supports the conclusions arising from Charter Plus reaccreditation as the Peer Challenge Team specifically noted that:-

“There is a very impressive and comprehensive approach to elected member learning and development which has been externally validated and provides a potential model for others”
10. The Charter Plus verifiers identified the following two areas for improvement that they would like to see the Council consider in the future, both of which closely reflected improvements that had been suggested by interviewees during the assessment:-
 - i) The Council include the Equality and Diversity course in the group of mandatory courses and that all members be required to undertake this training. It was noted during the assessment feedback that Equality & Diversity had been provided as non-mandatory training as part of the Induction Programme but that it had been poorly attended, which had led to further repeat sessions being planned. The verifiers noted that Equality & Diversity was considered to be part of every Learning & Development opportunity, but suggested that it may be appropriate for some stand-alone elements of this training to be rolled out in the form of mandatory training so as to engage more members;
 - ii) The impetus of the IT and E-learning offers be maintained and the roll out to engage all Members continue. This is likely to require ongoing monitoring and further evaluation by MAP/Senior Officers.

COMMUNITY IMPACT IMPLICATION

11. There are no community impact implications arising directly from this report.

CORPORATE PARENTING IMPLICATIONS

12. Not applicable.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

11. The cost of Charter Plus assessment was £1,600 which was met from existing budgets.

LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

12. There are no legal implications arising from this report.

RISK ASSESSMENT

13. This is categorised as low to medium risk. Existing management systems and daily routine activities are sufficient to control and reduce risk.

WARDS AFFECTED AND CONSULTATION WITH WARD/COUNCILLORS

14. Not applicable

BACKGROUND PAPERS

Report to Members Advisory Panel – 22nd August 2019

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