

ROTHERHAM BOROUGH COUNCIL – REPORT TO MEMBERS

1. Meeting:	MEMBER DEVELOPMENT & TRAINING PANEL
2. Date:	10th June 2013
3. Title:	Report Writing and Plain English – Outcomes of Elected Member Survey
4. Directorate:	Resources

5. Summary

This report summarises the outcomes of an online survey of elected members with regard to the standard of report writing within Rotherham Borough Council and the provision of information in support of elected members. It makes recommendations based on those results.

6. Recommendations

- All officers to be reminded of the “Clear Communication” section on the intranet as part of RMBC’s formal induction process
- All reports prepared for elected members should start with a brief, clear executive summary, and include a glossary of terms/acronyms used within the report
- A manager briefing on best practice around report writing to be distributed across the Council, with reminders of the key supporting documents available to officers
- Consideration be given – subject to cost – to the provision of awareness and skills raising for staff required to prepare reports through RMBC’s existing schedule of meetings and training
- Directorates be requested to share good practice and to continue their own internal improvement programmes in this area of work

7. Proposals and Details

7.1 Background Information

Communicating and engaging with others is a key competency for all managers within Rotherham Borough Council, and report writing is an important element of this. Reports are used within the Council to support the work of officers; externally to communicate the position or view of the authority to partner or other organisations/groups; to inform and assist members in carrying out their duties, and to support the system of governance through Full Council, Cabinet, Delegated Powers, Scrutiny and other elected member meetings.

Reports can be used to summarise lengthy issues; translate complex or technical information into a language and format that is easily understood by the target audience and put forward recommendations to facilitate the decision-making process.

In addition, the style and content of reports (including spelling, grammar and punctuation) can impact positively or negatively on the reputation of the Council.

However, it has been identified on a number of occasions in the past that the standard of report writing – particularly in the context of providing information for elected members – needed to be improved.

In February 2012, the Members' Training and Development Panel agreed that guidance be issued across the Council to highlight the need for improvements to be made – particularly with regard to the use of plain English.

In April 2013, the Panel endorsed the proposal for an electronic survey to be sent to all elected members seeking their personal views and experiences.

7.2 Outcomes of the Survey

All elected members were sent an electronic survey in early May, asking for their thoughts on the standard of reports submitted for their consideration.

20 responses to the survey were received. A summary of the findings can be found at Appendix A.

The main issues raised by those responding were:

- Reports too long
- Too much repetition/duplication of information
- Too many acronyms used (often without explanation)
- Too much jargon
- Too many officers are copying and pasting information into reports, without tailoring them according to the specific meeting/audience and the roles/responsibilities/powers of those reading the report
- Recommendations and impact assessments need to be clearer

Particular problems with complex terminology, jargon and acronyms were identified in the highways and planning sections of EDS, although some respondents also mentioned Resources, Finance, CYPS and Social Services as being problematic.

NAS were mentioned as a positive example of report writing and one member said CYPS were much improved.

8. Finance

There are no costs associated with the further dissemination or implementation of guidance through standard RMBC staff communications channels.

It is the responsibility of individual managers to use the guidance and in turn their line manager to performance manage against the key communications competency within the performance and development review process. It may be necessary in future to identify further mechanisms for improving performance, such as additional training sessions, with potential cost implications.

9. Risks and Uncertainties

The Member Development Strategy aims to train and equip Rotherham MBC Members to take on the duties of the modern local councillor. Failure to put a comprehensive programme in place may limit the opportunity for councillors to develop their abilities and skills, which will in the long term, impact negatively on the effectiveness of the Council as a whole.

10. Policy and Performance Agenda Implications

11. Background Papers and Consultation

RMBC Plain English Guide

RMBC Guidance for Reports to Members

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