

<b>COMMUNITIES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE</b>	<b>AGENDA ITEM No. 5</b>
<b>8 MARCH 2022</b>	<b>PUBLIC REPORT</b>

Report of:	Task and Finish Group to Promote Equality and Diversity Amongst Councillors	
Cabinet Member(s) responsible:	Cabinet Member for Digital Services and Transformation	
Contact Officer(s):	Ian Phillips, Head of Communities and Partnership Integration	Tel. 07415881802

**REPORT OF TASK AND FINISH GROUP – TO PROMOTE EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY AMONGST COUNCILLORS**

<b>RECOMMENDATIONS</b>	
<b>FROM:</b> Task and Finish Group	<b>Deadline date:</b> n/a

It is recommended that the Communities Scrutiny Committee approve the recommendations developed by the Task and Finish Group, namely:

1. The constitution should be amended to remove all gender related titles and in addition, the Mayor should be addressed in the same format as councillors i.e., Mayor surname.
2. All councillors should be made aware of the policies around claiming expenses to meet caring needs to allow them to effectively carry out their role. As part of a wider programme of meeting training and development needs, the publication of the availability of allowances for caring needs should be ensured.
3. Executive and Member Services should be asked to consider whether additional refresher training on Member conduct is required as part of the wider training and development programme.
4. The Employee and Assistance programme should be renamed to the Employee and Member Assistance programme and a briefing session held with Members to highlight the support available and how it can be accessed.
5. Regular, comprehensive and solution focussed training and briefings should be held for councillors on how to effectively handle bullying and harassment, including advice for keeping safe.

**1. ORIGIN OF REPORT**

- 1.1 The report is from the Task and Finish Group established by the Committee to consider a motion approved by full council exploring issues of Members diversity and equality.

**2. PURPOSE AND REASON FOR REPORT**

- 2.1 The report is presented to the Committee by the Task and Finish Group which has now concluded its research, making a number of recommendations.
- 2.2 This report is for the Communities Scrutiny Committee to consider under its Terms of Reference Part 3, Section 4 - Overview Scrutiny Functions, paragraph No. 2.1 Functions 13 determined by Council:

3. Equalities

### 3. **TIMESCALES**

Is this a Major Policy Item/Statutory Plan?	<b>NO</b>	If yes, date for Cabinet meeting	n/a
---	-----------	----------------------------------	-----

### 4. **BACKGROUND AND KEY ISSUES**

4.1 The former Adults and Communities Scrutiny Committee established a cross party Task and Finish Group to explore issues related to Councillor equality and diversity. The following terms of reference were set:

#### **Purpose**

To make recommendations to the Committee to inform the development of initiatives that promote equality and diversity amongst councillors.

#### **Scope**

Using a combination of reviewing good practice and learning from elsewhere, discussions with expert witnesses, research, analysis of data, and interviews with councillors, develop proposals that set out:

- How the council can promote equality and diversity for all councillors including consideration of phasing out the use of gender defining titles
- The adoption of a Parental Leave policy for councillors, to assist and encourage younger people to come forward as councillors
- How the council can ensure councillors with children and other caring commitments are supported as appropriate
- How political groups, Group Leaders and the Mayor/Chair can help ensure better behaviour in the Council Chamber to create an atmosphere of mutual respect – for example by:
  - Giving a reminder to all members of their responsibilities at the start of each meeting
  - Quick intervention if members fail to behave correctly
  - Ensuring a fair approach is applied to all councillors in the overseeing of meetings.

Additionally, at Full Council on 27 January 2021 a motion was proposed by Cllr Qayyum and agreed as follows:

The Council resolves to refer this matter to the current Task and Finish Group to promote equality and diversity among Councillors to:

- Consider how to best assist Councillors in relation to online abuse, bullying and harassment, particularly but not exclusively against female Councillors, with a view to report back to the Adults and Communities Scrutiny Committee meeting on 2 March 2021 with appropriate recommendations.
- Share any learning, training or any other opportunities that may arise from the work of the Task and Finish Group with all Councillors.

4.2 The cross party Task and Finish Group was made up of the following Councillors:

- Cllr Asif Shaheed (Chair)
- Cllr Jackie Allen
- Cllr John Fox
- Cllr Julie Howell
- Cllr Ikra Yasin

The Task and Finish Group's report is attached at appendix 1 and sets out a number of recommendations. This is the second and final report from the Task and Finish Group. The Communities Scrutiny Committee previously considered and agreed an interim report to support the amendments to the council's Member Code of Conduct, and the introduction of a Member Parental Leave Policy. Both policies were subsequently approved by Full Council in July 2021.

### **Gender Defining Titles**

- 4.3 The Task and Finish Group considered whether the council routinely uses gender defining titles. Whilst there may be rare occasions where titles such as "Chairman" are used, this is not the norm and has widely been replaced by the neutral term "Chair". However, the group noted that the Mayor is still formally addressed as Mr or Madam Mayor and this should be updated. It is therefore recommended that the Mayor be formally addressed as Mayor "surname" in line with the councillor address. If agreed, the constitution will be updated and amended to change any other gender specific titles to a neutral term.

### **Expenses for Councillor care commitments**

- 4.4 The council has long held a policy that means reasonable care expenses that Councillors may incur, whilst carrying out their official role, can be met. The Task and Finish group found that although the policy is in existence, few Councillors are aware of it. It is therefore recommended that the policy is advertised more widely and routinely forms part of Member briefing/training sessions.

### **Bullying and Harassment**

- 4.5 The Task and Finish group developed a survey for all councillors to understand issues that members may have experienced with bullying and harassment in their role. 29 responses (from 60 councillors, 25% of respondents stated they were female) to the survey were received.
- Just over half of the councillors who replied stated that they had experienced some form of public threats or harassment within the last three years
  - However, almost half of the councillors said that they were not concerned about the threats or harassment they received and were well prepared to handle threats of harassment
  - Less than a third of councillors have considered leaving their role as a result of threats or harassment received
  - Around a quarter of councillors have experienced physical violence/intimidation in their role from members of the public
  - Over two thirds of councillors are unaware of the support available through employment assistance programme

The Task and Finish Group felt that many of the issues commented on at formal meetings were historic and that over the last year, there had been a significant improvement.

- 4.6 The Task and Finish Group has previously recommended that the council adopt an improved Member Code of Conduct, and this was considered and adopted by Full Council in July 2021.

To help Members deal with public threats or harassment, it is recommended that additional Member training is provided that can provide practical assistance for Members. Members were offered training on Personal Safety and Conflict Management on the 12 January by the Health and Safety Team, following the training the slides and virtual recording were sent to all councillors.

4.7 In addition, Members noted that the council's Employee Assistance Programme provides a wealth of support and information on a wide range of issues, including access to mental health support. This support is also available to Members, and it is recommended that the programme be widely advertised to Members and renamed the Employee and Member Assistance Programme.

## **5. CONSULTATION**

5.1 The Mayor was interviewed as part of the Task and Finish Group's work. A survey to all councillors was also conducted.

## **6. ANTICIPATED OUTCOMES OR IMPACT**

6.1 The recommendations within this report will remove outdated gender defining titles and provide greater support for councillors via the council's assistance scheme.

## **7. REASON FOR THE RECOMMENDATION**

7.1 As agreed by Full Council, the Task and Finish group has undertaken a review of the issues raised in the council motions. The recommendations contained within the report, and those already approved will help to improve equality and mitigate issues experienced by some Councillors.

## **8. ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS CONSIDERED**

8.1 Do not approve the recommendations from the Task and Finish group. This option has been rejected as it will not meet the issues outlined within the council motions.

## **9. IMPLICATIONS**

### **Financial Implications**

9.1 The recommendations may result in increased claims for expenses, additional training costs and additional allowance costs, for example if a member in receipt of Special Responsibility Allowance takes parental leave, and the special responsibility is backfilled.

It is expected that any additional costs arising from the recommendations will be contained within the current overall budget for Members Allowances.

### **Legal Implications**

9.2 None identified.

### **Equalities Implications**

9.3 None identified

### **Rural Implications**

9.4 None identified

### **Carbon Impact Assessment**

9.5 No issues identified.

## **10. BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS**

Used to prepare this report, in accordance with the Local Government (Access to Information) Act 1985

10.1 None

**11. APPENDICES**

- 11.1 Appendix 1 – Report from the Task and Finish Group to Promote Equality and Diversity Amongst Councillors

This page is intentionally left blank