

PART 1 - PUBLIC

Decision Maker: General Purposes and Licensing Committee

Date: 30th June 2010

Decision Type: Non-Urgent Non-Executive Non-Key

Title: **DEMOCRATIC SERVICES - BENCHMARKING INFORMATION**

Contact Officer: Graham Walton, Democratic Services Manager
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Chief Officer: Mark Bowen, Director of Legal, Democratic and Customer Services

Ward: N/A

1. Reason for report

- 1.1 A pan-London benchmarking exercise was carried out in 2009 through the London Democratic Services Forum. This was considered by this Committee in September 2009, and the Committee requested that the matter be considered further when the effect of the changes to the Council's decision-making processes was clearer. The figures show that although the Council does have the highest ratio of meetings to staff in London, there has been a real reduction in the number of meetings since the introduction of new executive decision-making processes in May 2009.
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2. **RECOMMENDATION(S)**

- 2.1 **The Committee is requested to consider the benchmarking information and the other performance information relating to Democratic Services.**

Corporate Policy

1. Policy Status: N/A.
 2. BBB Priority: Excellent Council.
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Financial

1. Cost of proposal: No cost
 2. Ongoing costs: N/A.
 3. Budget head/performance centre: Democratic Services
 4. Total current budget for this head: £504,640
 5. Source of funding: NA
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Staff

1. Number of staff (current and additional): Current establishment is 14 staff, six of whom are part time (total 11.89fte posts). 10fte staff are involved in democratic services work (ie supporting meetings), with the remainder responsible for dealing with corporate complaints and Freedom of Information requests.
 2. If from existing staff resources, number of staff hours: N/A
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Legal

1. Legal Requirement: Statutory requirement. The main legislative requirements are contained in the Local Government Act 1972, the Local Government Act 2000 and the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007.
 2. Call-in: Call-in is not applicable. No executive decision is involved.
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Customer Impact

1. Estimated number of users/beneficiaries (current and projected): The Democratic Services Team has a particular focus on supporting all 60 Members of the Council, and plays an important role in working with members of the public who have an interest in the Council's decision making arrangements.
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Ward Councillor Views

1. Have Ward Councillors been asked for comments? No.
2. Summary of Ward Councillors comments: N/A

3. COMMENTARY

- 3.1 At its meeting on 23rd September 2009 the Committee received a report setting out benchmarking information that had been assembled through the London Democratic Services Forum (LDSF), a network that links Democratic Services managers from across London. This information had previously been considered by the Constitution Improvement Working Group on 10th June 2009, who had referred it to this Committee. The Working Group considered that if any changes were to be made to the levels of Member support, it was important to establish exactly what Members' needs were. The Chairman of the Working Group identified support for scrutiny reviews as one area where more support was needed. The Working Group also made reference to the Member Support survey conducted earlier in 2009 in which Bromley Councillors had identified access to better information as a major issue. The Councillors' intranet site (presented at the Committee's meeting in June 2009) is a direct outcome of this feedback, and these comments were also helpful in putting together the Member Induction Programme 2010.
- 3.2 The anonymised results of the LDSF survey are attached as appendix 1 – seventeen boroughs responded and Bromley's information is at line 4, Borough D (wrongly typed as B in the schedule). This data is now over a year old, and has the usual difficulties associated with making comparisons between organisations set up in different ways, but it does give a useful picture of support to members across the capital. It shows that Bromley's Democratic Services Team has the lowest reported staffing levels in London, and the lowest staffing budget, but it services the second highest number of meetings. However, it also shows that Bromley Members do not benefit from some of the support services that some other boroughs may provide with higher staffing levels.
- 3.3 Appendix 2 includes Bromley statistics for 2009/10 on numbers of meetings, compared to 2008/09. These figures cover meetings where there are formal agendas and minutes produced by Democratic Services – there are in addition around 40 Licensing Sub-Committee meetings per annum (for which the Team publishes agenda papers, but does not attend or take minutes.) This data shows that there has been a substantial reduction in the number of Portfolio Holder meetings (from 56 to 14) as a result of the changes to executive decision-making introduced in May 2009, although it should be remembered that the Democratic Services Team still has to process executive decisions even if they are not made at a portfolio holder meeting.. The new arrangements have produced a greater emphasis on effective pre-decision scrutiny, but there has as a result been increased pressure on the workloads of PDS Committees. There were slight increases in the numbers of PDS Committee and PDS Working Group meetings, while other Member-level meetings decreased from 157 to 145. There was an overall decrease in meetings within this category, although executive working groups increased from 7 in 2008/09 to 15 in 2009/10.
- 3.4 Other factors that had an impact on the Democratic Services Team during 2009/10 included introducing the new executive decision/making arrangements and other constitutional changes, implementing ICT changes (teamsites and Modern.gov), improving publicity and promotion of democratic activity and organising the change of Council membership in May 2010. This involved considerable resources devoted to preparing for and delivering the 2010 Member Induction programme, marshalling information for new Members, setting up new lists and providing support on an ongoing basis.
- 3.5 Minute production times have continued to come down. These are measured at two points - firstly, the time taken (in working days) for Democratic Services to produce draft minutes for internal circulation, and then, secondly, the overall time taken to be publish the draft minutes, as cleared by the chairman and senior officers. For 2008/09, the average times were 5.2 and 9.6 working days respectively; for 2009/10 the average times were 4.2 and 8.5 working days. Although this improvement is welcomed at a time when workloads are under continuing

pressure, there does need to be continuing effort to reduce these times, in particular for meetings involving executive decisions.

4. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

- 4.1 Although the Council has considerable discretion about how frequently meetings are held, there are some minimum requirements around issuing summonses for Council meetings (although we are only required to hold an annual meeting), administering executive decisions, having at least one overview and scrutiny committee and having committees responsible for scrutinising health and crime and disorder. Committee papers for meetings have to be published five clear days before the meeting in accordance with the access to information rules.

Non-Applicable Sections:	Policy/Financial/Personnel
Background Documents: (Access via Contact Officer)	None