

Member Learning and Development

A report for Epping Forest Council

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Introduction

1. The IDeA's main guidance document relating to Member Training and Development – “The Political Skills Framework for Elected members” begins with the following words:

Surprisingly little attention has been paid to the knowledge and skills required by local councillors despite their role being one of the most complex in politics or the wider work context. It is certainly more complicated than that of Member of Parliament. The local councillor role has also gone through many changes and continues to evolve. There is therefore a growing need to support new and experienced councillors in their efforts to develop the knowledge and skills they need to be effective.

2. It is in this light that the IDeA was commissioned by Epping Forest Council to help develop a more engaging and effective programme for Members, in order to ensure that:

- All members have the opportunity to explore their learning and development needs
- Members have the skills and knowledge they need to lead the organisation

and that

- Learning and development is seen as both effective and as providing value for money.

Methodology

3. Two evening seminars themed around Member Learning and Development were held in late 2009. These enabled Members to discuss some of the issues surrounding the requirements for a new and revitalised training programme, and resulted in agreement that Members would participate further in the process in January 2010.

4. All members were given the opportunity to become involved and interviews with an IDeA consultant were scheduled at the Council offices (the

opportunity for members to be interviewed in central London was also offered in order to accommodate those members who commute)

5. In total 18 members were interviewed, the survey was cross party and included the Leaders of the Conservative, Liberal Democrat, Labour and LRA groups

6. The purpose of the interviews was to consult with members to establish:

- (a) What they wanted from a learning and development programme and to work with each member to develop a personal development plan
- (b) To consider what should be included in future programmes (including Induction)
- (c) To discuss the most effective way to deliver effective member learning and development at Epping Forest; and
- (d) To consider options for evaluation to ensure any new programme can be clearly linked to learning objectives in order to measure effectiveness and value for money

Key Findings

- Members believed that training was currently “ad hoc” and that members had become “complacent” regarding training and development.
- Training must be relevant, engaging, value for money and scheduled well in advance.
- Members wish to become more involved - in setting learning objectives, delivering training and evaluating impact.
- Member training should be aligned to and support the strategic planning process.
- The role of the group leader – in supporting their group, identifying learning and development opportunities/needs and providing feedback – is key to ensuring the success of a learning and development programme.
- Deliver a more formal Induction for all new members.
- Consider new delivery methods – e.g. joint commissioning (with officers and members from other authorities), develop an e-learning resource, more practical training based on visits and observations in relevant service delivery departments, coaching and mentoring

- Member training and development should be part of the annual planning cycle – objectives agreed, programme developed, training delivered, impact assessed.
- All members wished to ensure their skills and knowledge on key technical issues (such as Planning and Licensing) are kept up to date, and suggested a formal programme of short refresher sessions.
- A large proportion of members interviewed wanted clearer and more accessible information relating to the constitution and council protocols, and would welcome a glossary of technical terms (e.g. relating to Planning and development control).

Training Delivery

7. It was recognised that it would be impossible to find a consistent time during the day that would be suitable for all members to attend training. However, the following ideas were suggested as possible solutions to the problem:

- Produce a training calendar once a year, identifying training sessions so members can get these in their diaries – try to ensure that this calendar is co-ordinated with the schedule of meetings
- Ensure members get at least one month's notice of any training
- Set aside a particular day (e.g. last Thursday in the month) as "Member training day"
- For mandatory or very popular courses, try to ensure that the course runs twice – once during the day, once early evening, to attempt to suit as many members as possible

8. In addition, there was some appetite for a range of delivery methods – all members questioned were happy to engage in training courses with Epping Forest officers, and all but one were interested in running a pilot session with other authorities in the region to see if joint commissioning of Member training could bring efficiencies.

9. Distance and/or E-learning was not seen as the delivery method of choice for many members, but a significant proportion said they would like e-learning tools to be available as an alternative option, and a number of those questioned said they would be happy to trial an e-learning module.

10. Members would like to see more learning resources available – e.g. developing a "training and information library" and providing access to e-

learning – not as a primary training source, but to provide back-up information and reference material.

11. Members liked being trained by Epping Forest staff because it was felt that they understand the local issues and can provide a more relevant perspective than external trainers, however, there were a number of caveats to this:

- “Not death by powerpoint”
- “I don’t want to just sit and listen to someone reading something from a screen that I could have read at home”
- “I need the training to be relevant to the residents of Epping Forest, and to show me practically how I can make a difference”
- “A professional trainer working alongside one of our officers often gives just the right balance”

12. There was a very definite preference for scenario/case study based training, in fairly small interactive groups, focussed on practical examples, where the member can ask questions and become more practically involved.

13. A number of members also thought that the training would sometimes have more relevance if delivered by members – e.g. training for new panel members could be delivered by the Chair/Vice Chair.

14. It was also suggested that an annual session delivered by the Chair and Heads of Service – providing update information, future plans and priorities and outstanding issues would be a very useful session for members and officers alike

15. In addition, some members attend learning and development events within the region and further afield, and are aware that there are many more such opportunities – often at little or no cost. They would like to be made aware of these events – possibly through the bulletin.

Content of a Member learning and development programme

16. The Personal Development planning sessions indicated a number of training needs which appeared to be required by a number of members. These are divided into three categories – Technical Skills, Interpersonal Skills and Practical Skills and are shown in the table below.

17. Please note; many members interviewed identified specific requirements which were personal and relevant to their own development (e.g. training on a specific IT package, training on specific areas of legislation). These have

been discussed on an individual basis with Ian Willett, and do not form part of the scope of this report. It should be noted however that the need to identify and meet such personal requirements will be an on-going part of the personal development process for elected members if the proposals discussed within this report are agreed.

% = percentage of interviewees who requested this training

Technical skills	%	Interpersonal skills	%	Practical skills	%
LGF - overview	38.8 9%	Working more effectively with officers	27.7 8%	Work/life balance/managing the role./being "good enough"	33. 33 %
Epping Forest – customer insight	16.6 7%	Coaching and mentoring	22.2 2%	Time management	33. 33 %
LGF – managing a budget	22.2 2%	Influencing and negotiating skills	27.7 8%	Public speaking/speaking to camera	27. 78 %
Dealing with Casework effectively	22.2 2%	Personal skills – motivating others, building a successful team, managing performance,	33.3 3%	Effective Questioning (scrutiny skills)	22. 22 %
Budgeting and performance management	16.6 7%	Managing and delivering effective opposition	11.1 1%	Improved public speaking and managing the media	22. 22 %
Managing on the wider agenda	16.6 7%	Managing and developing the group	11.1 1%	Effective reading and analysis skills (how to manage written data more effectively (NOT SPEED READING))	22. 22 %
Social media – opportunities and pitfalls	27.7 8%	Working effectively in political groups	16.6 7%	Speed reading	22. 22 %
Chairing meetings effectively	16.6 7%	Leadership skills and styles - inc possibly emotional intelligence	16.6 7%	Writing/creating effective leaflets/newsletters	33. 33 %
Procedure and protocols for formal council meetings	33.3 3%	Dealing with difficult people, managing	16.6 7%	IT for the terrified/computers don't bite	22. 22 %

		conflict, neighbourhood disputes etc			
Planning – the technical terms and vocabulary	16.6 7%	Working effectively in political groups	16.6 7%	Questioning techniques (specifically in preparation for public meetings) Training to include best ways to frame questions effectively	22.22%
Better use of social media – opportunities and pitfalls	16.6 7%				
General refresher training (e.g. planning)	100.00%				

Induction

18. All members felt that there was a huge learning curve following election, and that too much information, too quickly delivered, was not effective in terms of delivering Induction. However, all members felt that there should be a formal induction process for new councillors, but that this should take place over a longer time period, possibly supported by a buddy/mentor system so each new member has an identified person they can go to in the first few months in office. There was some difference of opinion regarding the identity of a potential “buddy” – some members felt that this should be another, more experienced, councillor, whilst others suggested that an officer could take this role.

19. Some interviewees suggested that the training programme should take place over a couple of dedicated days fairly soon after election while others felt that it would be more effective scheduled in over a 3/6 month period.

20. It was suggested that the Induction programme should include:

- An introduction to key officers and members
- Visits to key departments – but not a whistle-stop tour of the building as this just becomes confusing
- A tour of the district (optional – possibly link up with officer induction)

- A list of key contacts for all service areas – one very interesting idea would be to ensure that all officers have a photo on the intranet, with their job title, contact number and a brief description of their job role.
- How meetings work – possibly using footage from the web-cam
- The opportunity to observe all panels/committees
- Managing your case load effectively (see above)
- The practical aspects – who does what, office support, allowances, declaration of interests etc
- Standards and governance
- Organisational structure chart(s)
- Member/officer roles and relationships
- A glossary of terms (especially planning!)
- Planning
- Local Government Finance

21. It was also suggested that we should ensure that all reference material is available on the intranet and as hard copy in the Members Area, and that this is maintained in order to ensure that it is up to date.

Evaluation

22. All members were in agreement that any training programme should have clear objectives and provide value for money.

23. Training evaluation is notoriously difficult, sometimes the benefits are intangible; sometimes the opportunity to put the training into practice may take a while to materialise. However, it was agreed that there should be a clear link between the learning and development programme and strategic objectives, and a way of assessing the impact of the training in order to determine whether it has delivered against agreed objectives.

24. It was also felt that members should be involved in setting their own learning objectives, and that training should be relevant to the individual - for example, a new member may identify a wide range of subjects they would wish to explore further, whilst a more experienced member may identify very few training needs over and above refresher training. Some members interviewed also expressed an interest in pursuing 360 degree feedback as a method of both setting learning and development objectives and evaluating the success of a learning and development programme.

25. Members felt that it would be useful to adopt the learning and development planning cycle shown at figure 1 below. The evaluation would also feed into the strategic planning cycle and would allow members to gain a greater understanding of their own learning and development needs, the

options for meeting these, and to ensure that there was a positive return on investment.

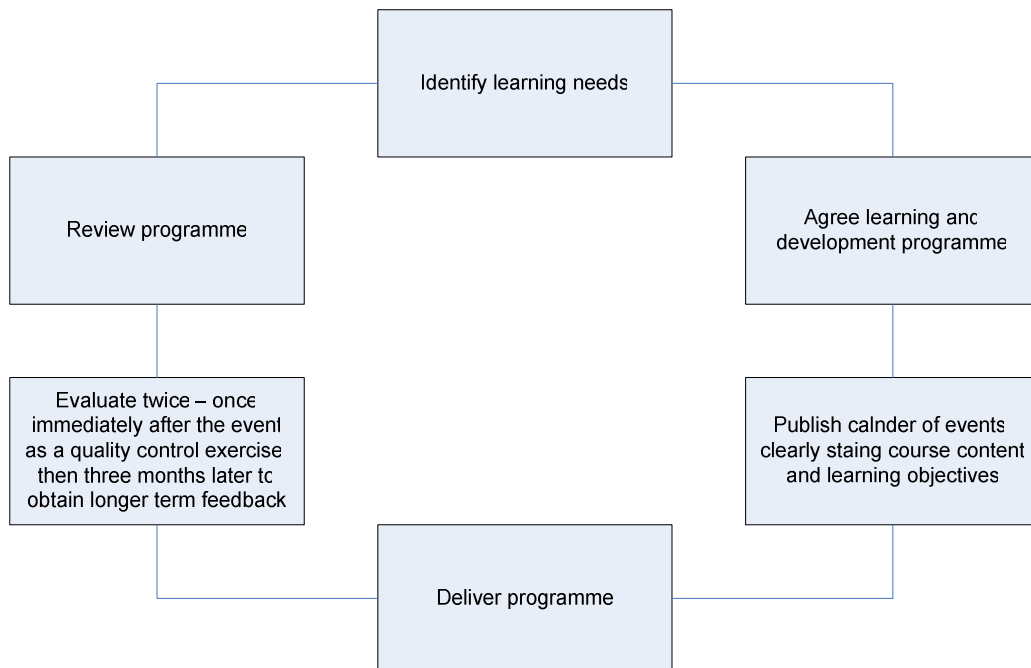


Fig 1. Planning and delivering the learning cycle

Recommendations

- 1) Develop a training brochure for Calendar year 2010/11 and allow members to select the learning events they would like to attend.
- 2) Develop and implement a formal planning and learning cycle for elected members, including an evaluation procedure.
- 3) Investigate running a pilot learning event with other authorities within the region - possibly a network discussion forum around a particular priority theme, rather than a formal training course.
- 4) Introduce additional training resources such as e:learning and training library and encourage one to one training opportunities such as site visits, service related discussions and coaching.
- 5) Support members to design and deliver training – Induction training, training for new committee members etc.

- 6) Work with officers to ensure that officer-delivered training is relevant, interactive and based around scenarios and case studies when possible – eradicate “death by powerpoint”!
 - 7) Agree a new member induction programme – to come into effect following the elections this year.
 - 8) Group leaders to consider developing informal buddies/mentors to ensure that all new members have the opportunity to avail themselves of this type of learning support.
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