REPORT OF THE MEMBERS' SERVICES TASK AND FINISH GROUP

1.0   **Introduction**

1.1   This Group, was established by Council at its meeting on 24 June 2010, for the purpose of reviewing the nature and level of support given to all elected members in their growing and changing frontline community leadership role, as "Cabinet members in their own division".   It comprised the following members:-

> Mrs J B Barrow
> Mr J E Clarke
> Mr J M W Kenny
> Mr M Whiteman
> Mrs T Woodward

1.2   The context for the Group's work is the Council's emerging community engagement strategy, as we seek to create more resilient, self-sufficient local communities, and the need to make recommendations to the Council on necessary improvements to our arrangements for supporting all elected Members, in their various roles.

2.   **Recommendations**

2.1   It is recommended that:-

(a)   the revised member role description and list of essential skills as set out in Appendix 5 be approved, as a working document subject to regular review and revision in the light of experience;

(b)   the purchase of the SEE Skills Portal Member Assessment Tool (see para 5.4 below) be approved;

(c)   the provision of appropriate facilities for members at the local HQ buildings be investigated, but no changes be made until the Area Directors take up their new offices;

(d)   dependent on (c) above, the provision of additional administrative support to members in their frontline role being provided locally be considered, subject to cost considerations;

(e)   a revised internal telephone directory be provided for all members as soon as is practicable;

(f)   the list of key officer contacts be updated and circulated to all members as soon as is practicable;

(g)   letterheads and accessible templates be provided to all members on request;

(h)   diary management be provided through Members' Services for all members, on request;

(i)   the Members' 'freefone' facility be discontinued due to very limited use;

(j)   the provision of more cost-effective arrangement for booking members' travel and overnight accommodation be investigated as a matter of urgency;

(k)   the production of a pocket Council diary be discontinued, but a weekly meetings schedule be sent to all members electronically, in its place;

(l)   the quality of the information contained in the Councillors' Corner section of the Council's intranet, and the training given to Members on its use, be improved;

(m)   the monthly information bulletins be continued and circulated to all members electronically;

(n)   the value of the Local Member Protocol be re-affirmed to all senior staff, and appropriate steps be taken to familiarise all members and senior officers with its contents, once the changes to Senior Management have been completed;

(o)   the functionality of the Council's electronic diary be improved, so as to enable members to import dates directly into their personal Lotus Notes diaries;

(p)   the current meetings schedule, which is spread over the five working days of the week, be maintained; and

(q)   the member development framework, consisting of five key development programmes of:-

- focused local learning;
- overview and scrutiny framework;
- essential development programme;
- What's New briefings programme; and
- Specific individual development needs

be approved and the focused learning programme be implemented as a prototype in the south eastern part of the Council's area, with effect from 25 January 2011.

3.   **Terms of Reference**

3.1   The Group's terms of reference were as follows:

- To consider the level and nature of officer support for individual members and identify future requirements and ways of working.

- To undertake an analysis of the support currently provided for Shropshire members against that provided elsewhere, particularly in other similar unitary councils.

- To assess the effectiveness of the current arrangements for member training and development and how these needs are likely to change in the future.

- To define the changing nature of the role of frontline members and of public expectations of them, including a review of how members communicate effectively with their electors.

- To identify how members' performance of the frontline role can be measured and members be made more accountable to local people for this.

4. Methodology

4.1 In order to achieve its intended purpose, the Group (under the chairmanship of Mrs T Woodward) met on six occasions to review the scale, scope and effectiveness of services currently provided to all members. These meetings have also been attended by the Leader of the Council and have been facilitated by the Chief Executive, the Assistant Chief Executive (Legal and Democratic), the Head of Democratic Services, and the Council's Organisation Development Manager.

4.2 At its first meeting, the Group recognised the need to consult all members on the completeness and effectiveness of the range of services provided for them, details of which are set out in Appendix 1. It was also agreed that, to provide context, this list should be benchmarked both against neighbouring councils and those of a similar type. These are set out in Appendix 2 for comparative purposes.

4.3 In addition, and so that the effectiveness of the services and also members' current and future requirements in this area could be assessed, the Group invited all members to participate in an online survey. A copy of the survey form is attached at Appendix 3 and the report containing the evaluation and highlights from the comments received, is attached at Appendix 4.

4.4 Approximately 65% of members completed the online survey form and the Group has drawn heavily on the comments received when framing its recommendations for action, which are set out below:

5. Background

5.1 The Group is aware of the comprehensive review of the Council's democratic decision making processes that has been ongoing since the beginning of 2010. These include the operation of both Council and Cabinet meetings, as well as the recent review of the scrutiny functions. This review of Members' Services forms the final, but no less significant, part of the process.

5.2 We consider that the work undertaken by members in their electoral divisions, where they are increasingly required to operate as "Cabinet members in their own wards", is probably the most important aspect of the wider review. Being pivotal to the decision making process, its importance to developing and supporting members to take on this enhanced role should not be underestimated, but this has been under provided for in the past, in terms of direct support from Council staff. Consequently, we consider that it is necessary to clarify this new Community Leadership role for all non-executive members, assess how this differs from their traditional role and put in place a range of services which ensure that all members have adequate support to undertake this role with confidence.

5.3 A revised Member job description was considered and approved by the Group, together with a list of the skills required to carry out the member role, both of which are attached at Appendix 5. These documents have also been considered informally and approved by the Impact group of elected Members who have been looking at the development needs of Members. This initial document is regarded as a working document, to be reviewed and updated regularly in the light of experience.

5.4   The Group also supported the purchase of the SEE Skills Portal Assessment Tool which enables Members to identify their learning styles, the areas where they are performing well and where they may require some additional support or training. Being an internet-based system, it will allow this information to be stored in a secure database and then used to plan effective Member development initiatives.

5.5   In the past, little dedicated support has been provided to assist non-executive members to develop their community leadership role. This will be more necessary in future, if they are to facilitate the creation of and co-ordinate the effective operation of local networks that will be required to build social capacity and greater self-sufficiency within their communities.

5.6   While assessing the adequacy of the current arrangements, we have been made aware of a number of matters requiring attention in this context. These include:

- the difficulties many non-executive members have experienced since reorganisation in identifying the correct staff member to resolve their particular concerns;

- lack of information about ongoing consultations/communications with parish/town councils on local issues;

- inconsistencies in the approach of officers to the Local Member Protocol, leading to variations in the information provided to members about local issues or initiatives; and

- the need to develop an appropriate way of communicating information about local events and actions to local electors.

5.7   Addressing each of these concerns in turn, we have already put in hand a number of improvements which appear to have been well received by members. With regard to the difficulties in identifying the appropriate person to provide swift action to resolve local problems, all members have been provided with a new key contacts list, (which will be updated to reflect recent appointments to the new senior management structure).

5.8   The concerns expressed over a lack of co-ordination on the release of information and the dates of consultation events has now been satisfactorily addressed.   In addition to the establishment of the consultation portal, related work is ongoing, and recently completed consultation exercises have seen details published regularly in the monthly electronic member bulletin produced by Democratic Services.   This document enables members to have a consistent and coherent message when attending at and reporting to parish/town council meetings.   Thus far, we have received a number of complimentary comments on the value of this document.

5.9   In relation to concerns expressed about inconsistencies in approach to notifying local members about important matters/events, we have considered both the content and relevance of the Local Member Protocol. Having done so, we concluded that the document is still very relevant, but its existence may not be universally known or appreciated by all senior staff. Again, because of current organisational changes, it has been decided to defer action to reinforce the need for compliance with the Protocol. However, once the new management structure has been established, the Assistant Chief Executive (Legal and Democratic Services), will take the necessary steps to ensure mutual understanding and operational compliance across all sections of the Council.

5.10   Finally, with regard to regular communications with local electors, the group discussed the value of regular Member surgeries and the publication of newsletters. However, given the current differences in the individual approaches taken by members in this area, the Group found it difficult to be prescriptive about the best method. Nevertheless, both services continue to be available to all members.

5.11   Steps have also been taken to make internal communications with members more effective. In recent months, this has led to significant improvements to the "Councillors' Corner" of the intranet, and also enhancements to members' individual web pages. These developments follow on from presentations made to each of the political groups by Democratic Services, so as to familiarise the majority of members with these facilities. Work to improve the quality of both is still in progress, but will shortly provide members with an effective resource and archive in the future.

6.   Members' Survey

6.1   Throughout the summer, the Group considered the best format for a survey to obtain all members' views on the current level of support, in terms of what works well and what needs to be improved.

6.2   Initially, it was intended that the Group would visit one or two exemplar councils to assess how local practice compares to the services provided elsewhere. However, this proved to be more difficult to do than was first anticipated, because none of these services is benchmarked against objective best practice indicators and, inevitably, custom and practice varies widely. Nevertheless, to ensure that Shropshire was at least keeping pace with its neighbours, and those unitary councils which are similar in style and size, a comparative exercise was undertaken. Eight councils were surveyed, and a comparative analysis of the service their members receive is contained in Appendix 2. From this, it can be seen that the range of facilities and services provided to Shropshire councillors compares favourably with those provided elsewhere.

6.3   When considering the style and form of the members' survey, the Group expressed the view that it was imperative that it did not follow the "tick box" style of many similar exercises. Members felt it important to provide their colleagues with the opportunity to make meaningful comments, so that these could be considered and evaluated where appropriate. The limited number of replies by the initial deadline of 27 August led to a 10 day extension, after which a response rate of approximately 65% of elected members was achieved.

6.4   As can be seen from the form which is attached at Appendix 3, the survey was itself wide-ranging. It covered the general service which is provided by the Members' Secretariat; the quality and accessibility of ICT support; and value of alternative approaches with regard to developing the community leadership role; as well as general comments on the current arrangements and possible improvements to these.

6.5   Most members indicated their satisfaction with the current services. But one of the most important findings to come through the survey was the relatively low level of usage members make of what is available. Although Shropshire compares favourably with the eight other councils contacted, many of those members who replied to the survey stated that they did not use the principal services of typing (35%) or dictation (25%) which are currently provided. These members prefer to compose their own correspondence and believe that their own efficiency and effectiveness would be improved at lower cost by access to letter templates which

would allow them to be more responsive than if they were to direct the work through the Members' Secretariat.

6.6   Another important finding was that the majority (52%) of members using the Members' Secretariat only do so when either ordering or collecting stationery. This appears to be a service which could be undertaken differently. Although this requires further exploration and discussion, it would appear more cost effective for the IT stationery requirements to be collected from the IT Helpdesk. Stationery could continue to be provided by the Members' Secretariat or, alternatively, through Shirehall Reception at the North Entrance.

6.7   The booking of venues for surgeries, travel and accommodation for members by the Members' Secretaries appears to be well used, although 15% of respondents have found it cheaper and/or more convenient to make such bookings directly themselves on line, rather than using the Council's agents. Consequently, the Group considers this to be something which requires urgent review and steps are being taken to improve these arrangements.

6.8   On the subject of general improvements, a number of members suggested the re-introduction of a pocket diary. We consider this to be a retrograde step, both in terms of cost and the fact that a printed diary is out of date almost immediately after the print run has been completed. The Group therefore rejected this suggestion, preferring to promote the usage of the Council's electronic diary, supplemented by the weekly release of an enhanced meetings list, which is now being circulated electronically to all members. Whilst this list can never be entirely comprehensive, given the difficulties of tracking individual meetings for outside bodies and the like, the reaction of members since its introduction has been positive.

6.9   One important area, where the Group has responded supportively to comment received, relates to the possible provision of members' services at the local HQ buildings. It is appreciated that it can sometimes be both costly and inefficient for some members to travel to Shrewsbury to arrange and/or collect supplies. The Group recommends that, once the new Area Directors have been appointed and are located in their new offices, further consideration be given to actioning this enhancement.

6.10   With regard to the potential benefits of the possible provision of dedicated neighbourhood officer support for members in their community leadership roles, the replies received were mixed. Whilst some respondents (15%) believe that this could be helpful, the same proportion are seeking clarification of the precise nature of the role before committing themselves. However, a more significant proportion (39%) feel that there is no real need for this support.

6.11   The Group was surprised by this reaction, given members' complaints about their own heavy workloads, so the matter is to be given further thought as part of wider changes in the introduction of locality working under the new Area Directors. Responses to questions relating to the type of local events supported by members revealed that a very significant proportion (70%) attend as many events in their local division as is possible. Most have an extensive knowledge of their local communities and the events they attend are wide-ranging. Apart from the usual parish/town council meetings, they include school, community and fund raising events, police, charity and residents meetings, as well as regular Local Joint Committee meetings.

6.12   Perhaps one of the most significant responses within the survey was that concerning how the members' role as community leaders could be actively promoted within their

local area. Here, 39% of those responding stated that this was best done by consulting, or at least informing them, before any local action was taken. Some of this number also suggested that they should be given the opportunity to participate on project boards, with the ability to directly influence some part of the budget spent within their own divisions.

6.13   This aspect is also to be reviewed further, in the light of best practice in other local councils. But, as a first step, the Council is soon to launch its Community Leadership and Development Framework – and overarching plan which links five development programmes together into a meaningful and linked framework. The five programmes are:

- Focused Local Learning;
- Overview and Scrutiny Framework;
- Essential Development Programme;
- What's New Programme of Briefings;
- Specific Individual Development Needs.

6.14   The aim of the Framework is to equip Members with the skills and knowledge that will support and strengthen them as community leaders and, in turn, improve outcomes for Shropshire residents. Effective Community Leadership is seen as key to enabling our communities to become more resilient and self sufficient, and will become an essential part of the Government's 'Big Society' initiative, as well as being increasingly important at a time of financial austerity and cuts in funding for local public services.

6.15   The Framework has been designed to ensure that all development related to Members is meaningful, accredited and focused.   It will allow Members to build on their existing skills and develop new ones. All Member development and support will then be tightly structured and linked directly to the needs of Shropshire's local communities.

6.16   The Focused Local Learning programme was approved by the Transformation Board in October 2010. It will be introduced initially as a prototype in the South East of the County in January. The programme recognises that local leadership has to be tailored to meet the needs of the individual community. The programme is focused on creating community based solutions to those complex problems which can be encountered when engaging in working in partnership with those living and working in those communities.

6.17   It is important that there are strong links between this programme and other interrelated initiatives to promote better locality working by the Council, to achieve the following outcomes:

Members becoming stronger community leaders during difficult times;

'Mentoring' – member to member – to improve skills and confidence;

Members supported to deliver measurable outcomes through working with a range of people, especially hard to reach groups;

Members leading and empowering their local communities to be able to do more for themselves – "leading the leaders"

Members ensuring that limited resources are targeted directly at the highest priority areas;

Career development for Members, and the ability to attract potential candidates to stand for election in 2013;

Positive outcomes for our local communities in times of financial austerity, through the greater involvement and empowerment of local people to do more for themselves and;

Members involved in meaningful, focused, and innovative personal development activities.

7. <u>Conclusions</u>

7.1 From the work that we have undertaken, the Group regards the response rate from members of 65% as being statistically robust enough to enable conclusions to be drawn about member views on these matters. This is particularly so if those members who did not reply are assumed to be satisfied with the current range of facilities on offer.

7.2 It is evident that there are high levels of satisfaction among members using the current range of services, particularly those provided by ICT (84%). But, while some parts of the current service are valued and respected, it is possible for some of them to be undertaken more cost effectively than at present.

7.3 The range of comments received on how best to assist and promote members in their community leadership role make it difficult to determine a single best approach to improving such support. However, one of the areas where a more consistent view could be discerned is in relation to member development and training. Here the Group noted that, in respect of the community leadership role, the position of the local member could be enhanced through the development of specific new skills.

7.4 It is intended to achieve this through the extension of the Focused Local Learning Programme to all areas of the County once the prototype in the south eastern divisions has been evaluated.

7.5 On the strength of the work of the Group, a range of improvements in support services to members have already been put in place, and others are planned. It is suggested that these new arrangements be reviewed in 12 months time, and revised, where necessary, in the light of experience of operating under the very difficult circumstances which will apply during this period.