

Report to Governance Committee

26 June 2023

Report of the Member Development Group

Report by Director of Law and Assurance

Electoral division(s): Not applicable

Summary

The Member Development Group (MDG) is an advisory body to the Governance Committee on all aspects of county councillors' roles and the training and development they need to undertake their work on the County Council. It reports to the Governance Committee on its work and member development activities undertaken. This report provides a review of the member development programme for 2022/23 and updates on the 2023/24 programme and on MDG's own work programme.

Recommendation

That the report be noted.

1. Background and context

- 1.1 Member Development Group (MDG) is a cross-party advisory body to the Governance Committee, chaired by the Vice-Chairman of the Council. It has ownership of the annual member training and development programme to ensure this reflects members' needs as well as corporate priorities. Other key MDG responsibilities are a regular all-member survey (generally carried out in alternate years); monitoring the member training budget; overseeing participation in the Councillor Development Charter; and ownership of the member induction programme.
- 1.2 MDG's work is informed by its agreed Member Development Strategy, which provides the structure for councillor learning and development. This sets out the support provided to members to ensure their training reflects both their personal needs and organisational requirements and includes the following priorities for the member development programme:
 - Corporate priorities, including those within the Council Plan
 - Service improvement
 - Policy and strategy development
 - Major contract renewal
 - Engagement in the budget process and understanding of local government finance
 - Members' knowledge base - understanding the Council's services through updates, briefings and engagement

- Key and personal skills (e.g. chairmanship, questioning, council procedures, and mandatory training which includes safeguarding adults and children, IT security and General Data Protection Regulation, equalities and diversity and the Public Sector Equality Duty, Corporate Parenting)
- Values and culture (e.g. Code of Conduct, Equalities)

1.3 Some training is mandatory for members, as previously agreed by this Committee (and listed below). All members are expected to complete this training within one year of their election. MDG monitors uptake of this training, and the political Group Leaders are also kept updated on this.

- Code of Conduct
- Safeguarding Adults
- Safeguarding Children
- Corporate Parenting
- IT Security and Data Protection
- Equalities and Diversity

1.4 Each year, 11 member development sessions are timetabled in the member calendar of meetings (monthly apart from August). These may be used for a range of activities as part of the member development programme (e.g. training, briefings, visits). Sessions may be aimed at all members, or just specific members, relevant to their roles. Three of these sessions are used each year for all-member Budget and Council Plan sessions (usually in July, October/November and January). Whilst most informal member meetings are held virtually, some member development sessions are held in-person where beneficial, particularly where group work is planned or to support networking.

1.5 A Training Needs Assessment (TNA) is completed by members following election, supported by Democratic Services. This identifies any specific training or development needs they have and an opportunity to review/refresh this is offered on an annual basis or where members' roles change.

1.6 MDG meets three times per year to review member development activities, assess any feedback from members and plan the future programme. It is also kept updated on its areas of responsibility in-between meetings and has a work programme up to March 2025. This includes MDG's other areas of responsibility, such as planning for member induction, the all-member survey and the Councillor Development Charter. MDG carries out an end-of-year review each year, and this report provides feedback on the 2022/23 end-of-year review it carried out in May 2023. The report also provides an update on the 2023/24 programme, future plans and other activities carried out by MDG during the year.

2. Member development programme 2022/23

2.1 Full details of member development activities in 2022/23 are attached at **Appendix 1**. There were 34 different member development events held during the year, including four visits, seven training sessions/workshops, a market place event and seven locality sessions for members in their district/borough areas. In addition, tailored induction programmes were provided to the two councillors elected at by-elections during the year and some members were supported to attend external training sessions/seminars/conferences. Overall, MDG felt that the programme was very full and covered a wide range of issues,

with generally positive feedback received from participants and a good balance of types of event. MDG's key findings and conclusions are set out below.

- 2.2 **Average attendance** at events aimed at all members was 44%. This compares with 52% in 2021/22, 58% in 2020/21 and 41% in 2019/20. Attendance levels tend to taper off in the mid-term period of the Council administration, as members' knowledge and confidence grows. It is not possible to tell whether members unable to attend training/development sessions access the online resources available as a follow-up (recordings, presentations etc).
- 2.3 **Evaluation of training and development:** members are asked to give evaluation feedback and response levels have increased to 36%, from 25% in 2021/22. Encouraging greater member feedback has been an emphasis for MDG during the year, and it has supported the development of the use of the chat function in Teams, a mix of paper and online evaluations depending on the event, and some targeted follow-up calls carried out to gather more qualitative data after events. Average satisfaction levels for the sessions aimed at all members were 94%.
- 2.4 **Feedback received:** in general, feedback on the content and presentation of events has been positive. MDG reviews all evaluations (including feedback from external events) and makes suggestions for improvement, where applicable. Questions and comments raised at the Personal Safety training session have led to further work to better support members, including questions in the all-member survey 2023, to provide a baseline for further consideration. Any future market place events will be spread out over more than one session, reflecting member feedback that there was not enough time to explore all the service stands. MDG also reviewed the Carbon Literacy course run specifically for members and agreed that in future, members will be offered the opportunity to participate in the courses offered to staff. Member engagement in the Council Plan and Budget process throughout the year was seen as very successful, with positive feedback from members on this. In response to comments by members about the volume of events held in 2022/23 and 2022/21, MDG has agreed to limit sessions to the scheduled monthly member development sessions, unless there is an urgent need for additional sessions.
- 2.5 **Format of sessions:** MDG is generally satisfied with how training and development activities are delivered. It has asked for presentation slides to be kept simple and easy to read, and to be provided in advance to enable members to digest what can sometimes be complex information. Where this is not possible, MDG has asked that slides be shared on the morning of sessions, to enable members to view these on their laptops. MDG supports a mixed approach in terms of in-person and virtual/hybrid. It considers in-person sessions are particularly important in the first year after elections, to provide networking opportunities but that by mid-term, there is less need for this. Information-type briefings should always be provided virtually, whilst the three Council Plan/Budget sessions held each year are sessions that generally work well in-person. MDG recognises that virtual/hybrid sessions can help increase attendance and accessibility, help to meet the Council's Climate Change commitments, save costs and assist members with work, caring and other commitments and those with disabilities. MDG has agreed that a hybrid option should be available for all in-person training/development sessions.
- 2.6 **External training:** MDG recognises that it is important to support external training and development opportunities, particularly for members in senior

positions. The approval of Group Leaders is always sought for any members' applications to attend external training, seminars or conferences to support their development and feedback on such events attended is gathered for future reference. MDG also recognises the benefits of using external trainers to deliver some sessions, particularly where their expertise is relevant to local government/elected members. It has highlighted the importance of assessing the value of such training and of ensuring that external training providers are properly briefed on any relevant context/background relating specifically to West Sussex County Council. External trainers used during 2022/23 were South East Employers and the Centre for Governance and Scrutiny.

- 2.7 **Mandatory training:** has been kept under regular review and the MDG Chairman has written to members who have not completed all their required sessions, reminding them of the importance of doing this. MDG welcomed the high uptake of this training (set out in the table below, as at 2 May 2023), but was particularly concerned to ensure 100% completion of safeguarding and IT Security/Data Protection training. It has asked Democratic Services to follow up with the members yet to complete these sessions and to liaise with their Group Leaders.

| Mandatory training completion rates | Number of members | % of members |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------|---------------------|
| Code of Conduct | 70 | 100% |
| Safeguarding Adults | 65 | 93% |
| Safeguarding Children | 65 | 93% |
| Corporate Parenting | 69 | 99% |
| IT Security & Data Protection | 68 | 97% |
| Equalities and Diversity (including the Public Sector Equality Duty) | 69 | 99% |

3. Other activities carried out by MDG

- 3.1 **Be a Councillor:** MDG has begun work to review the Council's 'Be a Councillor' programme, which will run up to the 2025 elections. This is part of work to promote local democracy and is aimed at encouraging and supporting people thinking of standing for election. This will include the provision of new information via the Council's 'Be a Councillor' website, 'Be a Councillor' events at libraries in 2024 and candidates' events in early 2025. MDG agreed that examples of casework and success stories should be included in the information provided as part of this programme and that opportunities for buddying, mentoring or shadowing current councillors should be offered.
- 3.2 **LGA political skills framework:** MDG has agreed that the Local Government Association (LGA) political skills framework should be adopted as part of the Member Development Strategy and be used to help structure the future member induction programme. This framework highlights the following six core skills for councillors:

- Local leadership
- Partnership working
- Communication skills
- Political understanding
- Scrutiny and challenge
- Regulation and monitoring

- 3.3 **Accessibility, equalities and diversity:** MDG is continuing the work it carried out prior to the 2021 elections to ensure the appropriate support is in place for councillors with specific needs. It has asked that the 'Be a Councillor' website be updated to include more information about accessibility, including a new short guide setting out the support for councillors with disabilities. This guide was developed in liaison with a councillor with a disability and with input from the LGA. Equalities and Diversity training for members was provided by South East Employers in September 2022 and opportunities to ensure the member development programme is accessible and open continue to be explored. Written briefings/information for members are provided, as well as recordings of sessions to enable members unable to attend on the day to watch at a later date. The Bulletin remains a key weekly resource for members and includes details of the member development sessions. A new initiative trialled during 2022/23 is the use of short podcasts, to summarise key messages from member development sessions. The aim is to develop this further during 2023/22.
- 3.4 **LGA National Census of Local Councillors and Debate Not Hate:** In October 2022, MDG considered the outputs from the LGA's national census of local authority councillors. The response by West Sussex County councillors to this national census was relatively low (23 in total), so MDG agreed that the next all-member survey should include some similar questions, to provide benchmarking data. In particular, this will focus on the issue of members' personal safety and their experience of abuse or intimidation and whether they ever feel at risk when fulfilling their role as a councillor. Linked to this is the LGA's Debate Not Hate campaign, which encourages all councils to sign a public statement. MDG recommended to the Governance Committee that it should sign this statement on behalf of the Council, which it agreed to in February 2023. MDG will aim to identify opportunities to reinforce the messages of Debate Not Hate and to promote civility in public life, including through the Council's 'Be a Councillor' programme. The national census also highlighted the importance of including information in this programme about how councillors can have an influence in their different roles and what being an effective councillor looks like.
- 3.5 **All-member survey:** a survey is being carried out during May/June 2023, focusing on members' personal safety (their experiences and the support available to them) and priorities for future training and development. The results of the survey will be shared with all members and reviewed by MDG and will be used to inform the development of new personal safety guidance for members.

4. Councillor Development Charter Interim Review

- 4.1 MDG continues to oversee the Councillor Development Charter, granted in November 2020 for a period of three years. An interim review was carried out by South East Employers in April 2022 and reported to MDG later that year. The assessment found that the Council continues to meet the standard of the Councillor Development Charter and has made significant progress against the action plan developed following the successful Charter Accreditation. Key successes identified include:
- A structured TNA with 100% participation and the opportunity for 1-1 discussions; the TNA is being utilised to inform the development of a councillor learning and development plan

- MDG has a strategic focus and its terms of reference have been reviewed; it MDG focuses successfully on how member development can support the Council's strategic priorities
- MDG has led the development of e-learning opportunities including the recording of training sessions and active use of the LGA's e-learning resources for councillors
- Member development opportunities are actively promoted via newsletters and e-bulletins and a process of continuous evaluation is in place
- A leadership development strategy is in place that incorporates minority Group Leaders. Leadership development includes access to LGA programmes and is a regular area of discussion with Group Leaders

4.2 The Councillor Development Charter is due for renewal by March 2024 and MDG is due to consider whether to seek renewal of the Charter or to seek Charter Plus status at its meeting in October 2023.

5. Member development update 2023/24 and MDG work programme

5.1 Details of the current member development programme are set out at **Appendix 1**. Some details are to be confirmed, may be subject to change and will be regularly reviewed by the MDG to ensure they reflect key corporate priorities and member training needs. It is possible for additional sessions to be arranged for high priority topics, although MDG has asked that this be avoided as far as possible, given the demands on members' time and capacity.

5.2 MDG will continue to monitor member attendance levels, review feedback on events and assess mandatory training completion rates. Other areas of activity planned by MDG for the future include:

- The development of new guidance for members on their local role
- A review of the Member Development Strategy
- Planning for the Member Induction Programme 2025
- The impact of 'smarter working' on members and their future IT requirements
- Reviewing how the Council communicates with members
- Opportunities to promote local democracy, including with young people

6. Other options considered (and reasons for not proposing)

6.1 Alternatives to the proposed member training and development activities may be considered within the Committee's debate.

7. Consultation, engagement and advice

7.1 All members attending member development sessions are invited to provide evaluation feedback, which is analysed and reported to MDG to inform future plans. An all-member survey developed by MDG is currently underway, gathering feedback on members' personal safety and the future training and development programme. The Officer Executive Leadership Team is regularly invited to comment on plans for member training and development.

8. Finance

8.1 There are no financial implications arising directly from the content of this report. Plans for member development and induction can be met from within existing resources. The member training and development budget is £15,000

per year and spend against this budget is monitored by MDG. Costs covered by this budget include training provided by external trainers, member attendance at external training events, conferences and seminars and catering, venue hire and other ancillary costs. Spend against this budget during 2022/23 was £11,374.04.

9. Risk implications and mitigations

| Risk | Mitigating Action (in place or planned) |
|-----------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| County councillors are unable to fulfil their roles | The member development and induction programmes provide training and information tailored to their needs and overseen by the Member Development Group |

10. Policy alignment and compliance

- 10.1 There are no legal, Crime and Disorder Act, human rights, climate change or public health implications directly arising from this report. The member development programme aims to meet the Equality Duty through providing fair opportunities for learning and development to all members. Social value is provided by ensuring members receive support and training to be able to fulfil their roles effectively and therefore help the council to achieve its aims and objectives.

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Appendix 1

Member development work programmes 2022/23 and 2023/24

Background papers

None