

10. Review of Theme Adviser Posts

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Purpose of the Report

This report reviews the member-level posts, designated as “Theme Advisors”, which were established by the Council in January 2006. It was agreed at that time that the operation of the posts would be reviewed after a year.

Action Required

That Members of the Scrutiny Committee consider the report and their comments will be considered alongside those of District Executive when the report is considered by full Council.

Recommendations

The District Executive is asked to recommend Council:

- (1) to note the review of the Theme Advisor posts as set out in the report.
- (2) to agree that the existing posts remain as appointed by Annual Council in May 2007 and agree the protocol for Theme Advisors as attached at Appendix A, which will replace the role and job description included as Appendix C.
- (3) to receive a report back from all Theme Advisors at the September meeting of the Council with a work programme and priorities for each theme for the remainder of 2007/8.
- (4) that all Theme Advisors make a report on their work to the Annual Council meeting in May 2008, and future Annual meetings, to include recommended priorities within their theme for the following year.

Background

The Council agreed to establish the new posts of Theme Advisors in January 2006. The Council was informed that since the introduction of new decision-making structures under the Local Government Act 2000 (creation of new Executive decision making structures), there had been some feeling that there was a need to provide opportunities to develop non-executive members, and to develop member expertise on particular issues or themes.

In establishing the posts it was proposed that the posts would lead on issues that were identified as a priority for the Council within the Corporate Plan, across portfolios or where member input was needed for a specified reason. The role was envisaged to complement the responsibilities of portfolio holders, and other members with designated responsibilities, without usurping such responsibilities.

The four posts were established covering the following themes and with members appointed as below:

Social inclusion and Equality – Jo Roundell Greene (until May 2006); Ann Campbell (May 2006 -)

Older People/Young People – Maggie Foot (until May 2007) Alan Smith (May 2007 -)

E Government – Peter Seib (until May 2007) Robin Munday (May 2007-)

Community Safety - Alan Smith (until May 2007) Henry Hobhouse (May 2007-)

The Theme Advisors cannot take decisions on behalf of either the Executive or the Council. The role is one of influence and ensuring that issues that fall within their area of interest are taken into consideration in decision-making and policy development across the Council. These are not Executive positions and the Advisor is accountable to the Council.

It was stated that the role of the Theme Advisor would involve working with Executive members whose portfolios were relevant to the role, assisting scrutiny reviews and attending Scrutiny Committee when their area of interest was to be considered. They would take advice from officers as necessary and generally promote the area that they champion. In terms of external relations, they would monitor the work of partners in their area of interest, and liaise with appropriate outside bodies.

It was also felt that these posts would offer experience to members and help with succession planning.

The Council agreed a job profile for the role in January 2006. An updated version was approved as part of the revised job profiles for councillors in April 2007. This is attached at Appendix C.

Review of the Work of the Theme Advisors

Last year's Theme Advisors were asked for their views on their roles and achievements over the year 2006-7, and their feedback is attached as Appendix B.

All the Theme Advisors were asked whether they felt there was sufficient information and clarity on their role and if they had any comments on how the role could be improved. There were some comments made on the need to be clearer as to exactly what the role was expected to cover and making sure that officers were aware of their role.

All Heads of Service were also asked for their comments on the role of the Theme Advisors.

Generally the lead officers that dealt directly with the Theme Advisors were very pleased with the support that they received from their Theme Advisor. It was felt that the roles had added value to those areas of the Council's work that may cut across Executive portfolios or which would benefit from the specialist expertise and interest of the member. It was felt that their work had helped to raise the profile of their theme area and provided a very valuable member perspective.

Guidance on Theme Advisor Posts

Whilst there has been a lot of external advice and guidance on the statutory roles of councillors – Executive, Scrutiny and quasi-judicial roles (planning, licensing etc.) – there has been very little guidance on these new posts. However, in February this year a report was published on behalf of the South West Regional Assembly reviewing the role of members appointed to champion particular services or interests, known in some councils as “member champions”. This is understood to be the first comprehensive publication looking at these new roles.

The report recognises that the roles are emerging in councils that have decided to establish these posts and that they operate differently in councils. The report looks at both executive and non-executive “champions” and puts forward advantages and disadvantages of both methods of working.

In terms of non-executive posts which this Council has appointed the report states that these provide an opportunity:

- to engage a wider group of members in service review, development and improvement in a focused way – including opposition members.
- to look objectively at the interest being championed and how Council and Executive policies and practice impact on that interest
- to provide succession planning for leadership positions in the Council.
- to engage with communities of interest
- to build closer links with the community leadership role of all councilors.

The issues raised in the Guidance include the need to be clear about the roles and to offer sufficient officer support.

The report outlines the experiences of other councils and includes examples of good practice. It also includes a model protocol.

The report highlights what are seen as issues relating to these roles which need to be addressed. These in summary are seen to be:

- uncertainty over the role.
- whether they should be executive or non-executive – the report says that there is no prescription on this point and it is a matter for local discretion.
- the level of Offer support and advice
- how to prioritise the work of the Theme Advisor and how far they should be allowed to set their own workload
- the possible duplication with Overview and Scrutiny.
- need for recognition of the role by external partners.

The report also refers to the level of allowances for these roles. In South Somerset the independent remuneration panel has felt unable to make a recommendation on the level of allowance without more evidence of the work of the Theme Advisors, although the Council has agreed an allowance in line with that awarded to Area vice-Chairmen. The panel will be asked to look again at these posts in its review later this year.

The South West Provincial Employers has established a project group to offer continued support and guidance to “member champion” posts to include launching an annual conference and establishing an effective, ongoing network for these posts and their Advisors. The information obtained from this project will assist in the development of these roles at South Somerset.

Way Forward

Members are asked to note that the roles of Theme Advisors are still very new, both for this Council and other authorities. It is generally recognised that they can add value to the Council's member level structures. Following the review of the work undertaken in South Somerset it does seem that these posts are allowing member input and guidance into issues that cut across portfolio holders, and that the work of the post holders has been valued by officers.

It is recognised that there is a need for more work to support the Theme Advisors, ensure that they are clear as to their roles, how their work is programmed and a need to raise awareness of the roles.

Subject to any comments from Portfolio Holders, it is recommended that the posts and their role be confirmed for this year. Additionally, and to assist the post holders and officers, it is recommended that the protocol attached as Appendix A be adopted. This is based on the model protocol produced by the South West Provincial Employers and would supersede the job profile agreed previously by Council and set out in Appendix C.

It is also recommended that dedicated training and support is given to the Theme Advisors to ensure that they are fully aware of their role, and the officer support that is available to them.

It is recommended that the Theme Advisors report to the next Council on their priorities for this year and then make a report to the Annual Council meeting next May on their work during the year and seek agreement for the priorities for the following year.

Financial Implications

There are no financial implications at this stage. The Council agreed in February 2007 that the posts of Theme Advisor should have a Special Responsibility Allowance in 2007/8 of £1306, the costs of which have been included with the revenue budgets for this year.

Background Papers: Report from South West Regional Assembly on Member Champions (Published and available from Democratic Services)
Feedback from Theme Advisors
