LGA Scrutiny Panel

Revisit of Scrutiny on Political Group Offices

Introduction

1. The Panel decided, as part of its 2003 programme, to re-visit the recommendations contained in its scrutiny of the political group support offices, reported to the General Assembly in July 2002. The Working group has held interviews with Heads of the Political Group Offices; and senior staff of the LGA. On 17 July, Cllr John Gyford; Cllr Trevor Jones; and Cllr Gordon Beever met Julie Grimble, Head of Labour Group Office and Jason Stacey, Head of Conservative Group Office. On 15 October, Cllrs Gyford and Jones, together with Cllr Townsend met Sir Brian Briscoe and Paul Ogden, Head of the Independent Group Office; and on 26 November, Nick Cull, Director of Information and Research, and John Rees, Director of Central Services.

2. In its interviews, the Working Group took as its starting point the extent to which its recommendations, as far as they were accepted by the LGA, had been implemented by the organisation, and the effect of the recommendations on the work of the Association. A copy of the Panel's original recommendations, and the response of the LGA Executive to them is attached (Appendix A)

3. Comments from the interviewees are set out below, against the particular recommendation of the Panel.

Induction Arrangements

4. PGSOs had organised a staff seminar, focussing on the role of the elected member, which included how the PGSOs fitted in to the LGA work. The seminar had been well attended, but not always by those line managers who had less well developed relations with PGSOs. Induction arrangements for new staff, to include an introduction to the PGSOs, had been initially patchy, though were now much improved. The four group offices were now involved in the induction process and had now begun to participate in the formal new staff induction seminars.
Sir Brian agreed that, after a slow start, the induction process for new staff seemed to be working adequately. It was noted that with the employment of staff who increasingly did not have a local authority background, efforts to introduce them to the place of the political process in the LGA became more important.

Timetabled meetings between policy teams and PGSOs and involvement in policy development.

5. PGSOs reported that arrangements for timetabled meetings had been patchy. Not all PGSOs had yet been invited to divisional meetings, and whilst there had been invitations to individual team meetings within divisions, these were not consistent. All had been invited to attend at least one meeting of the Strategic Management Group.

6. Senior officers met, on invitation, with senior Labour Group members, (through the Labour Group executive in advance of LGA Executive meetings). The Conservative group had decided not to hold meetings in advance of LGA Executive meetings, but to invite senior staff to meetings of their Group Executive, which were not necessarily connected to the LGA Executive.

7. The twice – monthly meetings with the Director of Central Services remained a feature of the liaison arrangements, as were the weekly meetings with communications staff to discuss forward planning in the publicity and communications area.

8. On timetabled meetings with PGSOs, Sir Brian agreed that the record had not been consistent, but this was essentially a procedural approach which would always be under pressure of events, in a situation where around 50 staff involved in policy (including senior managers) were dealing with a multiplicity of complex issues across 19 executives and 12 Government departments. In Sir Brian's view, the answer was not to focus on formal meetings as the answer to PGSO involvement, but to encourage mainstream staff to be more engaged with PGSOs on policy development, overcoming the perception by PGSO staff that some mainstream staff regard them as somehow separate from the policy – making process.

9. On the issue of involvement in policy development, there was a general feeling amongst PGSOs that they were not adequately involved in the policy formulation process – there was a concern that they were not really seen as partners in the process, and meetings with policy staff on policy issues were still not regular events. There were good examples of where liaison with PGSOs early in the process produced results – the Delayed Discharge Bill, and Education Funding were good examples – but other areas of LGA work did not involve any significant PGSO – or member – involvement in the formative stage.

10. Sir Brian, in his interview, was strongly of the view that the move to a much more focussed single LGA Business Plan would significantly help overcome their perceived divorce from the policy process. The Business Plan would inevitably still contain contentious political issues, but it would be easier for the Group offices to identify and involve themselves in issues, because there would be a finite set of programmes and objectives. The LGA Business Plan would provide the vehicle for much better forward planning and communications amongst the Groups and with mainstream staff..

11. Sir Brian acknowledged that closer liaison between mainstream staff and group staff had logistical implications but the single plan should enable much more pre-planning of effort, which should improve liaison – but would not always exclude the need for last minute initiatives.

12. He was clear that there were issues where it was entirely legitimate for he or LGA staff to deal directly with Chairs and leading members without going via the political group offices. He was firmly of the view that LGA staff needed to have direct contact with members and that the PGSOs were not gatekeepers of the political process. However, it was essential that the PGSOs needed to be kept abreast of communications between mainstream staff and members on policy issues.

13. A key aspect of this joint working was that policy officers should be better at identifying issues that would be of political relevance to the PGSOs and which should be raised with them. There was also scope for improving personal contacts across the board. Again, the single business plan should enable policy officers better to identify any contentious issues and involve PGSOs in more focussed discussions.

14. The Panel members explored with John Rees whether his twice-monthly meetings with the PGSOs might be an appropriate vehicle for facilitating greater policy liaison with mainstream staff. John Rees had indicated that originally the meetings had dealt with routine "housekeeping" issues (he is line manager to PGSOs), but that the agenda had widened in scope more recently to include discussions on more sensitive issues such as press release protocols. Whilst the meetings still did not deal with policy issues, he felt that the remit could, in principal, be extended to include discussion of aspects of the business plan with relevant policy staff.

15. He noted that projects in the business plan would have a clear remit and timetable which would enable PGSOs to identify those elements which might require an early discussion with policy staff. He thought it necessary that any such discussions should be selective – restricted to those projects that might be sensitive and where PGSOs saw a particular benefit from an early discussion with policy staff. He did not feel that the meetings provided a suitable vehicle for a comprehensive discussion of the whole business plan.

Databases

16. Whilst Group Offices had access to the LGA Gladis database, PGSOs did not feel that it was sufficiently comprehensive and had felt it necessary to construct their own special databases for their own needs. PGSOs would be reluctant to share own specifically – constructed databases with mainstream staff. The Panel noted the LGA was in the process of introducing an integrated information system, which would enable the LGA to relate more effectively to its wide range of "customers", and explored this further with Nick Cull, Director of Information and Research.

17. The Panel has noted that the present Gladis database was never intended to be a comprehensive repository of local government information, containing core information on members and officers only as they related with the LGA. It was noted that the LG Connect project currently under development by the Information and Research Directorate was a significant initiative, which aimed, amongst other things, to bring a much more comprehensive and accessible

information resource to the organisation. The political groups, together with the rest of the organisation would benefit from a much richer and comprehensive database of information as a result.

18. Nick Cull accepted that PGSOs needed to be engaged with the development of the LG Connect project. A particular issue needing to be discussed with them was the extent to which they needed to maintain databases separate from the mainstream database, or whether password protected sections of the main database would be acceptable.

Recommendations

- The Panel notes the improvement to the induction arrangements for new staff, and welcomes the involvement of PGSOs in this process. Care needs to be taken that these arrangements are maintained.

- The Panel accepts that formalised timetabled meetings with PGSOs at divisional and team level may not be the best means of maintaining contact with mainstream policy staff. However, such meetings, particularly at individual team level can be valuable where specific policy matters can be discussed.

- The introduction of the single business plan should provide a framework and an opportunity for policy staff and PGSOs to make use of such meetings to maintain and improve their dialogue on specific policy issues.

- The remit of the fortnightly meetings between PGSOs and the Director of Central Services should be extended to provide a vehicle for greater policy liaison between the staff of the group offices and mainstream LGA staff on those elements of the business plan of particular interest to the Groups.

- Policy staff should be encouraged to be more alert to potential political concerns in implementing the projects in the business plan, and involving PGSOs at an early stage.

- PGSOs should also be prepared to indentify those projects which may be more sensitive for their groups and contact the relevant policy officers at an early stage.

- PGSOs should be consulted on their database needs and the extent to which they can be met within the comprehensive system being introduced. Wherever possible, data held by the LGA should be integrated, rather than held separately.