

Slough Borough Council

Report To:	Standards Committee
Date:	20 March 2025
Subject:	Member Development Programme 2025-26
Chief Officer:	Sukdave Ghuman (Monitoring Officer)
Contact Officers:	Colin J Sweeney (Interim Head of Democratic Services and Scrutiny)
Ward(s):	All
Exempt:	No
Appendices:	Appendix A – Proposed outline of Member Development Programme 2025-26

1. Summary and Recommendations

This report recommends the 'Member Development Working Group' approved by this Committee now be convened to review the proposed outline of a Member Development Programme for 2025-26 as set out at Appendix A to this report and considering any comments made by the Standards Committee.

Recommendations:

- 1. That a 'Member Development Working Group' of councillors and officers be convened to advise the Monitoring Officer on the outline Member Development Plan 2025-26, as set out at Appendix A to this report, considering any steer by this committee; and**
- 2. That the principles for member development set out in section 3 are endorsed again for the ongoing member development programme.**

Reasons for Recommendations:

- a) To provide Councillors with the key skills, tools, knowledge and confidence to enable them to successfully navigate their roles and effectively discharge their council responsibilities.
- b) To demonstrate progress against the recommendations in the Centre for Governance and Scrutiny's *Scrutiny Improvement Review*, including that we have begun to upskill and develop councillors' capacity and capability to take on and respond to the current significant challenges faced by the Council.
- c) To ensure that the Council complies with its duty to implement the Directions of the Secretary of State to achieve improvements in relation to the proper functioning of democratic governance and scrutiny.

Commissioner Review

“Commissioners welcome this report as member training and development is extremely important in helping Councillors to fulfil their Council roles. Commissioners strongly advise all Councillors to take advantage of the training offered by the Council and will be interested to understand the level of take up.”

2. Introduction

- 2.1 The Member Development Programme itself takes the form of a series of principles for the way in which member development will be done during the current year. It is designed to allow Councillors to build on their existing knowledge and skills base.
- 2.2 The Programme was designed to provide a framework for, and to demonstrate the Council’s commitment to, the continued professional development of Councillors. In order to meet the Council’s improvement goals it must provide sufficient ongoing development opportunities for its decision-makers, to steadily improve their skills, knowledge and behaviours.
- 2.3 The Programme is intended to ensure that councillors make evidence-based decisions and are mindful of the duty of best value and the Council’s strategic priorities, its recovery plan and vision.
- 2.4 The Programme envisages that the bulk of training will be provided in-house, with a mixture of online and in-person sessions, with accessibility enabled by modern technology such as recording sessions on Teams. Some sessions will be facilitated by external providers and councillors will also be encouraged through various other means to gain outside experience of ‘what good looks like’. In the event, the main outside providers of member development have been the Centre for Governance and Scrutiny – who delivered the Scrutiny induction programme in conjunction with SBC officers – and the Local Government Association.

3 Member Development Programme 2025-26

- 3.1 The Programme sets out formal (minority), informal (majority) individual and group learning opportunities.
- 3.2 The Programme is split into the following six areas:
 - a) Community Leadership

Managing casework; representing your wards; engaging with stakeholders; Planning Committee and Licensing Committee.
 - b) Committee – General

Getting the most out of meetings (procedure rules, deciphering reports, benefits and purpose of pre-meetings, roles and what makes a bad meeting?); questioning skills and chairing skills.

c) Committee – Specialist

Planning Committee (refresher); Licensing Committee (refresher); annual Audit and Corporate Governance Committee training; scrutiny (purpose and maximising the impact of scrutiny); scrutiny and cabinet working together; data and performance management – what does it tell us?

d) Knowledge

Safeguarding children; safeguarding adults; communications; media skills, first aid; IT (maximising your IT skills); useful information, including LGA workbooks and LGA e-learning offer:

- Equality, Diversity and Inclusion
- Local government finance
- Effective ward Councillor
- Holding council meetings online
- Facilitation and conflict resolution
- Influencing skills
- Supporting mentally healthier communities
- Scrutiny

e) Governance

Code of Conduct and member and officer relations; local government finance; data protection, GDPR and information security and decision-making.

f) Place (Slough)

Questions and Answers with CLT; meet departmental leads; improvement and recovery and “Knowing Slough – meet our partners.”

- 3.3 Members are requested to identify any remaining training needs for 2025/26, and which have not been included in the Plan so that these can be addressed by the Monitoring Officer.

Structure and Prioritisation

- 3.4 The intention in 2025/26 is to continue to prioritise in a similar way, with a programme of work which kicks off after the Annual Meeting i.e. after any potential changes of chairmanships or cabinet portfolios:

1. Refresher sessions of mandatory courses first, covering compliance with legal and constitutional requirements (e.g., with regard to Member Code of Conduct, declarations of interest, information governance, and mandatory Planning/Licensing training). Establishing an expectation of annual review of these key topics.
2. Skills next (i.e., *how* to be an effective councillor), in the form of training aimed at committees and individuals in key roles, especially where there have been changes of personnel.
3. Subject matter knowledge, primarily delivered at moments when it is relevant and can be applied e.g., subject briefings in advance of decisions on those topics,

changes in legislation, etc. Supported by increasing the formality around all-member briefings, the use of which has been increasing in frequency in the latter part of the year, and which have generally been well received.

- 3.5 The induction programmes set out at Appendix A and B follow this pattern and are split into these sections for clarity.

Scrutiny Training

- 3.6 The Centre for Governance and Scrutiny (CfGS), with funding assistance by the Local Government Association, delivered a programme of Scrutiny development work specially for Slough Borough Council, in light of the findings in their review of SBC's scrutiny arrangements and the developments in the service since. Their proposal was submitted in July 2022 and the council delivered it in full for the new cohort for Scrutiny members commencing immediately after the election. This was a critical thread in the Council's Scrutiny Improvement Action Plan. It included facilitated support for the development of the Scrutiny Work Programme as well as bespoke training for the scrutiny committee, its chair, the cabinet and officers.
- 3.7 Full details of the CfGS proposal can be found at [Appendix B to the report published on this committee's agenda in April 2023](#).

More recently, CfGS officers have undertaken an informal review of scrutiny at Slough, the results of which are pending. The intention is that the results will be discussed by scrutiny Members at a forthcoming workshop and factored into the Scrutiny Annual Report – this is likely to help shape future training and development for scrutiny members in particular.

Other Committee-specific training

- 3.8 Where possible, committee-specific training (such as that for planning, licencing & audit) took place on the evening of their first scheduled meeting, as is custom and practice at SBC, and then, for some committees, at other suitable junctures through the year, typically in pre-meetings.
- 3.9 Further training and development is expected to take place on at least an annual basis, and for key committees which are currently subject to considerable corporate focus (such as Scrutiny and Audit) on a more frequent basis through the system of regular pre-meetings and officer briefings.

External expertise, including visits and mentoring

- 3.10 In the past members have had some concerns about training delivered by third parties, both because it costs money and because training delivered in this way has sometimes been felt to lack sufficient awareness of Slough Borough Council's local context, or the lived experience of SBC's councillors.
- 3.11 Efforts must continue to be made to mitigate this effect, however, it is important to recognise the value of input from outside sources. In particular, the Council's commissioners have repeatedly expressed that they felt there would be a benefit for SBC Councillors of visiting other authorities and meeting councillors from other authorities in order to develop a stronger sense of 'what good looks like'. Some councillors have taken up this idea, with the Leader, many Cabinet Members and committee chairs visiting or contacting other local authorities.

- 3.12 During the previous administration, the LGA provided a structured mentoring service to Members with key roles and this was reconstructed for the current administration too. The LGA provide hand-picked mentors for SBC councillors who are experienced councillors from other authorities around the country. These mentors are professional and are paid for their time, and the LGA has funded this work. Anecdotal feedback from the members involved has generally been very positive.

Remote working

- 3.15 In light of the significant proportion of members of Slough Borough Council who work full time and/or have caring responsibilities, it was anticipated that remote working capability would be used where possible to deliver training. This was intended to increase the overall uptake of learning and development opportunities and allow members to access content at a time which suits them rather than having to attend a specific training session. A 'video library' was mooted in the past. Virtual training, when it was delivered, was filmed and the links circulated to Members. However, in practice Members' preference for face-to-face learning was borne out by better attendance figures and better engagement for in-person sessions, and so most member development has taken place face-to-face. Face-to-face sessions were also an important part of helping to build a positive culture and relationships between members.

Members' Handbook

- 3.16 The handbook contains a wide range of useful and practical information regarding Councillors' roles and responsibilities, how the Council operates, its vision, priorities, and support available for Members.

Senior Officer attendance

- 3.17 There is an expectation that subject-matter training will be delivered and/or attended by senior officers so that there is accountability and appropriately strategic engagement with Members.

Measuring and Monitoring Satisfaction

- 3.18 In the past, response rates from Members to post-course surveys have been extremely low which makes it difficult to assess the success of the training provided. Members' views are welcome on how to improve the Council's visibility of member satisfaction with training sessions.
- 3.19 In the meantime, the Member Survey has been used as a means to assess overall satisfaction with member development, see below for detailed results.

Member Survey

- 3.20 A third-ever survey of members was carried out just before Christmas 2024 and the results can be found elsewhere on today's agenda. This includes important data about members' satisfaction with member development and a significant amount of valuable free-text comments providing suggestions for future training. To avoid duplication of paperwork those comments are not reproduced in this report but they can be found elsewhere on today's agenda.

3.21 Although the response rate for the 2025 survey was only 50%, the data about barriers preventing members from attending training show the number of councillors reporting that they have no issue attending and the range and frequency of barriers to entry are much reduced. Areas for continued reflection are on whether a more convenient time can be found to deliver them, and whether more of them should be online.

Member Development Charter

3.22 As reported to this Committee in March 2024, some authorities (13 in the South East) have [obtained 'charter status'](#) for Member Development. This is essentially a system which recognises local authorities which have been formally assessed to have met a [set of criteria](#) defined by the Local Government Association. The criteria relate to the quality of member development offered by the authority. In our region the assessment and associated support is carried out by South East Employers. There is a cost of about £3,000 associated with gaining charter status and a significant investment of officer and member time is required. For example, one criterion has been that all members should have a personal development plan and regular 1:1 meetings with a lead officer to assess progress against that plan.

3.23 While charter plus would be a worthy goal for SBC, it was not considered that resources were available to support the required level of investment in 2024/25. However, members should keep an eye on the possibility that SBC could aim for charter status by the end of the four-year administration, if the required resources can be identified and the cost justified.

Making courses 'mandatory' and differentiating between new and experienced Members

3.24 Members are not employees and the Council has no sanctions it can apply to force Members to undertake training, except where some specific committees constitutionally require their Members to undertake training in order to sit on a committee. This is a nationally recognised issue when it comes to Member development. Nevertheless, a strong expectation can be set by Group Leaders and whips who are in a position to apply sanctions within their Groups as they see fit.

3.25 In all invitations and communications relating to the induction programme, the following terms were used in order to best encourage take-up of training by the most relevant councillors:

- **Mandatory** – failure to attend would not be in compliance with the requirements on members set out in the constitution and/or prevent you from sitting on a specific committee
- **Essential** – All Members are expected by their own Group Leaders to attend
- **Encouraged** – All Members would benefit from attending and it will be relevant to all Members
- **Welcome** – All Members would benefit from attending, but it may be less relevant for some.

Scheduling

3.26 It is intended that online working and recording of member development sessions will enable the councillors to access learning and development courses regardless of the time of day they are held. However, in general experience last year showed that it was best to hold online sessions around the end of the working day but before

evening meetings (e.g., between 17:00-18:00) or to hold in-person sessions immediately before formal meetings (17:30-18:20). Democratic Services will continue to be responsible for scheduling member development sessions in order to minimise the frequency of clashes with the formal meeting calendar, however much of the content is of course the responsibility of individual services.

Format

3.27 There is an expectation that presenters will provide an active learning environment with varying styles of learning and presentation and opportunities for discussion. This will continue to be assessed through Member feedback.

Attendance

3.28 Members' attendance will be recorded as per any other Member meeting. The Member Survey report elsewhere on today's agenda gives some insight into Members' reasons for not attending sessions, however the greatest response from councillors was that nothing prevents them.

LGA resources – e-learning and workbooks

3.29 Slough Borough Council is a Member of the Local Government Association. This Membership includes access for Slough's Members to a number of e-learning courses and workbooks. The LGA is always releasing new content and courses, and Democratic Services stays abreast of this content and includes it in the regular Member Newsletter every Friday.

3.30 Self-service is a key tenet of the Council's current transformation programme. Councillors have been guided to access the following e-learning courses via self-registration with the LGA. This will be a key part of the Member Development 'refresh' after the Annual Meeting:

- Equality, Diversity and Inclusion
- Holding council meetings online
- Facilitation and conflict resolution
- Effective ward Councillor
- Scrutiny
- Influencing skills
- Local government finance
- Supporting mentally healthier communities

3.31 Councillors have been referred to the many LGA workbooks available for them to work through in their own time, through a scheduled series of articles in the Members' Newsletter over the period of the council, including:

- Acting on climate change
- Being an effective ward Councillor
- Bribery and fraud prevention
- Chairing skills
- Community leadership
- Community safety
- Councillor/officer relations
- Engaging young people

- Handling casework
- Health and safety in the council
- Health in All Policies and COVID-19
- Local government finance
- Neighbourhood & community engagement
- Neighbourhood planning - ward Councillors
- New Councillors
- Scrutiny of finance
- Supporting residents with complex issues

Resources for delivery of the Member Development Plan

3.32 Given the financial climate in which the council finds itself, Member Development will need to be delivered within existing resources. Accordingly, co-operation by the whole council will be necessary in order to deliver a year-round programme of learning for Members. Individual service areas have agreed to be responsible for delivering member development on subject-specific areas.

Parish Councils

3.33 The Monitoring Officer has previously written on several occasions to the Clerks of the three parishes on the Borough, offering assistance in relation to any matters arising under the Parish Council's Code of Conduct or any other related issues, but this offer has not been taken up, to date. This included specifically asking if he can assist with any training of Parish Councillors on the Code of Conduct and asking for assurance as to what training has been given in relation to the Code of Conduct.

4. Implications of the Recommendation

4.1 *Financial implications*

While a modest budget is available for individual members to attend external training or to bring in external trainers during the year, this report does not commit members to any specific spend. This budget is managed and administered by Democratic Services and the Head of Democratic Services has the authority to determine payment from this for external providers of any courses mentioned in this report, without the need for a councillor decision.

4.2 *Legal implications*

The Council has many different statutory functions and duties. When making decisions members must comply with these legal duties, including making decisions in a fair, lawful and transparent manner. Members must comply with the Member Code of Conduct and understand their obligations to register and declare interests and the sanctions regime for failing to comply with the Code of Conduct. The Member Development Programme assists members to be effective and ensure the Council complies with its legal obligations.

4.3 *Risk management implications*

None, other than as referred to in the report.

4.4 *Environmental implications*

None

4.5 *Equality implications*

The Council has a duty to have due regard to the need to advance equality of opportunity for those with a protected characteristic and those without. The member development programme, and the way we deliver it, should take account of members' protected characteristics and consider any adjustments needed. This is done on a session-by-session basis.

5. Background Papers

None