

2019 Member Induction Survey - Findings

Background

Following the Local Elections in May 2019 an Induction Programme for all elected Members of South Hams District Council was undertaken. It was designed to act both as a refresher for re-elected Members and to inform newly elected Members about the operations of the Council and the role and responsibilities of District Councillors. It ran for approximately three months.

The aim of the Programme was to help new Members to prepare for and settle in to their new role as quickly and as effectively as possible and to help build their confidence. In the design of the schedule, account was taken of the vast amount of information that needed to be conveyed, balancing this where possible with the time available for training. The 2019 Programme was also created to reflect feedback given on previous Induction Programmes.

In order to help gather the most accurate information on the Members' experience, a short survey was circulated to all Members. A total of 12 responses were received.

Findings

Attached at Appendix A is a copy of the questionnaire complete with all the combined scores (where given) and comments made by Members. Appendix B includes a summary of the three month Programme undertaken. In summary, overall the programme was generally well received with some useful suggestions made for inclusion in the design of future programmes.

Programme Content

Question 1 sought Members' views on the content of the Programme and whether subjects were covered in enough depth or if they proved to be too challenging.

Overall Members indicated that they were generally happy with the level at which the sessions were pitched with ten scores given in the positive scoring bracket. A frequent observation was that there was a steep learning curve and there was perhaps too much information delivered in a very short time but Members were aware of the need to get up to speed. One Member highlighted that 'context in the learning' would have been helpful and another that more in-depth training immediately prior to the meeting it related to would have ensured that key information was fresh in the mind.

Delivery Style

Members were asked whether or not there was enough variety in the content and delivery style of the sessions, whether the amount of Interaction was appropriate and whether or not the blend of internal (officer & Member) and external training provider was successful

Ten of the 12 responders found that the sessions were generally presented in an interesting way though commented that the training was only as interesting as the topic itself. Some comments reflected that there were too many PowerPoint slides used and that in some cases too much information was presented on each slide. On a positive note, officers were seen as knowledgeable and the sessions were delivered in a friendly and easy format.

Regarding the variety in content and training style, Members were generally happy with the training received, with all but one score appearing in the top two brackets of the ratings, though one Member suggested that a greater range of delivery styles was needed.

Members liked the blend of Internal and external providers with comments reflecting a positive learning experience from the methods used. One Member reflected that more input from returning Councillors could have been beneficial and another suggested input from Members of other authorities could have added value.

In terms of interaction within the training, the scores from Members suggested that there was generally enough involvement for them in the sessions although their comments highlighted some shortcomings in this area. Interaction was deemed as 'asking questions' which was seen to cause a distraction in some cases but was also viewed as an invaluable tool in others.

When asked to identify the sessions they found most interesting, Members most frequently mentioned the sessions held on the Planning Process as the most valuable. Other topics listed included Setting the Scene/How the Council works, Universal Credit, Media Skills and the MTFS session of 5 September. Audit and Media Skills were listed as those least enjoyed for reasons of both content and delivery style.

Delivering Expectations

Members were asked a series of questions related to whether or not their expectations had been fulfilled in terms of their anticipated learning

Eight scores in the 'Agree' or 'Strongly Agree' categories were received indicating that most of those who responded learned what they were expecting to learn during the Programme. However, in terms of pacing, once again there was an even split in scores given; a number of Members suggested that sessions felt rushed and as a result were unable to deal with some of the issues raised within them and that some topics were covered in outline only. Some felt that the programme was too concentrated. Other Members recognised that there was a large amount of information to learn and one 'didn't see what else could be expected' but did suggest that refresher sessions six months later might be helpful.

Although not reflected in the scoring, the Officer Buddy System was generally well received by those who used it though many (mostly returning) Members were not aware it had been implemented.

The Council's Approach to the Induction Programme

An open question was asked at question 8, seeking Members' thoughts on what proved helpful during the programme and what changes they would make. Those who commented gave a general indication that the Programme worked well and that they appreciated the welcoming and friendly approach of the staff. Most stated they wouldn't change anything about the training, aside perhaps from the pacing of it – too congested; though one Member indicated that the schedule would have been fine for someone with no other commitments.

Overall Impressions

At Question 9, separate questions were asked of new and returning Members, looking to identify for new Members which sessions proved the most useful in equipping them to undertake their new role as quickly and as confidently as possible and for returning Members how the 2019 programme compared to any others that they had attended in the past.

As would be expected, new Members found most sessions of benefit, particularly those delivering training related to the Committees to which they had been appointed.

For re-elected Members comparing the 2019 Programme with previous Inductions, the overarching comments indicated that although there were still improvements to be made, this year's Programme was certainly better than previous Inductions experienced, particularly with the addition of dedicated IT support.

Future Training

The final question sought Members' immediate thoughts on what they would like to see included in the rolling programme of training undertaken throughout their term of office. The answers given will be considered by the Senior Specialist – Democratic Services and where appropriate will make up part of the ongoing Training Programme for the 2019-2023 Council term

Overall Scores

Given the opportunity to provide an overall score of the Programme, all twelve Members rated it Satisfactory or better (with one splitting their score between 'satisfactory' and 'unsatisfactory') providing comments supportive of their view. Again, time and intensity were listed as the negatives but some recognised that this was a necessary part of the process in order to become as effective as possible, as quickly as possible 'There is so much to take in but after a few months the confidence gets better and you understand more, so sessions later on are really good But you do have to hit the road running at first and just get through it'

Conclusion

As can be seen from the scoring given, overall the Programme was relatively well received and seen to have generally delivered on its requirement to prepare Members for their new roles and responsibilities. Many lessons have been learned and improvements made on past Induction programmes, however, there is always room for further improvement and delivery of training can be developed further in terms of content, variety and in better preparing Officers, who are not trainers, to deliver their sessions. A key point to consider for 2023 would be to investigate the possibility of providing key sessions immediately before the Committees they relate to and also to investigate the value in providing a smaller scale refresher programme six months after the initial Induction when Members had acquired more knowledge and experience in their role. To some extent this is already addressed by the ongoing and robust training programme continuing throughout the 2019-2023 term.

The issues raised in this survey will be considered and where possible implemented for the next Induction Programme in 2023.