Support to Political Groups
Cllr Gavin James, Leader of the Liberal Democrat Group

Report to Council
Ward(s): All
Key Decision: No

Foreword - Cllr Gavin James, Leader of the Liberal Democrat Group

The Leader of the Council announced that the Conservative Group had decided it no longer wished to employ a political assistant therefore it was claimed the posts must be abolished.

However, conventions and well-established procedures have been ignored. We are told the Council has to review the posts "from time to time" and indeed this has been done. From the initial review after the posts were created, through fit for purpose, etc. the post have had detailed review.

The political assistant posts are employed on a rolling three year contract. The established procedure has been for consideration of renewing the contracts to be made in the run up to May elections when the contracts are due for renewal. This decision has gone to a meeting of Group Leaders and has been agreed in 2003, 2006, 2009, 2012 and 2015 without any dissent from Conservative, Labour or Liberal Democrat groups.

It is claimed that the current ‘review’ is “opportune” because the political assistant appointed by the Conservative group left his post, yet three previous Conservative and two Labour political assistants have left the post without there being any review.

The legislation allowing for the role of political assistants was introduced by the Conservative Government when Mrs Thatcher was Prime Minister. Basingstoke and Deane Borough Council has employed political assistants since 2000.

A member of the Cabinet believes the public will be 'shocked' to discover the council provides group support. Others might think the public would on the whole be surprised about how little support members receive.

The Conservatives are proposing that the council no longer employ political assistants. The decision is being presented by the administration as a binary choice - either the council employs political assistants or it doesn't.

The reality is more complex. Any Group that qualifies for a Political Assistant may choose not to appoint anyone to the post. The distribution of Political Assistants is
determined by legislation. They are not appointed to “the opposition” or “the administration”. Never the less, the Conservative group would do well to remember that it too may one day return to opposition and that the role undertaken by political assistants can be significantly different when in opposition.

The Council had before it in October 2017 a report proposing to cease the employment of political assistants. A report, that it has had three separate supplementary legal advices issued by the Council to go with it. That is neither usual for this council or for other councils seeking to end the employment of political assistants.

The October report did not include any option analysis.

The Council has an opportunity with this alternative recommendation to build a consensus way forward.

Since October it has been confirmed that there will probably be 10% fewer Councillors from May 2019. It has also been confirmed that wards from May 2019 will be considerably bigger, averaging near 8000 electors. With all up elections on new boundaries there is likely to be many new councillors

It would be truly opportune to consider all these issues together. It may be for example that a compromise can be reached where groups have the option of continuing with employment of a political assistant or not and there being alternative support instead.

It had been claimed that a decision on the future employment of political assistants had to be taken at the October Full Council Meeting. This was allegedly because the decision was part of the Conservative administration’s Policy and Budgetary Framework consultation proposals. It is clear now, that the two decisions are separate and there was no need for a decision in October.

It is also clear now that there is time for a review of the posts and the other support given to councillors without in anyway impacting on the indicative salary cost savings earmarked for 2018/19 and beyond.

So the issue before the Council is simple – either to review the posts properly along with the totality of support given to members or to proceed with a poorly evidenced proposal to end the employment of political assistants.

Recommendation to Council:

That Council resolves to considers the options for support to members as set out in the report from Councillor Gavin James and approves:
1. The review of the totality of support to members including the posts of political assistants at Basingstoke and Deane Borough Council

2. Authority be delegated to the Head of Human Resources and Organisational Development, in consultation with the group leaders to take all necessary steps to implement 1 above
Background, corporate objectives and priorities

The report supports the following council plan priorities

- We will continue to drive efficiency

Glossary of terms

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Definition</th>
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<td>The 1989 Act</td>
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Main considerations

1 Executive Summary

1.1 Many councils employ political assistants. Many councils employ officers carrying out a very similar function, providing direct support to political groups. There are over 20 different job titles for people undertaking the work of supporting Council Groups. It is wrong to suppose that just because a Council doesn’t employ “Political Assistants” under the 1989 Act it does not provide similar support to members.

1.2 It is claimed by the Cabinet Member for regulatory services and the environment that since 2006, “the cost of support to political groups has remained virtually unchanged” whereas operating costs have been reduced by £10m. The Cabinet member suggests “it can no longer be justified in the current climate for the role of political assistant to be maintained.”

1.3 The administration is well supported by Officers and Special Responsibility Allowances paid to: Cabinet Members and Chairmen of Committees. Opposition groups greatly value the role fulfilled by their political assistants.

1.4 The question for the Council is whether it wishes to look at support for members in total to consider what savings can be made or whether it wishes to proceed with picking on one aspect of support to members without proper analysis of the consequences.

2 The Proposal

2.1 Employment of political assistants ought to be considered along with all the other support that goes to members.

2.2 A review is undertaken of all existing support arrangements for all elected members to enable them to undertake their duties, on an equal basis, effectively, efficiently and for the benefit of the whole community of the Borough of Basingstoke and Deane.

2.3 Such a review would consider the continued employment of political assistants as part of the totality of support given to members and will consider
the total current cost of such support and propose how a £136k pa reduction may be achieved.

3 Key issues for consideration

3.1 The Labour and Liberal Democrat Groups and the Independent councillor have indicated they do not wish to see the political assistant posts discontinued.

3.2 There has not been a proper analysis of the work political assistants undertake, the value they add and the impact of ending their employment.

3.3 The case for political assistants has not been considered alongside with all the other support members receive, for example members’ allowances and special responsibility allowances.

3.4 The financial case for ending employment of political assistants has not been made.

3.5 There has not been a comparison with other councils that employ political assistants.

3.6 Comparison with support given to other elected officials such as MPs had not been made.

3.7 It should be noted that the two members of staff directly affected are on a three year fixed term contract which naturally expires on the 3rd June 2018.

4 Options Analysis

i) To abolish the posts of Political Assistant. – The stated view of the Conservative Group but no information has been provided by them as to how or why they adopted that view. It is therefore difficult to critique the reasoning when it has not been evidenced.

ii) To continue with the employment of Political Assistants for those group that qualify and wish to appoint to them. – The preferred option of the Labour and Liberal Democrat groups and the Independent Councillor. Never-the-less in recognition of the Conservative groups position, this report advocates a third option.

iii) To review the posts of political assistants

4.1 The Labour and Liberal Democrat Groups and the Independent councillor have indicated they do not wish to see the political assistant posts discontinued.

4.2 It might be suggested that Council Groups employ their own political assistants out of their allowances but this is neither practical nor legal.

4.3 While the former Conservative political assistant handed their notice in in July, the decision to proceed with terminating the posts was announced in October. Rather than group leaders being consulted on what was happening,
they were informed and notices of threat of redundancy were being issued within hours.

4.4 This has caused considerable ill feeling and disquiet that the staff involved were not being treated in a fair and equitable manner.

4.5 **There has not been a proper analysis of the work political assistants undertake, the value they add and the impact of ending their employment**

4.6 Members will still wish to have secretarial support, research reports, briefings, casework, and other support to enable them to carry out their role as councillors.

4.7 If political assistants posts are abolished, this work will fall on other staff or councillors themselves or not be done. If it is done by others or not done it will impact on Councillors and the public.

4.8 In particular it could impact on those sections of the population who wish to be Councillors but who have to work.

4.9 It is suggested that members will be able to get briefings from other staff under the members officer protocol. However, that is not a substitute for the work of political assistants. It is not even a new facility.

4.10 The job description of the political assistant’s covers a wide range of activities. It is simplistic and premature to take the salary costs of political assistants and present that as a saving, without any consideration of what costs will fall on other officers and what work will fall on members and what work will not be done.

4.11 Political Assistants may be considered to save the council money by saving senior officer time. The also provide a valued one-stop contact point for members and provide useful support to members, which in turn allows members to better serve the public.

4.12 Hampshire County Council is currently advertising two positions: ‘Executive Assistant to the Leader’ and ‘Policy and Administrative Assistant – Leader’s Office’ both of which appear to have considerable crossover with the role of political assistant. Although political assistants serve the needs of a whole group rather than just a couple of councillors.

The job descriptions for the Hampshire County Council jobs include:

- conserve the Leader’s and Deputy Leader’s time by reading, researching and routing correspondence; drafting letters, documents and presentations; and collecting and analysing information;
- coordinate and organise internal and external meetings, attending where necessary to provide support, including by taking minutes;
- manage the coordination of timely briefings, meeting papers, presentations and other documentation in advance of meetings / events;
• undertake proactive ‘horizon scanning’ and undertake / oversee research projects on policy matters of interest to the Leader and Deputy Leader; develop and utilise fit-for-purpose filing and retrieval systems, ensuring accurate records are maintained
• undertake proactive ‘horizon scanning’ on local matters and issues relevant to Hampshire constituencies, as well as national policy developments and parliamentary affairs;
• undertake research projects on policy matters of interest to the Leader and Deputy Leader, as directed by the Executive Assistant;
• maintain positive relationships with policy support offices within key external policy networks, such as the County Council’s Network;
• support with proactive and accurate records management;
• keeping the wider team informed of progress;
• contribute to ad-hoc projects and initiatives;
• undertake general and routine office duties

4.13 A proper consideration of the tasks undertaken by Political Assistants should be undertaken as it would for any other post in the council. That would start with the political assistants job description and consultation with the 'service users' in this case councillors

4.14 The case for political assistants has not been considered along with all the other support members receive, for example members allowances and special responsibility allowances.

4.15 Political assistants are just one facet of support given to members. The employment of political assistants ought to be considered in the round, along with all the other support that goes to members.

4.16 The Cabinet and Administration are well supported. In addition to an excellent officer corps, they have secretarial support for the Cabinet and the Conservative group has no less than 21 Special Responsibility Allowances (SRA’s). That is 2/3 of the Conservative Group given SRA's, compared to just 3 of the 27 opposition councillors.

4.17 In 2002, when the Leader and Cabinet model was introduced, the administration SRA’s totalled £78,369 and the oppositions £18,879. In 2017 the comparable figures are administration £150,456, opposition £18,032. As can be seen, the support given to opposition parties has fallen while that given to the administration has doubled.

4.18 The total budget for Members Allowances is in the region of £600,000 a year. In addition members receive car park passes, ipads or laptops and refreshments.

4.19 It might be suggested that Council Groups employ their own political assistants out of their allowances but this is neither practical nor legal.
4.20 Many Councils employ political assistants, many councils employ officers carrying out a very similar function, providing direct support to political groups.

4.21 Initial research shows that there were over 20 different job titles for people undertaking the work of supporting Council Groups. Even in Basingstoke and Deane, Political Assistants are colloquially referred to as Group Assistant's.

4.22 Merely asking whether Councils employ “political assistants” as defined by the 1989 Act can lead to very misleading results.

4.23 In Councils that do not employ political assistants/group support officers, what alternative support do these councils provide to members? Many provide secretarial support, overview and scrutiny officers and other assistance. Members’ allowances are set taking into account the lack or presence differing levels of member support.

4.24 In BDBC Overview and Scrutiny support officers were employed as part of Committee Services. Those post were scrapped, part of the argument at the time being that political assistants performed that function in a more effective way.

4.25 It should be noted that some council provide not just political assistants or similar staff but also secretarial support and caseworkers in Group Offices.

4.26 Just because the Conservative Group no longer wish to appoint someone to their allocated post does not mean that other groups can’t retain or appoint people to their allocated posts.

4.27 If the Administration wants to look for savings in the area of support given to members, it should have a proper review that includes all support given to members. This would include members’ allowances.

4.28 Basingstoke and Deane Council has a refreshments budget for 2018/19 of £51,900, much of which relates to council meetings, committees meetings, workshops, etc.

4.29 The financial case for ending employment of political assistants has not been made.

4.30 Because there has been not proper consideration of the impact of no longer employing political assistants, it is premature to claim that there will be a cost saving.

4.31 Similarly, the cost of any ‘saving’ has not been considered. We can all make a ‘saving’ by skipping breakfast, lunch and dinner but at what cost?

4.32 The Cabinet Member for Regulatory Services and the Environment references the cut in revenue support grant [RSG] by 87% in the last 5 years as some kind of clinching argument. What conclusion are we meant to draw from the reference to RSG? That services must be cut by 87%? The RSG is predicted to be negative by 2019/20. Are we to think all BDBC run services must end?
4.33 The RSG’s figure is misleading as other sources of revenue to the Council have also changed.

4.34 Total non-ringfenced Government Grants (including Revenue Support Grant) to BDBC were £11,446,000 in 2013/14 and £11,234,000 in 2016/17.

4.35 The council gross revenue expenditure is currently around £133.3 million, gross underlying expenditure is £47.3m. In 2008/9 the gross underlying expenditure of BDBC was £36.3m. So despite a cut in RSG, there has been a 30% increase in gross underlying expenditure since 2009.

4.36 While there are undoubted financial pressures on the council, that ought to make the case for a proper cost/benefit analysis of the role of political assistant even more important.

4.37 **There has not been a comparison with other councils that employ political assistants.**

4.38 No mention is made of councils that do employee political assistants – such as near neighbours, West Berkshire and Surrey County Council.

4.39 A list has been provided of Hampshire Councils that do not employ political assistants, as defined by the 1989 Act. Not only are they name checked in the report, the point is emphasised by including it in table form as well.

4.40 The Cabinet just recently presented us with a list of Hampshire Council that don’t have weekly bin collections. Did the Cabinet decide BDBC has to do what other councils in Hampshire do? No, they didn’t.

4.41 Instead of proper comparison, there is a selective list that doesn’t compare like with like.

4.42 Hart District Council does not employ political assistants - Hart has about 1/40th of the Financial Reserves that BDBC has. (£11m to £420m). Hart has about half the population of BDBC. (93,000 to 180,000). Hart has one third of the geographic area of BDBC (83 sq miles to 245) Hart has about half the Councillors of BDBC, it has a far lower revenue budget, a far lower housing target.

4.43 Even so, Hart was not asked why it doesn’t employ political assistants and whether it might like to.

4.44 East Hampshire is a Council with 44 members all of whom are Conservative. In the New Forest - opposition Councillors are just 2 out of 60 members. In Eastleigh the Conservatives have spent years with fewer than 10% of the members and there has been no Labour Group.

4.45 Political Assistants are of no relevance to these councils because they have no opposition groups that would qualify. Comparing support to opposition groups in Basingstoke and Deane to councils with no opposition groups that would qualify for a political assistant might be considered a best misleading, at worse perverse.
The Conservative Political Assistants’ Network (CPON), has represented 70+ Conservative political assistants in local government.

The Conservative party pamphlet “Your guide to becoming a Conservative Councillor” specifically mentions as a positive point that many Councils provide political assistants to assist councillors.

Conservative Political Assistant post have been appointed to or advertised in recent weeks for Camden Council and Norfolk County Council.

The sensible comparison ought to be between those councils that do employ staff directly to support political groups and those that don’t and the costs and benefits of each approach.

Comparison with support given to other elected officials such as MPs had not been made.

Basingstoke and Deane is represented by three MPs.

The ISPA shows that in 2015/16 The MP for North East Hampshire employed at taxpayer expense 5 Fulltime and 2 Part-time members of staff.

In 2015/16 the MP for Basingstoke claimed as a staffing expense, payroll for staff to a total of £147,583.75.

Parliament currently allows for non-London Area MPs, an annual staffing costs budget of £150,900. That's just the staffing costs, additional payment are made for hire of offices, purchase of equipment, travel, postage, etc etc.

It is a well-established feature of British Politics that opposition parties such receive publicly funded support for research and related matters. “Short Money” been paid since 1975 to opposition parties in the House of Commons. In 2015/16 Short Money totalled over £9m, around £50,000 for each opposition MP

In addition, opposition parties also received public funds “Cranborne money” to support their work in the House of Lords.

Both Short money and Cranborne money are in addition to payments made to individual MPs.

The cost of providing support to 60 councillors is less than the support provided to a single MP.

Bodies such as The Welsh Assembly and The London Assembly provide support to members. Elected Mayors and Police and Crime Commissioners also receive substantial support.

Conclusion
5 Summary and reason for the decision

5.1 The decision to employ political assistants is a matter for determination by the council.

5.2 Support for members is a fundamental pillar of good governance. Such support should be considered as a coherent whole, not in a piece meal way.

5.3 The political assistants contracts are due to either end or be renewed on 3rd June 2018. There is time for a considered review.

5.4 Following the review, a decision could still be made to end the employment of political assistants by Basingstoke and Deane Borough Council

5.5 Council should therefore consider the continued employment of political assistants as part of a review of the totality of support given to members which will consider the total current cost of such support and identify possible savings.

6 The options considered and rejected

6.1 To continue to plough on with discontinuing the post of political assistants

6.2 To continue with the employment of political assistants without a review

Date: 14th December 2017
Decision taken by: Council

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<td>Report author</td>
<td>Councillor Gavin James  <a href="mailto:cllr.gavin.james@basingstoke.gov.uk">cllr.gavin.james@basingstoke.gov.uk</a></td>
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