

LONDON BOROUGH OF TOWER HAMLETS
ANNUAL MEETING OF THE COUNCIL
WEDNESDAY 24TH MAY, 2006
APPOINTMENT OF POLITICAL ASSISTANTS
AGENDA ITEM NO. 10
REPORT OF THE INTERIM HEAD OF
DEMOCRATIC RENEWAL
AND ENGAGEMENT

SUMMARY

- 1 This report concerns the appointment of political assistants to the political groups on the Council.

RECOMMENDATIONS

2. That the Council is invited to consider the establishment of posts of political assistant in accordance with section 9 of the Local Government and Housing Act 1989.

BACKGROUND

3. The 1987 Widdicombe Committee produced a report entitled “The Conduct of Local Authority Business” and one of the issues it examined was that of political advisers, otherwise known as political assistants for political groups on authorities. The Widdicombe Committee recognised the existence and the reality of political organisations operating within the context of a local authority and found that political advisers were appointed by a small number of authorities “of all political colours”. The appointment of political assistants has now become standard practice across local authorities.
4. Widdicombe, whilst not advocating their general appointment found political assistants to be a useful means of broadening the basis of advice to councillors which led to positively promoting rather than damaging the role of the main officer hierarchy.
5. Widdicombe was of the view that political assistants should be differentiated from other officers, they should not enjoy delegated powers and that they should advise members directly rather than through an authority’s Chief Executive.

QUALIFICATIONS

6. The Local Government and Housing Act, 1989 (LGHA 89) set out the legislative framework for the employment of political assistants. It provides that, where the members of the authority are divided into different political groups, a political group shall qualify for a political assistant if:-
 - (a) the membership of that group comprises at least one-tenth of the membership of the authority;
 - (b) the number of the other groups (if any) which are larger groups does not exceed two; and
 - (c) where the number of the other groups which are the same size or larger than that group exceeds two, the authority have determined that group should be a group to which a post is allocated.

POSITION IN 2002-2006

7. During the previous administration both the Labour Group and the Liberal Democrat Group enjoyed the service of a full-time (35 hours per week) political assistant.
8. The political composition of the Council following the Borough Elections is:-

Labour Group	-	26
Respect Group	-	12
Conservative Group	-	7
Liberal Democrat Group	-	6

9. The Council is asked to consider whether posts of political assistants should be established for the 2006/10 administration. If the Council decided to do this, posts would be allocated to the Labour, Respect and Conservative Groups.

LEGISLATIVE BACKGROUND

10. Section 9 of the Local Government and Housing Act, 1989 which incorporated a number of Widdicombe's recommendations, governs the appointment of political advisers to provide assistance in the discharge of functions of members of any political groups as members of the authority.
11. Political assistants must be appointed on a fixed term contract which will terminate shortly after the annual meeting in 2010. The appointment of political assistants must be one of no more than three posts the authority has decided to create. Each group may only have one political assistant. The appointment of political assistants must be in accordance with the wishes of the political group to whom the post has been appointed. The appointments process, however, must be conducted in accordance with the Council's procedures and statutory requirements.
12. The legislation prohibits the making of an appointment to any post allocated to a political group until the authority has allocated a post to each political group on the Council which qualifies for one.

CONCURRENT REPORT OF THE ASSISTANT CHIEF EXECUTIVE (LEGAL)

13. The legal position is set out in the main body of the report.

COMMENTS OF THE CHIEF FINANCIAL OFFICER

14. The current budget for Democratic Renewal & Engagement includes provision for two posts of full-time political assistants. If the cost of any new arrangements exceeded this provision, it would need to be met from existing provision by means of compensatory savings.