

**Member Development Strategy
2024 - 2027**

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Foreword and Commitment

Members of Swale Borough Council wish to serve the communities they were elected to represent, and the Borough as a whole, to the best of their ability.

The Council wishes to ensure that all Members have the necessary skills and knowledge to best serve their community. This is very important, at a time of ongoing changes in local government.

The Council has set out its aims and objectives in the new Corporate Plan which was agreed in April 2024. There are five Themes in the Corporate Plan, which are

- Community - To enable our residents to live, work and enjoy their leisure time safely in our borough and to support community resilience.
- Economy - Working with our businesses and community organisations to work towards a sustainable economy which delivers for local people.
- Environment - To provide a cleaner, healthier, more sustainable and enjoyable environment, and to prepare our borough for the challenges ahead.
- Health & Housing - To aspire to be a borough where everyone has access to a decent home and improved health and wellbeing.
- Running the Council - Working within our resources to proactively engage with communities and outside bodies to deliver in a transparent and efficient way”

Councillors play a key role in developing and delivering these Themes, for the benefit of the Council and its communities.

To achieve this, it is a great benefit to have Councillors from a range of different backgrounds. They bring with them a wealth of different experiences. It also means that they have different training needs and learning styles. The Member Development Strategy (the Strategy) recognises this. It sets out clearly how the Council will support Members in obtaining the knowledge and skills that they require, whilst also recognising that Councillors need to take responsibility for their own learning and development.

The Strategy has been reviewed and updated by the Member Development Working Group (MDWG), which includes representatives from all the political groups represented on the Council, and by the Standards Committee. The MDWG's main role is to champion Member Development and to ensure that learning and development meets the needs of Councillors.

The Strategy covers the period up to May 2027. It includes activities to support those who have been councillors, previously, those who were newly elected in May 2023, and those who might be thinking of standing for election.

The Strategy is divided into a number of sections that explain the vision, values and aims; how they will be achieved and monitored; how learning and development needs will be identified and met; what support and resources are available, and what the role of the MDWG is. Also, how the success of Member Development will be measured and assessed, together with an Action Plan, setting out specific targets required to deliver the Strategy.

Councillors are faced with a wide range of roles and responsibilities. These cannot be underestimated. With its consistent and structured approach to Member Development, the Strategy represents a major commitment by the Council to support its Members. If Councillors have this support, it helps them to carry out their roles, effectively and

efficiently. This, in turn, helps to promote efficient decision making, strong representation and good governance.



***Councillor Tim Gibson
Leader of Swale Borough
Council***



***Councillor Elliott Jayes
Chair MDWG***



***Larissa Reed
Chief Executive***

Context

Many people who are elected as Members have their own political views and core social values. Those in political groups will receive leadership and support from their own group.

The Strategy outlines the support that will be given to Councillors to help them fulfil their roles and contribute to the delivery of the council's Corporate Plan. The Strategy ensures that a long-term view is taken of Member Development but is also one which can flex to fit changing needs and priorities.

The Strategy recognises that Councillors are not employees of the Council and strives to help them seek a balance between their demanding roles, both inside, and outside, of the Council.

Vision and Values

The vision for the Strategy is that all Councillors, have the necessary skills and knowledge to perform effectively and efficiently in their current roles, and to be able to develop those skills/knowledge for future roles in the Council.

To help achieve this vision, the key values that underpin the Strategy are:

- Development opportunities will be available to all Councillors irrespective of political allegiance.
- Member development will be based on the identified and agreed needs of the individual Councillor through their participation in the Member Development Plan (MDP) process.
- Member development will be delivered through methods, at locations, and at times, that ensure equality of access for Councillors personal circumstances, backgrounds and learning styles.
- The Council has a learning culture that seeks continuous development and life-long learning for Councillors as vital to its success.
- The Council acknowledges that Councillors and any Co-opted Members may have transferable skills from their work place and/or life experiences that can be used to help them perform their Council role.

Aims

The Strategy has the following aims:

1. To create a clear framework for the development of Councillors based on their individual needs and the needs of the Council as a whole.
2. To ensure that all Councillors have the skills at a level that is suitable for their roles and responsibilities.
3. To ensure Councillors have the skills and knowledge necessary to oversee the delivery of high-quality public services by the Council through their community leadership.
4. To ensure that Councillors feel confident and motivated to undertake their roles.
5. To ensure that Councillors are fully aware of their roles and responsibilities, legal requirements and matters of good practice as a means of delivering good governance.
6. To support the continued development of Councillors and help prepare them for roles that they may fulfil in the future.
7. To ensure a consistency of approach to Member development.
8. To attract and retain high calibre Councillors from as wide a range of backgrounds as possible.

Overall Management and Monitoring of the Strategy

Member development must be undertaken and managed if the Strategy is to be successful. To do this, it is vital that Councillors play an integral part in the management of the development programme.

The MDWG will advise the Council on all Member Development matters and will evaluate the programme of Member Development to ensure that it is responsive to Members' needs as follows:

- At least once a year, the MDWG will evaluate the implementation and effectiveness of this Strategy. If necessary, it will be updated to take account of lessons learned, Member feedback, latest developments and best practice.
- Where possible, Members will be asked to complete evaluation forms after each training session in the core programme either via a paper form at the session or electronically afterwards. Members attending externally provided courses will be encouraged to provide feedback to the Council on them to ensure that value for money is obtained.

- Member Development Plan (MDP) meetings will be offered to all new Councillors by their Group Leader as soon as it practical but within the first 12 months of their election with a review taking place annually afterwards or earlier, on request. The review meeting will include an opportunity for Members to comment on the training provided since their initial review and to assess the impact training has had on their ability and capacity to carry out their role, and any ongoing benefits.
- During the period covered by the Strategy, at least one comprehensive survey of Members will be undertaken to investigate a range of issues relating to their needs and their views of the services provided for them.
- Where appropriate, exit interviews will be undertaken with Members who have resigned or who are not seeking re-election to determine whether Member Development opportunities contributed to their decision.

Evaluation and feedback will be analysed and will inform the provision of Member training and will shape future policies. Each year, the MDWG will review the feedback that is received in respect of Member Development and share this information with other Councillors, and if necessary, with the Standards Committee. Significant issues will be brought to the attention of the MDWG at other times, if required.

Each year, the MDWG will draft a report for the Standards Committee and Full Council giving a summary of the attendance of each training session, the training activities and their costs, and the forthcoming municipal year's training schedule.

Member Development Working Group

The Strategy is owned by the Council as a whole. However, it will be the responsibility of the MDWG and the Democratic Services team to ensure that the Strategy is reviewed and updated to reflect any changes arising from external and internal factors, and that it continues to be fit for purpose.

Role and Composition

The MDWG will include representatives from all the political groups and independent members that make up Full Council, with officer support being provided by a Democratic Services Officer.

The Group will meet a minimum of 4 times a year to agree and review training and development for Councillors.

The main purpose of the MDWG is to:

- Provide strong leadership and guidance in respect of Member Development.
- Develop a comprehensive Member Development Programme.
- Ensure that learning and development is effective in building capacity and ensuring that Councillors have the necessary skills and knowledge to carry out their community leadership roles effectively.

Terms of Reference

- To champion and encourage Member development.
- To monitor and review the Strategy and associated documents/processes on an at least an annual basis.
- To shape and prioritise Member Development, e.g., New Member induction Programme, Prospective Councillor Events, training, and development needs identified through MDP or other means etc.
- To oversee the development of a comprehensive Member Development Programme, that takes advantage of partnership opportunities with other local authorities and promotes best practice for the delivery of Member Development.
- To ensure that the Council provides Member Development that meets the needs of all Councillors.
- To encourage effective Member / officer working relationships in accordance with the Code of Conduct and Officer Member Protocol to ensure that all Councillor roles are explained clearly.
- To assist in the development of effective evaluation to ensure the effectiveness of the Member Development Programme and to make best use of resources.
- To maintain a dialogue with national and regional bodies supporting Member Development and to explore external sources of funding for Member Development.
- To receive regular update reports on Member Development within the Council, to review Member attendance at Member Development events and to retain an overview of the Member Development budget.
- To ensure equal access for all Councillors to training and development and to promote the use of information technology for and by Members.

How Member Development Needs will be Identified

Member development needs will be identified through the following four main avenues:

1. Corporate Training Needs

The environment in which local government operates may change frequently and fundamentally. This is because of changes in the law, corporate priorities, or changes to local government services/structures. The Council must be alert to these changes and be ready to adapt its learning and development to suit every circumstance, and to fill any gaps in skills and knowledge that arise.

2. Role of Members

It is vital that Member Development and this Strategy relate directly to the roles and duties that Members have to fulfil. To ensure this, the Council will develop a number of Role Descriptions for Councillors which will be included in the Council's Constitution. The MDWG will ensure that there is a programme of development that enables Councillors to have the skills and knowledge to fulfil the specific roles identified. Each newly elected Councillor will be invited to participate in an induction programme relevant to their role.

3. Specialist Role Needs

Many Members will have additional roles that they currently carry out, or roles that they aspire to, in the future, and these will require specialist or more focused training. These roles include:

- Chair or Vice-Chair of Committees or Sub-Committees
- Leadership, for example Leader of the Council or Leader of a Political Group
- Regulatory Committees such as Licensing and Planning which exercise regulatory functions
- Audit and Governance
- Standards
- Civic and ceremonial protocols

4. Identifying Personal Development Needs

The skills needed to carry out the roles listed in points 1 – 3 above set the training needs for Councillors, which are also linked to the delivery of Themes in the Strategic Plan. However, for a truly effective training needs analysis which identifies specific development needs for individual Members, a more in-depth discussion is needed on a one-to-one basis. This can best be achieved through participation in the MDP process. This involves:

- Participation in an individual Member Development Plan meeting where Councillors can identify any gaps in their skills / knowledge to inform their development needs.
- Considering other relevant, necessary skills eg presentational skills, speed reading, public speaking etc.
- Discussions with Political Group Leaders or the Democratic Services Team.
- Reviewing the impact of learning and development through the MDP process as well as feedback received through course evaluation.
- Councillors maintaining their own personal development / training records and regularly reviewing if there any gaps in their skills / knowledge.

Based on the above, an overall Member Development Programme will be developed each year but will be reviewed by the MDWG on a regular basis to ensure that it is responsive to the needs of Members and the Council.

How Member Development Needs will be Met

To support the diverse development needs of Councillors and Co-opted Members, a range of options will be made available to suit different learning styles and individual circumstances. In some cases, these can be delivered through the Council's own internal resources or, where necessary, specialist providers with a proven track records in terms of training will be brought in. Potential development delivery methods may include:

- Training courses
- Informal in-house briefings and workshops, including joint Member / officer training where appropriate
- External conferences and seminars
- Member briefings
- Written learning materials
- Peer Mentors
- E-Learning packages
- Distance learning packages
- Visits to other Councils or relevant partners
- Shadowing opportunities
- Sharing of knowledge amongst other Elected Members
- Personal research or preparation for specific projects.

Councillors will be encouraged to be involved in Member Development, where appropriate, by leading workshops, disseminating expert knowledge, offering mentoring or by encouraging the take-up of Member Development opportunities. The delivery of these activities will also be considered as contributing towards a Member's own continued professional development and can be a method of achieving goals identified on their specific Member Development Plan.

Support for Prospective and New Councillors

Swale Borough Council is keen to attract Members from all different backgrounds to join the Council, including those people who are not necessarily part of established political groups. Such people might require some additional information, and support, on what it is like to be a Councillor, such as details of the potential time commitments, the benefits of being a Councillor, as well as some of the challenges.

The following specific support will be offered to prospective Councillors:

- A media campaign to attract and support prospective Councillors will commence at least 6 months before the elections and drop-in sessions will be available with Elections and Democratic Services staff, to provide information on being a councillor.
- A candidate pack will give information on the process for standing for election and the required forms to be completed, as well as brief details on what it means to be a Swale Borough Councillor.
- Candidates will be encouraged to observe Council and Committee meetings to further their understanding of how the Council operates.

The following specific support will be offered to New Councillors:

- After the elections, each new Councillor will be provided with an Electronic Member Handbook providing a more detailed introduction to the Council and practical information about being a Councillor.
- A comprehensive Induction Programme will be provided to ensure that newly-elected Councillors can quickly participate fully in the business of the Council. This will include an opportunity to meet senior officers, find out about the Council's key priorities, be given information to get them started and receive basic training on key areas such as the Code of Conduct.
- Sessions tailor made for new councillors will be provided to induct them into how the council operates and the roles of councillors and officers. The sessions will also include 'Teams' training.
- Details of the Democratic Services Team will be given to provide support with information and signposting.
- Newly-elected Councillors will receive a tour of Swale House so they can familiarise themselves with the building, Chamber and ensure they feel comfortable in the surroundings.
- Councillors who have been elected at by-elections will be provided with a similar Induction Programme and support.
- New Councillors will be offered a tour of key locations across the Borough within the first 6 months after election.
- New Councillors will also be offered a Member Development Plan Meeting by their Group Leader within 6 months of being elected to identify any specific training needs.

In addition, Councillor Communication Guidelines (Appendix A) have been developed so that new Members understand the minimum level of service that residents can reasonably expect when contacting their Borough Councillor.

The Member Support Scheme (Appendix B) provides for a Senior Council Officer (buddy) to be assigned to a newly elected Member immediately following the election. Members can also request peer support and/or mentoring by a more experienced Member which is particularly helpful for newly-elected colleagues as well as those Councillors stepping into key roles. This provides development benefits for both the mentor and the mentee.

Resources

Each year, the MDWG will identify the budget and resources that are needed to support Member Development and will refer any recommendations for the Member Development budget to Full Council (as part of the annual budget review process). These resources will be monitored by the MDWG and include:

- Financial budget allocation and other capacity to support Member Development activities

- Member support from within the Democratic Services Team
- Conference / Seminar attendance by specific postholders eg Group Leaders, Chairs of Committees etc
- Opportunities for cross-authority / partner training on a countywide, regional or national basis
- Specific training programmes provided by national / regional course providers eg Local Government Association, South East Employers etc.
- Relevant opportunities for learning through seminars, conferences or visits hosted by partners.

The budget for Member Development is currently set at £6,000 per annum. The MDWG will look at this budget and identify whether it is enough and make the necessary requests to Policy and Resources Committee for funding.

Ongoing Commitment

As part of their ongoing commitment, the MDWG has developed an Action Plan setting out specific pieces of training required to deliver the Member Development Strategy (Appendix C) which will support the direction and priorities within the Corporate Plan.

The Strategy and the Action Plan are flexible and dynamic, ensuring that the right support can be offered to Members, depending on what the changes in priorities might be, arising from national or local circumstances.

Remote Working/Training

The pandemic had a major impact on the way in which people live and work. It has impacted on Councillors, too, in terms how they conduct their roles, and carry out their duties.

During the Pandemic, Councillors increased the use of MS Teams and following Covid, this has not changed. Officers are in the council building on average 2 days per week and councillor behaviour has shifted to coming into Swale House predominately for formal meetings.

The Members' Teams area has also been set up and the MDP will identify what training councillors require to enable them to work successfully remotely. Wherever possible, briefing and training sessions will be recorded and shared in the Members' Team area.

COUNCILLOR COMMUNICATION GUIDELINES

Swale Borough Council is committed to delivering quality services. These Communication Guidelines outline the minimum level of service that members of the public can reasonably expect when contacting their SBC Councillor.

We will:

- Respect your views and respond to you in a fair, objective, polite and helpful manner.
- Respond as quickly as possible to all requests for information or services.
- Respect your right to privacy and confidentiality.
- Actively seek your views and feedback, acting on them appropriately
- Apologise if we get it wrong and put it right as quickly as possible

If you visit us:

- If you have made an appointment we will ensure that you are seen at the time agreed, or keep you informed of any delay and the reasons for this

If you telephone us:

- We will answer or respond to your call as soon as possible, within 21 days, understanding that many councillors work full time or have family commitments.

If you email or write to us:

- We aim to respond to letters within 21 days and emails within 14 days. If this is not possible, we will acknowledge your correspondence telling you why and we will give you a response date
- We will respond to you in plain language

What we expect from you:

- Openness and honesty, giving as much information as possible to assist us in dealing with your enquiry, letting us know if you have any special needs
- Full co-operation and for you to be respectful when dealing with Councillors, as although we will do our best to help you, we will not tolerate abuse, threats or harassment, on or off Council premises.

MEMBER SUPPORT SCHEME

The Member Support Scheme provides Councillors with a named contact from the Council's Senior Management Team following their election. In addition, if requested, a peer Mentor who is usually a Councillor from their own political group, can be assigned to help with signposting and providing advice on all issues affecting the life of a Councillor.

The Scheme is not designed to replace the direct contact and access that all Councillors can expect when they wish to speak to their Group Leaders, the Chief Executive, Directors or Heads of Services. It is also not intended that it will create personal assistants or research assistants for individual Councillors

Buddy's can offer support and advice, especially during the first year after a Member is elected or if they have been appointed to a new role, and can help the Councillor understand the requirements of the role and develop their confidence. The Member Support Scheme should enable Councillors to:

- be more aware of where to go for information and support
- feel more confident in their representative and decision-making roles
- be able to make an early contribution to the work of the Council and representing their local community.

If Members need factual information about Council services and details about who to contact within the Council, or any other day to day information about Council business, contact can be made with their named buddy or anyone within the Democratic Services Team or refer to the information contained in the Member Handbook.

What can a Councillor expect from their named buddy or a Mentor?

- A friendly response to questions however trivial they may appear
- Support and advice from the Officer/Mentor's personal knowledge and experience
- Signposting to an appropriate officer or Councillor to take forward a query as needed – this will usually be at service head or team leader level for any new service enquiry or it could be a Committee
- A sounding board to help the Councillor reflect on new experiences and issues raised
- A response to emails and telephone calls as promptly as possible and to be advised who will respond to queries if the Buddy/Mentor is away for an extended period of time
- A prompt response to requests to meet with the Buddy/Mentor

How and when is a named Buddy or Peer Mentor assigned?

The named Buddy will be appointed immediately following the election and will contact the new Councillor within the first day or so after the Count. Once notified of a request for a Peer Mentor, the Democratic Services Officer will contact Political Group Leaders to ask for a nomination as soon as practicable.

The Member Support Scheme is informal and intended to be helpful, therefore, Councillors can make as much or as little use of it as they wish.

APPENDIX C

Strategic Plan Theme/ Responsible SMT Rep	Training Action	Date of training	When will the session be held
Mandatory Training			
	Planning Committee Training	15 October 2024	Evening session starting around 6 – 9 pm
	Licensing Training - COMPLETED	13 June 2024	In-House training from Legal and Licensing
	Audit Committee Training	Ongoing	Bitesize training before committee, starting at 6 pm
	DSE Training	TBA	
Democratic Services and Monitoring officer			
	Neurodiversity Training	19 November	Evening remote session 6 – 7.30 pm
	Officer/Member Protocol briefing – COMPLETED	April 2024	
	MENTalk briefing - COMPLETED	14 July 2024	
	Standards Training and conducting Standards Hearing training - COMPLETED	10 June 2024	External Training
	Understanding the Committee System	TBA	
	Elections training around General Election and what you can and can't do during 'purdah'	TBA	Bitesize training during core hours
	Electoral Review of Swale – Group leader briefing - COMPLETED	5 September 2024	
	Electoral Review of Swale – Briefing to all Members - COMPLETED	11 September 2024	
Audit and Finance			
	Employer Pension Fund Briefing by KCC – COMPLETED	April 2024	
	Risk Management Training	TBA	Bitesize training before committee starting at 6 pm
	Budget Setting training	TBA	Training session starting at 6 pm
	Not-so-basic Finance Information	TBA	Bitesize training before committee starting at 6 pm

	Basics of Budget monitoring, plus specific finance terms	TBA	Training session starting at 6 pm
Planning			
	Understanding the Local Plan	12 September 2024	Training session starting at 6 pm
	Mid Kent Planning Portal Training	TBA	Bitesize training before committee
	5 Year Housing Land Supply Briefing	TBA	Bitesize training before committee
	Introduction and testing of the draft Member Development Protocol - COMPLETED	23 May 2024	6.15 pm, Committee Room, Swale House
	Swale's Enforcement Strategy	To be rescheduled	6.15 pm, Committee Room, Swale House
	Bolstering Responses to Outline Applications - COMPLETED	12 September 2024	6.15 pm, Committee Room, Swale House
	Understanding BREEAM	January 2025	6.15 pm, Committee Room, Swale House
	'Your role as a Ward Member' at Planning Committee	May 2025	Bitesize training before committee
	Heritage briefing - COMPLETED	22 July and 6 August 2024	Dedicated training session 6 pm – 7 pm
ICT			
	MS Teams training including top tips for Councillors and awareness of cyber security	TBA	Bitesize training during core hours Training Away day on Saturday
Community Safety and Housing			
	Community Safety briefing	TBA	Training session starting at 6 pm
	Prevent Training	TBA	Training session starting at 6 pm
	Swale Voluntary Alliance presentation - Completed	21 May 2024	6.30 pm, Virtual via Microsoft Teams
	Rent reform briefing	TBA	Bitesize training before Committee
	Emergency Planning training	18 December 2024	Remote teams session 6 pm

	Housing training on homelessness and the housing budget	TBA	Bitesize training before committee
	How to deal with desperate residents and situations	TBA	Training session starting at 6 pm
	Briefing on operation 'Menai Bridge'	TBA	Bitesize training during core hours
Communications and Customer Services			
	Customer services briefing including how to signpost correctly to the correct services	TBA	Training Away day on Saturday
	Communications strategy briefing	TBA	Training session starting at 6 pm
	When to talk to the press, and how to deal with the press training	TBA	Training Away day on Saturday
	Effective use of Social Media	TBA	Bitesize training during core hours
Council Tax			
	Understanding Council Tax and Business Rates	TBA	Training session starting at 6 pm
Information Governance			
	FOI and GDPR	TBA	Training session starting at 6 pm
	Covert Surveillance and RIPA training	TBA	Training session starting at 6 pm
Leisure Services			
	Waste Contract Briefings	TBA	Training session starting at 6 pm
	Carbon Literacy Training	TBA	Training session starting at 6 pm