Some local authorities employ Political Assistants to work directly with political groups in the development of policy priorities. Any such posts are employed by and funded by the Council.

1. Background Details

Under section 9 of the Local Government and Housing Act 1989, a local authority may appoint up to three assistants for political groups subject to stringent conditions and safeguards.

The general role of Political Assistants is to undertake research and provide administrative support for political groups.

The appointment of each assistant is down to the political group that each post (political assistant) is to represent. The selectors can take account of the candidate's political activities during the selection process, although the posts are 'politically restricted'.

The criteria laid down for the posts are that

- only one post can be appointed to a political group
- the three largest groups in each authority qualify for a post (if the membership of the group consists of at least 10% of the membership of the authority)
- although it is for the authority to determine the salary payable, the remuneration of the assistants must not exceed £34,986 being the maximum figure specified by The Local Government (Assistants for Political Groups) (Remuneration) (England) Order 2006. This is equivalent to spinal column point 44 on the NJC pay scales.
- their terms and conditions must not be less favourable than those of other political assistants in the authority
- the contract of employment must terminate at or before the annual council meeting following the first elections after the person was appointed (or the first annual council meeting after the person has been in post for three years if the council is elected by thirds)
- the local authority cannot delegate any functions to an assistant, and no other authority officer can be required to work under the direction of an assistant (other than in respect of secretarial or clerical services)

Unlike other politically-restricted posts, political assistants are not restricted from speaking to the public at large or publishing any written or artistic work that could give the impression that they are advocating support for a political party. However, they may not speak in public so as to create the impression that they are speaking as an authorised representative of a political party. They must also not publish or be involved in the publication of a written or artistic work which gives the impression that the publication is authorised by a political party.
2. Report
Information gathered from other local authorities in Northamptonshire shows that only two District/Borough Councils (Kettering and Northampton) employ Political Assistants. These Councils are both larger than Corby and operate under a Leader and Cabinet model. It is inevitable that the role would differ in a fourth option authority, where Members work together in committees rather than in individual executive roles.

The evaluated grades for the posts at Kettering and Northampton range between £25k and £30k. If such posts were created at Corby Borough Council then they would need to be evaluated in line with the current job evaluation scheme. For the purposes of the costings in this report, a mid-point of £27,500 is assumed. In addition to the basic salary cost, on-costs for National Insurance and Pension contributions of around 29% would be incurred. Finally, budgetary provision for office costs, computer, desk etc. amounting to £2,000 per post would need to be allowed. The total cost per full-time Political Assistant would therefore be in the region of £37,500.

The Council has three political groups, each of whom hold more than 10% of seats, and would therefore be entitled to the same level of support. The full year cost of three Political Assistants is therefore estimated at £112,500. Clearly part-time posts could be secured at a proportional cost. It would be for each Group to decide whether to take up the option of appointing a Political Assistant and whether that would be on a full or part-time basis.

If Members choose to appoint Political Assistants, additional consideration would need to be given to line management arrangements and office accommodation – each assistant would require separate office space.

Political Assistants undertake such tasks as constituent case work, media relations, research and a degree of administrative work to support the demanding and full-time roles of their Councillors. Of course Councillors provide that role too and when the Independent Remuneration Panel last met and recommended increases in Members Allowances they did so cognisant of the lack of political assistants. The question would need to be put whether this would change their view.

3. Options to be considered
There is no statutory requirement to appoint Political Assistants. Members may choose to do so, either on a full or part-time basis. Allocation of budget to such posts should be considered in the light of other resource requirements supporting the achievement of One Corby priorities.

4. Issues to be taken into account:-

Policy Priorities
Part of the role of Political Assistants is to assist political groups in developing policy and their response to policy development.

Financial
As set out in the Medium Term Financial Strategy elsewhere on this agenda, the projections show a potential funding gap in the General Fund and therefore limited scope for service growth without reductions in other services. There is a possibility of additional funding through the Local Authority Business Growth Incentive (LABGI) scheme and/or a better than expected Formula Grant settlement. Neither of these will be clarified until the autumn of this year.

If three full-time Political Assistants were appointed for 3.5 years from October 2007 until just before the next election, the full cost would total £394k (excluding inflation/pay awards). The part-year budget for 2007/08 of £56,250 would require funding from reserves or reductions in other budgets. Costs would reduce pro-rata if fewer of part-time posts were created.
Legal
The appointment of Political Assistants is covered by the Local Government and Housing Act, the Local Authorities (Standing Order) (England) Regulations 2001 and the Local Government (Assistants for Political Groups) (Remuneration) (England) Order 2006.

In reaching a decision Councillors should consider the importance attached nationally to the issue of political neutrality in local government and this has to be considered in the introduction of such posts - particularly in a small authority where the costs and impact (size of workforce) etc. will be disproportionately higher.

Human Rights
The compatibility of political restrictions on local authority posts with an individual's rights under the European Convention of Human Rights was tested in the case of Ahmed and others v UK [1999] 188 ECHR.

The European Court of Human Rights held that the political restrictions did not breach Article 10 (the right to freedom of expression) or Article 11 (the right to freedom of association) of the applicant's Convention rights, as the public has a right to expect that those holding higher level local government office are politically impartial.

Equalities
The recruitment of any Political Assistants must be carried out in accordance with Corby Borough Council's Equal Opportunities Policy.

Performance Information, Sustainability, Community Safety
No direct implications arising from this report.

5. Conclusion
Political Assistants provide support to political groups, and would be funded from the Council’s General Fund budget. Their role is subject to restrictions as set out above.

6. Recommendations
That Members decide in principle on the appointment or not of Political Assistants and make a recommendation to One Corby Policy Committee regarding the funding of such posts.

Background Papers
Information extracted from Local Government Employers (LGE) Website

External Consultations
None

List of Appendices
None

Wards
All Wards

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