



Council

28 March 2022

Appendix D

Report of Town Clerk

Municipal Calendars

Access Public

Background

1. A review of the existing committee system has been part of the forward plan for some time, and was positioned at the end of the first civic year of the new council to allow new members to form their own opinion of the practice of governance within the council.
2. Broadly speaking, council returned to a committee system in 2017 and has operated with three service or business based committees alongside the planning committee. Only limited decision making powers have been delegated to committees, and many decisions have to be referred back to council for decisions; as a result council often has more than 20 agenda items.
3. An over-reliance on officer prepared reports is both impacting the amount of time officers can spend on delivery of projects and services and has the effect of leading to councillors feeling distant from the decision making process. The reliance on text led reports does not help this effect. In addition, officers fear there is an element of wasted time in their preparing reports that are overly prescriptive and which, after scrutiny from members, have to be substantially re-appraised, and would seek to find ways of enabling pre-decision scrutiny in a way that more fully involves members.
4. As part of the preparation of this report officers have asked members for their opinions about the operation of the current system, and the demands it places on council resources.

Feedback

5. There was a strong consensus that there are too many committee meetings for the progress achieved in the time taken. There was also an implicit consensus that decision making needed to be streamlined. Beyond that point however, there was some divergence on proposals for change.
6. Broadly speaking, the proposals were:
 - a. To return to whole of council decision making, by having two council meetings per month,
 - b. To reduce the number of committees by:
 - i. Merging one or more of them, or
 - ii. By creating a general purposes and policy committee, or
 - c. By reducing the number of committees and of whole of council meetings, while supporting decision making by greater use of delegations.

Implementation of proposals

7. Officers have considered each of the proposals put forward and reached the following conclusions.
 - a. Council has previously operated with whole of council meetings on a three weekly basis. The root cause of that decision was a desire to avoid council re-visiting matters decided in principle in committees, and to ensure that each decision made in committee was both lawful and well made. The view of officers is that the cultural issues that led to that situation have been largely resolved, both through better record keeping and administration of meetings, and through the hard work of members who more frequently pursue consensus and police their conduct in a way that was not always possible. It is not clear from the proposal, as put forward, how much time would be freed up, and it is not obvious, from past experience, how much more can be achieved in whole of council meetings.
 - b. Merging one or more committees would not, in and of itself, reduce the number of decisions required.
 - i. Merging committees whilst also delegating authority to the merged committees might enable more decisions to be taken with less repetition, and this is an area officers would like to explore.
 - ii. Merging People and Communities Committee with the Budget and Administration Committee, to create a Policy and Administration Committee which would also be the parent committee for a new Audit Sub-Committee, and the Staffing and Corporate Resource Committee, would enable a reduction in council meetings, and, with delegated authority, would enable swifter decision making.
 - c. Officers believe it may be possible to deliver smoother decision making while reducing the number of meetings, simply by delegating more authority to committees, on the basis of budget headings. However, improved ways of consulting on decisions would also be required, and more work on this is also under way.
8. Separately Officers have already consulted on ways of making the Forward Plans for committees and council more member led, and note that the proposal to enable members to make a presentation at the start of each meeting, no longer than three minutes, is congruent with existing standing orders, and they will, with council's consent, implement this immediately as part of the re-design of council agendas.

Recommendation

1. To consider the report.

Author	GD
Checked by	SC
Town Clerk sign off (if required)	GD