

EPPING FOREST DISTRICT COUNCIL CONSTITUTION WORKING GROUP MEETING MINUTES

Thursday 14 March 2024, 7.00 pm - 8.10 pm

Virtual Meeting on Microsoft Teams

Members Present:	Councillors A Lion (Chairman), J H Whitehouse (Vice-Chairman), R Bassett, S Heap, H Kauffman, J Mclvor, C C Pond and L Burrows
Apologies:	Councillor(s) P Bhanot and J Philip
Officers In Attendance:	Nathalie Boateng (Service Manager / Solicitor - Legal Services (Shared Services)), Gary Woodhall (Team Manager - Democratic & Electoral Services), Matt Picking (Democracy & Elections Apprentice), Tom Carne (Corporate Communications Team Manager) and Steven Mitchell (PR Website Editor)

14 SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS

The Working Group noted that Councillor L Burrows had been appointed as substitute for Councillor J Philip.

15 NOTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING

RESOLVED:

That the notes of the working Group held on 18 January 2024 be agreed as a correct record.

16 TERMS OF REFERENCE & WORK PROGRAMME

(a) Terms of Reference

The Working Group noted the Terms of Reference.

(b) Work Programme

The Working Group noted the Work Programme and there were no further comments.

17 CONSTITUTION - REVISIONS & AMENDMENTS

One outstanding revision regarding Portfolio Responsibility amendments, G Woodhall stated that if the review of article 17 was agreed at this meeting further in the agenda and then at the Council meeting on 9 April 2024, then he planned to do both updates at the same time after the April council meeting.

The consensus of the group was to get things moving and agreed to send them both together.

18 CONSTITUTION REVIEW UPDATE

Scheme of Delegation:

N Boateng informed the group that the Constitution Workstream Group have reduced the Scheme of Delegation from 140 pages to 40-50 pages by removing duplications and streamlining it while ensuring that no crucial information had been lost.

N Boateng planned to take the revised article to SLT and the wider leadership team, then back to the Constitution Working Group for approval before going to Council to be agreed.

The Chairman, Cllr Lion suggested breaking down the re-writing of the constitution into 3 phases to ensure the seamless handover to the new members of the Constitution Working Group next year. All members concurred.

Resolved: That the progress of the revision of the Scheme of Delegations section within the Constitution be noted.

Improving accessibility of the constitution:

T Carne and S Mitchell discussed how EFDC is currently using the committee management system (mod.gov) to view, store and edit the Constitution. The group discussed how the Constitution in its current form (PDF format) is no longer fit for purpose because it was not accessible for people to search the Constitution for the article or part they were looking for. The Council was currently moving away from PDF format in favour of HTML for the website due to its better rendering on different-sized devices, ease of searching with multiple search engines and being better suited for users with disabilities such as blindness as it could support accessibility software.

The Chairman, Cllr Lion noted that the constitution in its current form was suitable for Officers and Members of the Council using the tools that we had available such as the mod.gov app. However, other stakeholders such as members of the public, contractors and consultants who wished to read a part of the Constitution might struggle to find what they were looking for using the online PDF version.

The Group noted that while Mod.Gov had its advantages in terms of automatic page numbering and the ability to look at old versions of the Constitution, the benefits of transferring the Constitution to HTML format outweighed these. In HTML format the Constitution would no longer be broken down into multiple small documents which made it difficult to search. This coupled with the amendments that were being made by N Boateng would make the constitution much more readable and accessible. T Carne noted that if HTML was not widely adopted, there was always the option to revert to PDF format.

In response to a question from the Chairman, A Lion. N Boateng confirmed that the decision to change the constitution into HTML format would have to go to Council to ratify the decision, but suggested officers should create a draft of at least part of the constitution to have something to present to all the Council members.

ACTION 1: N Boateng to contact the said Councils should members decide to transfer to the HTML version of the constitution to discuss how the changes affected them.

ACTION 2: Testing to commence on putting the Constitution in HTML format by T Carne and S Mitchell.

19 REVIEW OF ARTICLE 17 - ACCESS TO INFORMATION

G Woodhall informed members that the Democratic Services team had noticed there are several parts of article 17 that we are no longer doing because the legislation had changed, or the Council had revised their processes. For example, when the print unit was disbanded, the Council was no longer putting copies of the agenda in the reception as well as changes to the length of time that key decisions had to be advertised on the forward plan.

Cllr Whitehouse raised a question about where the terms “clear working days” and “clear days” were used interchangeably throughout the document. G Woodhall confirmed that they both have the same meaning (5 days between, not including the day of publication for the agenda and the day of the meeting) and confirmed that changes would be made to ensure that the wording was uniform throughout the document.

ACTION 3: G Woodhall to update Article 17 amended document to ensure that the wording of the “clear working days” is uniform throughout.

Cllr Whitehouse commented that paragraph 42, which referred to the recording of cabinet decisions at meetings at committees, did not mention the Member Questions without Notice at Council. G Woodhall informed members that there were not any decisions made in Member Questions without Notice at Council. If there was an issue raised that needed a formal decision it would go to Cabinet or come back to Council with a report for it to be properly minuted.

Cllr Whitehouse enquired whether Appendix 2 in Article 17 regarding the relationship between Councillors and Officers was included as part of the induction of new Officers. G Woodhall said he was not sure if it was included in the Officer induction but would take it away to the people team to enquire if it was included.

ACTION 4: G Woodhall/N Boateng to speak to Joanne Budden (Service Manager – People Team) regarding Appendix 2 in Article 17 to see if the relationship between Councillors and Officers was included in the Officer induction.

Cllr Whitehouse raised an enquiry around EFDC no longer putting the agendas/notice of meetings on the boards outside the Civic Offices. G Woodhall suggested that we look into getting notifications of meetings up on the TV screens situated in the reception area of the Civic Offices to keep the public who don't use computers informed of when the next public meetings are occurring.

ACTION 5: G Woodhall to enquire about getting notifications of public meetings on TV screens in Civic offices reception area (see if it is possible to link Mod.Gov calendar).

Cllr Heap raised a point around having all member questions written out fully in the minutes. G Woodhall informed members that Democratic Services had done research into this topic and found that no other Councils were fully minuting every question raised. So long as the minutes outline the topic of the question, who asked it and who it was addressed to, full details of the question can be found on the webcast.

Resolved:

That, subject to the requested amendments to Article 17 outlined above, the revised Article 17 be submitted to Council for approval.

20 DATE OF NEXT MEETING

It was noted that the next meeting of the Working Group would be held on 11 July 2024 at 19.00.