

Report to Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Date of meeting: 6 June 2006

Subject: Council Meetings - Future Role

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Committee Secretary: Z Folley (ext 4532)



Recommendation:

That the proposed enhancements to Council procedures set out in this report be approved and appropriate amendments be made to the Council's Constitution accordingly

Report

(a) Scope of Review and Consultation Undertaken

1. (Chairman of Constitution and Members Services Scrutiny Panel) Following the introduction of revised political decision-making arrangements and adoption of a new Constitution, revised Terms of Reference for the Full Council were agreed.
2. When reviewing constitutional matters, at its meeting on 25 November 2003, the Overview and Scrutiny Co-ordinating Group noted that the volume of business being referred to the Council from Cabinet was more limited. In the early stages of drafting the Constitution, it was acknowledged that a new role should be developed for the Council.
3. Since political modernisation, debates at Council meetings have concentrated on referred items, appointments to outside bodies and Committees, and to motions and questions. It is recognised that Council meetings may not be achieving Members' aspirations for providing a major forum for debates of interest to the local community.
4. During the 2004/05 Council year, the then Policy Working Group began a review of the types of item being considered and determined at Council meetings and the options for enhancing debate. The work on the review was continued by this Panel as it fell within its purview under the revised arrangements which came into effect from the commencement of the 2005/06 Council year.
5. A number of visits to other local authority Council meetings were undertaken and a comprehensive review has now been completed. We have identified a number of additional items that might be appropriate for discussion and determination by the Full Council itself, and identified other potential revisions to the terms of reference we feel would enhance debate and encourage greater public interest.
6. Subsequent to the conclusion of the review we also surveyed all Members of Council, in the form of a questionnaire, on the potential enhancements we had identified. The results of the survey indicated that, in each instance, Members were in favour of the enhancements proposed.

(b) Key Areas Selected

From a range of measures assessed, we have identified a number of enhancements we are proposing should be introduced during the 2006/07 Council year, details of which are set out below. There are other enhancements (such as the Council in Committee/Seminar concept) which we feel could be brought in at a later stage once the other measures have become established.

(i) 'State of the District' debates

We were keen to introduce of 'State of the District' debates, having been impressed by the successful introduction of this item at other local authorities such as Arun, Ashfield, Breckland, Fenland, Rother, Salisbury and Welwyn Hatfield. We have stressed the need for these debates to result in positive outcomes, for the meetings to be held once a year and to be linked in to Best Value/Council Plan and budgetary process.

State of the District debates focus on the key issues faced not just by the authority, but by the areas and communities within the District. Such debates symbolise an outward looking Council and often involve, as part of the meeting, representatives of other stakeholders and the public generally, as part of a community planning process.

If other Members of the Council are supportive of this, officers will work on the detailed operational arrangements with a view to the first 'State of the District' debate being held during Autumn 2006.

(ii) 'Single Issue' Council meetings

We noted that provision already exists in the Constitution for such debates. The issue is about how this provision should be used and the approach to be taken in achieving the desired outcome.

Reference was made to the informal public seminar recently held on wheeled bins. The option could be used for similar discussion using a similar approach. The debates might be held before formal Council meetings. In relation to choosing topics for discussion, it was noted that this could be rotated between the Groups 'State of the District' debates could also bring forward issues for the sessions.

We agreed that this option should be pursued and suggested that only one debate be held in the first instance as a pilot. Again we feel action should be taken to ensure that meetings are followed up to secure a 'positive outcome'. This could be undertaken, for example, by a specific Task and Finish Panel.

(iii) Reports from Overview and Scrutiny/Leader/Portfolio Holders

We agreed that this should involve a written report being submitted to every meeting by each of the Portfolio Holders, the Leader and the Overview and Scrutiny Chairman on current work falling within their spheres of responsibility. The information in their reports should be taken as read and be subject to questions by Members without notice. We are proposing that twenty minutes be allocated under this item to each of the three areas and that it should cover any issue under their remit.

We have agreed that a protocol be devised for determining the number of questions each Group/individual Member would be entitled to ask during the item and that the question of

whether the protocol should take account of the 'pro rata' arrangements will need to be looked at.

(iv) Questions by Members

We have agreed that, alongside a provision for verbal questions, provision should still exist for written questions under notice. We are proposing that there be one agenda item for Members questions and this cover both option (iii) above and written questions and the twenty minute slot referred to in that option cover both written and verbal questions.

(v) Questions by the Public

The District Council, along with many other local authorities has had difficulty in encouraging the public to submit their questions and participate in the process. We have agreed that publicity arrangements for this should be re-assessed. Suggestions for potential improvements include information on the website, local newspapers and an updated version of the booklet providing guidance to the general public. We have also agreed that the operational arrangements connected with questions from the public should be reviewed to identify ways of making them more customer friendly.

(c) Constitutional Changes

We noted that the officers will be looking at the operational arrangements, including any protocols required in respect of the new arrangements and will be reporting back on these in due course. In the meantime details of the constitutional changes necessitated to the Council Procedure Rules are identified in bold in Appendixes attached.