

Report to the Council

Committee: Overview and Scrutiny

Date: 25 July 2006

Chairman: Councillor Richard Morgan

Item: 6

1. FUTURE ROLE OF COUNCIL

Recommending:

- (1) That approval be given to the proposed enhancements put forward by this Committee in relation to Council meetings, namely those in respect of 'State of the District' debates. 'Single Issue' meetings, reports from Overview and Scrutiny/the Leader/Portfolio Holders and questions from Members;
 - (2) That approval be given to a review of the publicity arrangements in respect of questions from the general public to Council and committee meetings; and
 - (3) That, accordingly, the Terms of Reference and Procedure Rules in respect of meetings of Full Council be amended as shown in Appendices 1. and 2 attached.
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Introduction

1. (Chairman of Overview and Scrutiny Committee). 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 the Constitutional Affairs Scrutiny Standing Panel in 2005/06.
5. A number of visits to other local authority Council meetings were undertaken and a comprehensive review completed. A number of additional items that might be appropriate for discussion and determination by the Full Council itself were identified.

6. Subsequent to the conclusion of the review Members of Council were surveyed, in the form of a questionnaire, on the potential enhancements identified. The results of the survey indicated that, in each instance, Members were in favour of the enhancements proposed. We considered the responses to the questionnaire along with the completed review of the Panel at our meeting on 6 July 2007 and concurred with the proposals put forward.

Key Areas Selected

7. From a range of measures assessed, the Panel identified a number of enhancements it proposed should be introduced during the 2005/06 Council year, details of which are set out below. There are other enhancements (such as the Council in Committee/Seminar concept) which the Panel felt could be brought in at a later stage once the other measures have become established.

(i) 'State of the District' debates

8. The Panel were keen to introduce the concept of 'State of the District' debates, having been impressed by the arrangements in place for these at other local authorities. The Panel stressed the need for these debates to result in positive outcomes, for the meetings to be held once a year and to be linked to the Best Value/Council Plan and budgetary process.

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

10. The aim is for officers to 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

11. 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 evoking it.

12. Reference has been 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 involve consultation with the public and them participating in the discussions and possible voting. In relation to choosing topics for discussion, one possibility might be for this to be rotated between the Groups.

13. The Panel felt 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

14. The Panel 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 a maximum of twenty minutes be allocated under this item in respect of verbal questions in each of the three areas and that it should cover any issue under their remit.

15. 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

16. The Panel agreed that, alongside a provision for verbal questions, provision should still exist for written questions under notice for which there would be a separate item on the agenda and no time limit for discussion.

(v) Questions by the Public

17. 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. The Panel 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. It was 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

18. 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 the Appendixes attached, with deletions shown by a 'scored' line.