

Constitution Working Group

Held at: Zoom – remote meeting

Date Thursday, 4 January 2024

Present Councillors Mrs Jennifer Hollingsbee, Jim Martin,
Connor McConville, Tim Prater and Paul Thomas

Officers Present: Ellen Joyce (Democratic Services Trainee), Amandeep
Khroud (Assistant Director), Susan Priest (Chief
Executive), Jane Walker (Communications &
Engagement Senior Specialist) and Jemma West
(Democratic Services Senior Specialist)

Others Present: Councillor M Blakemore
David Kitson (Bevan Brittan)

1. **Declarations of interest**

There were no declarations of interest at the meeting.

2. **Minutes**

The minutes of the meeting held on 18 December 2023 were agreed as a true record of the meeting.

3. **Consultation on new governance arrangements**

David Kitson set out his proposals for consultation. He advised that the consultation would concentrate on public participation.

Members of the Working Group made points including the following:

- Permitting questions to be asked at all Committee Meetings could result in a large amount of additional work for officers and Members.
- Allowing questions at the two main service committees (i.e., Resources and Community & Environment) would enable the public to have input into the committees. This could be time limited.
- Would there be a change to Councillor question and answer sessions?

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- Could there be a limit to the number of public questions asked at committee meetings? The option of asking supplementary questions could also be removed.
- The current portfolio holder updates at Council meetings were really useful, and Committee Chairs could be given an opportunity to give updates to Council meetings.
- Only 7 public questions had been asked at council at the last three meetings. Allowing questions at committee meetings would be unlikely to increase the number of overall questions, but may possibly just disperse them.
- How many meetings would each committee have?
- Members of the public should be consulted for their input in terms of potential restrictions on questions.
- Tweaks could be necessary after the arrangements were introduced in May.

David responded to some of the issues raised and made points including the following:

- Having a time limit on a questions and answer session would not reduce the amount of administration involved, as answers would need to be provided to all questions.
- The Councillor question and answer session would remain at Full Council, but the nature would change, as there would not be Cabinet Members but questions could be asked of Committee Chairs.
- It would be possible to put a time restriction on the Q&A session, and limit the number of questions.

The Chief Executive also added the following points:

- It was necessary to retain the provision for the Monitoring Officer to determine whether a question was permitted, and where it should be routed to.
- The number of meetings was being considered at present. The Working Group had already indicated they did not wish to increase the number of overall meetings, so the team would seek to keep within the current total number of meetings.
- The urgency provision still needed to be finalised, to ensure that decisions could be expedited quickly when needed.
- It was vital to ensure a clear remit for each of the service committees.

David indicated that he would update the consultation questions to reflect the discussion, and recirculate to the Working Group Members.

David then outlined suggestions for the community event. He advised it would be part of the consultation process, and would give the public another opportunity to feedback on the consultation if they had not already done so. The

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format would be a presentation, and input would be sought in respect of public participation in the new structure.

The Working Group Members commented on various issues and made points including the following:

- This was a big change to the way the council operated and more needed to be done to communicate this to the electorate. Members would have a responsibility to explain the change to the public and needed to fully understand how it would work in order to do this.
- It would be useful if going forward, for each Cabinet meeting, members be shown what items would go where in the new arrangements.

The Chief Executive added the following points:

- A training programme for members could be set up, with workshops taking place before and after May, to ensure Members were prepared before the first cycle of committee meetings took place.
- An on-line consultation would run for a period of four weeks, and would include questions and an open text box. The working group would be provided with an update at their next meeting on 25 Jan, but the consultation would still be live at this point. The community consultation event was scheduled for 5 February. All Members would be invited to attend, and it would be limited to an hour. It would be broadcast over the internet. An all member briefing was proposed for 19 February, to give members an update on the work done to date. The final proposals and revised constitution would need to be considered by Audit and Governance Committee at their meeting on 13 March. The deadline for final papers would fall at the end of February.
- A draft plan for the sequencing of meetings, along with a proposed training programme would be brought to a future meeting of the Working Group.
- The consultation survey would give an opportunity for some free text, and would ask specific questions around the Q&A at Committees, and how best to limit the process.