

Governance Committee

Meeting held 27 March 2024

PRESENT: Councillors Fran Belbin (Chair), Sue Alston (Deputy Chair), Simon Clement-Jones, Dianne Hurst, Mary Lea, Mike Levery, Laura Moynahan and Paul Turpin

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

1.1 An apology for absence was received from Councillor Alison Norris.

2. EXCLUSION OF PUBLIC AND PRESS

2.1 There were no items identified where a resolution may be moved to exclude the press and public from the meeting.

3. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

3.1 There were no interests declared at the meeting.

4. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING

4.1 **RESOLVED:** That the minutes of the previous meeting held on 28 February 2024, were agreed as an accurate record, subject to a typographical error at 7.5 of the minutes in which '*SCC was the only Council to get high numbers of public questions...*' would be changed to '*SCC was not the only Council to get high numbers of public questions...*'.

5. PUBLIC QUESTIONS AND PETITIONS

5.1 There were no public questions or petitions received.

6. PUBLIC QUESTIONS AND PETITIONS REVIEW

6.1 The Committee considered a report of the Director of Policy and Democratic Engagement, James Henderson regarding Public Questions and Petition Review. Laurie Brennan, Head of Policy and Partnership was in attendance to present the report to Members.

6.2 The Head of Policy and Partnership explained that he had prepared a presentation for the item. This was also published on the council's meeting webpages, alongside the agenda. A summary of the presentation was as follows: -

6.3 The Council's public questions and petitions process was highlighted as an area that needed improvement as part of the Six-Month Review of the Committee System. Therefore, this was huge opportunity to improve the

approach and quality of questions and answers for members of the public.

- 6.4 The new proposal allowed for Members of the public to submit statements to a committee. These would be published on the Council's meeting webpages, put on record, and read out at the committee meetings.
- 6.5 The new approach to written questions would be that there were submitted 6 days before a committee meeting, published on the Council's meeting webpages and then a further opportunity be given for the questioner to provide a supplementary written question which must be submitted up to 24 hours before the committee meeting.
- 6.6 The new approach for verbal questions was that they were submitted 3 days prior to a committee meeting with a politician responding verbally at the meeting.
- 6.7 The new approach to public questions and petitions would also allow for questions and petitions to be presented remotely. Officers would also use a tracker to follow the process through from start to finish and provide better guidance to questioners and petitioners.
- 6.8 The Head of Policy and Partnerships explained that there were 5 key principles as part of the new approach which he explained in detail. A list of those principles was as follows: -
1. Improving the quality and overall experience of public questions.
 2. Making public questions modern and accessible for all citizens.
 3. Creating a clear, open and transparent process so that citizens can track the journey of a question from submission to response and action.
 4. Improving advice and guidance for citizens to ask public questions and raise petitions.
 5. Purpose of public questions – a statement of principle, and ongoing review.
- 6.9 Following the presentation, Members of the Committee made comments and asked questions and key points to note were: -
- 6.10 The Chair (Councillor Fran Belbin) thanked everyone who had contributed to shaping this new approach.
- 6.11 A Member highlighted how there were more opportunity for people to present either a question, petition, or statement at a meeting therefore the time limit of 30 minutes did not seem like it would be sufficient.

The Head of Policy and Partnerships mentioned that each committee was different and where he anticipated that 30 minutes should be ok for most, there could be more in demand in certain meetings where there was an item on an agenda that raised public interest. He said that this would be at the discretion of the Chair to manage this and that there was also the opportunity for a written response to be provided within 10

working days after a meeting, if the Chair decided to move on from that item.

6.12 A Member thought it would be important to not change to new approach immediately, but allow for it to bed-in.

6.13 A Member mentioned that the Council should keep a record of their learning in regard to this new approach so that this could be considered at a time of review.

6.14 A Member asked if a member of the public could request who asked their question on their behalf if they were not able to attend a committee meeting.

The Head of Policy and Partnerships advised that the member of public could ask someone else to read their question on their behalf, whether that was another member of the public, an officer, or a member of the Committee.

6.15 A Member mentioned how this new approach was a really positive step and thanked everyone who contributed to the proposal. They believed that the new approach would need at least 2 cycles of committee meetings to take place before the approach could be reviewed.

6.16 A Member suggested that the wording be more specific around who could respond to written statements and how long they had to do so.

6.17 A Member mentioned how the remit for Full Council was limited therefore did the wording in regard to questions being asked within the remit of 'Full Council' need to be changed to just the remit of the Council.

The Director of Policy and Democratic Engagement advised that the Council's Procedure Rules highlighted the grounds for which public questions would be refused on and that the intention was not to change this.

6.18 A Member mentioned how it was important to consider other ways to engage with citizens, other than online.

6.19 The Chair mentioned how it was important to communicate all this information to members of the public, so they were aware of the new process and encouraged to participate. She added that it was key that officers and Chairs responding to questioners were briefed so that there was some consistency but appreciating each Chair had their own style.

6.20 **RESOLVED:** That the Governance Committee (1) consider the revised proposals to reform the Council's approach to public questions and petitions; and (2) agree to recommend the proposals for consideration by Full Council at its AGM on the 15 May 2024.

7. UPDATE ON THE USE OF URGENCY PROVISIONS

- 7.1 The Committee considered a report of the General Counsel, David Hollis regarding urgency provisions. Jason Dietsch, Head of Democratic Services was in attendance to present the report to Members.
- 7.2 The Head of Democratic Services explained that the purpose of the report was to update Members of what urgency provisions had taken place between the new Committee System was introduced in May 2022 and March 2024.
- 7.3 The Head of Democratic Services highlighted the detail of some of the urgency provisions carried out which were outlined within the appendices to the report.
- 7.4 Members of the Committee made comments and asked questions and the key points to note were: -
- 7.5 A Member mentioned how the Committee might want to look at this as part of the work relating to Committee Remits as it was clear that Policy Committees were having more extraordinary meetings rather than Urgency Sub-Committees.
- 7.6 A Member wondered whether other sub-committees, similar to Charity Sub-Committee, had to meet urgently due to their workload.

The Head of Democratic Services agreed that this could also be looked at as part of the Committee Remits work, to determine whether the workload for these committees was appropriate.

- 7.7 **RESOLVED:** That the Governance Committee (1) notes the update on the use of urgency provisions and to agree that this information is also considered by the Review of Committee Remits task and finish group; and (2) requests that a further update is submitted to the Committee in 12 months' time, subject to any activity that may have taken place.

8. WORK PLAN

- 8.1 The Committee considered a report of the Head of Policy and Partnerships concerning its work programme.
- 8.2 The Policy and Improvement Officer (Alice Nicholson) gave an update on the programme and highlighted the key areas for Members attention.
- 8.3 Members of the committee made comments and suggestions relating to the work programme, as follows:
- 8.4 The Chair stated how it was good to see all the work from the Public Questions working group come through at the meeting but mentioned how the Committee still 2 active working groups, with a lot of work to continue in the next municipal year.

8.5 A Member suggested that the Governance Review Implementation Plan item be presented at the first meeting of the Governance Committee next municipal year to bring new Members up to speed and refresh Members objectives.

8.6 **RESOLVED:** That the Governance Committee (1) notes the Committee's Work plan, as set out in Appendix 1, progress on activity this municipal year, and forward work for Governance Committee; and (2) consider any further issues to be explored by officers for inclusion on the future iteration of the work programme for the new municipal year.

9. DATE OF NEXT MEETING

9.1 The next meeting of the Governance Committee will take place on a time and date to be agreed.

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