

REVIEW OF COUNCIL MEETING STRUCTURE

Executive Summary

Over recent months Officers from Woking Borough Council have been working with a number of stakeholders, including the [Centre for Governance and Scrutiny](#) (CfGS), on a review of the Council's arrangements for formal and informal meetings. The purpose was to draw up proposals which would achieve a range of outcomes to address comments received and measures taken following the decision of the Council to issue a Section 114 Statement and the subsequent [Government intervention](#).

These objectives include:

- Improved effectiveness and efficiency of meetings and decision making.
- Improved effectiveness and impact of scrutiny.
- Rationalisation of 'closed' meetings such as Working Groups, Boards etc.
- Greater openness and transparency of the decision-making process.
- 'Smarter working' to reflect the impact of changes to services and staffing levels.
- Improved cross-committee cooperation and coordination.

A detailed paper on the proposals has been drawn up and is attached to this report. A copy of the report is due to be considered by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee at its meeting on 18 March 2024, and a summary of the Committee's discussion will be provided to both the Executive and Council following that meeting. Also attached is a proposed calendar of meetings for the coming Municipal Year to replace the calendar adopted towards the end of 2023.

Recommendations

The Council is requested to:

RESOLVE That

- (i) from 20 May 2024, the current Overview and Scrutiny Committee be disbanded and replaced by three, directorate specific Committees, each with responsibility for overview and scrutiny, namely the Resource and Finance Scrutiny Committee, the Communities and Housing Scrutiny Committee and the Environment and Place Scrutiny Committee;
- (ii) Officers be instructed to draw up a Committee Responsibility Protocol for consideration at Council in the new Municipal Year;
- (iii) from 20 May 2024, the Standards and Audit Committee be renamed the Audit and Governance Committee;
- (iv) annual training on audit and governance be made mandatory for the Members of the Committee;

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- (v) the Audit and Governance Committee completes a review of its function by the end of each Municipal Year;
- (vi) an Employment Committee be constituted, to come into effect from 20 May 2024;
- (vii) Officers be instructed to draw up a protocol for the Group of Chairs for consideration at Council in the New Municipal Year;
- (viii) Officers be instructed to draw up a policy framework for decision-making for submission to Council in the new Municipal Year;
- (ix) from 20 May 2024, the Appeals Committee be disbanded;
- (x) the revised calendar of meetings for 2024/25, as set out in Annex 2 of the report, be adopted;
- (xi) the Working Groups and Panels as set out in Section 28 of the Annex 1 be disbanded from 1 May 2024;
- (xii) authority be delegated to the Strategic Director for Place, in consultation with the Portfolio Holder for Planning, to determine any applications for Community Infrastructure Levy funding below £10,000;
- (xiii) any outstanding pieces of work from the old Committee Structure, including Working Groups, be brought forward under the new arrangements;
- (xiv) a limit of four be placed on the total number of active task and finish groups operating at the Council at any one time unless exceptional circumstances exist as deemed by the Group of Chairs in consultation with Statutory Officers;
- (xv) the Monitoring Officer be instructed to make consequential amendments to the Constitution, the revised Constitution to be presented to Council on 20 May 2024; and
- (xvi) a joint Member-Officer review of the new structure be undertaken at the beginning of 2025, the outcomes to be reported to Council.

The Council has the authority to determine the recommendations above.

Background Papers: None.

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1.0 Introduction

- 1.1 This report summarises the full proposal paper attached at Annex 1.
- 1.2 As part of the [Improvement and Recovery Programme](#) it has been identified that the Council's meeting structure could be made more efficient and prioritise the scrutiny function of Council.
- 1.3 It was noted in the [External Assurance Review](#) that the Council runs a number of non-public meetings through Working Groups and Panels and that these could be rationalised.
- 1.4 The proposals impact the Council meeting structure and aim to reduce the resource required to service them by Members and Officers while simultaneously improving the efficiency and transparency of decision-making.

2.0 Proposal

- 2.1 The key changes of the proposal paper are summarised below:
 - 2.1.1 The Council meeting structure is streamlined including the disbanding of many Working Groups, Panels and Boards.
 - 2.1.2 The Overview and Scrutiny Committee is reconstituted as three, directorate-specific, scrutiny committees.
 - 2.1.3 The Standards and Audit Committee is renamed to the Audit and Governance Committee and its responsibilities for governance and audit be reviewed.
 - 2.1.4 A Group of Chairs is formed to help Committees coordinate work.
 - 2.1.5 An expansion of the Executive/ O&S protocol to encompass responsibilities and working relationships between Committees, the Executive and Council.
 - 2.1.6 An Employment Committee is constituted.
 - 2.1.7 The Appeals Committee is disbanded.
 - 2.1.8 Applications for Community Infrastructure Levy funding below £10,000 to be determined by the (Acting) Strategic Director of Place in consultation with the Portfolio Holder for Planning.
 - 2.1.9 A new Calendar of Council Meetings is attached at Annex 2.

3.0 Purpose and Outcome

- 3.1 The restructure is intended to:
 - 3.1.1 Improve transparency at the Council moving more business and information to public meetings.
 - 3.1.2 Streamline and make more transparent the decision-making process.
 - 3.1.3 Improve the scrutiny function at the Council.
 - 3.1.4 Improve the coordination of work between Committees, the Executive and Council.
 - 3.1.5 Prioritise the governance and audit functions of the Council.

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3.2 Success will be measured by:

3.2.1 Scrutiny forming a more central function to the development of policy and overview of Council business.

3.2.2 Governance of the Council and its monitoring being more effective.

3.2.3 Council business and policy is better coordinated and monitored.

3.3 The intention is to bring a revised version of the Constitution to the meeting of Council on 20 May 2024 for agreement. The revised Constitution will be based on the decisions taken by Council on 28 March 2024 in respect of the new arrangements; recognising that changes may be made by Council following review by both the Overview and Scrutiny Committee and the Executive, the Constitution cannot be updated until the Council has agreed the new structure.

4.0 Background and Process

4.1 The full proposal paper is set out at Appendix 1. Each change to the Council meeting structure is laid out covering the background and rationale that led to the development of the proposals.

Alternatives

4.2 Consideration was given to retaining the Council Meeting structure currently employed. However, recommendation had been given that it should be reconsidered as part of the [External Assurance Review](#).

4.3 The Council's organisational restructure, reducing Officer resource, added risk to the sustainability of output for the number of extant public and non-public meetings.

4.4 It was recognised that the number of meetings placed burden on Members and due to the multitude of Groups it was difficult to stay abreast of all relevant information.

4.5 Throughout the formation of the proposals alternatives were considered. Consideration was always given as to whether each part of the structure could benefit from being amended or retained as is.

4.6 The number of Overview and Scrutiny Committees was given considerable attention. Alternative proposals of 1, 2, or 4 Committees were considered;

4.6.1 Retaining a 1-committee structure was deemed incompatible with the aim of providing focus on both the Council's Improvement and Recovery Programme and business as usual work. A 1-committee structure only allows for a minority of Councillors to take part in scrutiny.

4.6.2 A 2-committee structure was considered but did not split responsibilities cleanly leading to overlap or uncertainty.

4.6.3 A 4-committee structure, following the directorates and a dedicated committee for the improvement and recovery programme was considered. However, it was recognised that it was not possible to separate out directorate-level improvements from the Council's ordinary business.

5.0 Implications

Finance and Risk

5.1 There are no known financial implications from this report.

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Equalities and Human Resources

- 5.2 The Council meeting restructure is designed as a consequence of the organisational changes that are taking place at the Council, reducing Officer resource. It is expected that resource will benefit or mitigate the reduction in resource from the organisational change Officer workload.

Legal

- 5.3 Changes to the Council meeting structure will require changes to the Constitution.
- 5.4 There are no known legal implications from this report.

6.0 Engagement and Consultation

- 6.1 Senior Officers, Managers and Corporate Leadership have been consulted.
- 6.2 [Commissioners](#) have been consulted.
- 6.3 Members have been consulted through workshops and briefing sessions.
- 6.4 The [Centre for Governance and Scrutiny](#) (CfGS) have supported Officers in developing the proposals.
- 6.5 The proposal is being submitted to [Overview and Scrutiny Committee](#) and the [Executive](#) prior to approval.

REPORT ENDS