

Report To: Democratic Services Committee

Date of Meeting: 1st July 2016

Lead Member / Officer: Councillor Barbara Smith, Lead Member for Modernisation and Housing

Report Author: Head of Legal, HR and Democratic Services

Title: Member Attendance

1. What is the report about?

1.1 This report is about the ways in which changes can be made to the arrangements relating to committees in order to try and improve Member attendance.

2. What is the reason for making this report?

2.1 To enable Members to consider different options available for the arrangements for committees in order to enable consistently good levels of attendance.

3. What are the Recommendations?

3.1 That the Committee consider and comment upon the options available for the arrangements for committees

4. Report details.

4.1 There has been a concern expressed by some elected members, the Chief Executive and external regulators about the levels of attendance by Members at formal committees of the Council.

4.2 The issue has been raised with Group Leaders and there has been an improvement in attendance levels in recent months.

4.3 Members have however expressed a number of frustrations regarding the issue. Many Members work or have caring responsibilities and as a result are not always available for all meetings. In addition most members are also involved in other community organisations including City, Town and Community Councils, the business of which may sometimes make it difficult to attend meetings of council committees.

4.4 Officers have, in considering changes to the constitution had regard to the desirability of making it easier for Members to attend meetings.

- 4.5 There are some constitutional levers that can be pulled to try and impact upon attendance.

These include:

Removing the bar on Members of Corporate Governance being members of any of the Scrutiny Committees.

There is currently a bar on members of this Committee from being members of a Scrutiny Committee. This bar can cause difficulties for some political groups. Cabinet members are unable by law to be members of Scrutiny Committees. This means that for groups with members on Cabinet it can be difficult to fill all their allocation of scrutiny seats especially when they have a member or members on Corporate Governance who is also prevented from sitting on Scrutiny. This can mean that some Members are on multiple committees and sometimes find it difficult to attend them all as regularly as they would like. It is proposed that this bar be removed in the new version of the Constitution

Allowing the Vice Chair to be on Committees other than Corporate Governance

The Constitution currently requires that the Vice Chair of Council must be a member of Corporate Governance Committee. Depending on the size of the group from which the Vice-Chair comes this can cause similar difficulties to those described above. In addition, the Vice-Chair often has civic engagements to undertake which may clash with committee meetings. The size of the Corporate Governance Committee, six elected Members plus a lay member, means that the absence of a Member such as the Vice-Chair has a disproportionate impact on the attendance level of the Committee and it has an increased risk of being inquorate.

It is proposed to remove this requirement in the Constitution in order that the Vice Chair may sit on any committee.

Allowing substitutions at committee meetings

Currently the Constitution does not allow for substitutions at the majority of committees unless it is to cover a long term absence due to illness. A procedure for allowing substitutes would allow Members to cover for each other but can cause additional bureaucracy and requires groups to be quite organised. Democratic Services would need signed forms of approval from groups for each substitution. It could also lead to a lack of continuity in committees with constantly changing memberships. For these reasons it is not proposed that the current arrangements be changed in the Constitution

Changing the number of members on each committee

The number of seats on each Scrutiny Committee could be reduced, thereby reducing the quorum. Currently we have 11 on each Committee giving a

quorum of 5. To reduce the Quorum to 4 we would need committees of 9 and to get the quorum to 3, committees of 7. This may sound attractive but if we are webcasting scrutiny meetings which only have 3 Members sitting around the table, while quorate, may not give a good impression. There is therefore no proposal to change these numbers in the Constitution.

Changing the quorum figure for each committee.

We could keep the membership the same and reduce the quorum to say a quarter or to a specific figure. This may prevent inquorate meetings but does not necessarily improve attendance. There is no suggestion that the current arrangements should change in the Constitution

Reducing the size of Planning Committee

Our Planning Committee is very large compared to most and double the size of some. If we reduced the size to say 15 we would free up a significant number of Members. This is not something contemplated in the current review of the Constitution but may be considered in future and may be required by legislation.

Changing the timing and location of meetings

A Task and Finish group of Members has been set up which is due to hold its first meeting in early July. This group will look at what, if any, alternative arrangements can be made regarding the timing or location of meetings to make it easier for some members to attend. The outputs from this group will be reported back to this Committee.

5. How does the decision contribute to the Corporate Priorities?

5.1 The decision contributes to the priority of modernising the Council.

6. What will it cost and how will it affect other services?

6.1 There are no direct costs associated with this report

7. What are the main conclusions of the Equality Impact Assessment (EqIA) undertaken on the decision? The completed EqIA template should be attached as an appendix to the report.

7.1 An Equality Impact assessment is not required for this report.

8. What consultations have been carried out with Scrutiny and others?

8.1 The issues relating to attendance have been discussed with Group Leaders. The Constitutional aspects of a number of the issues in this report have been considered by the Constitution Working Group and the Corporate Governance Committee

9. Chief Finance Officer Statement

9.1 Not required for this report.

10. What risks are there and is there anything we can do to reduce them?

10.1 There is a risk that if we do not take steps which facilitate Member attendance that some meetings may be inquorate leading to delays in decision making and reputational damage.

11. Power to make the Decision

11.1 No decision is required.