

8 July 2020

Report of	Monitoring Officer	Author	Andrew Weavers ☎ 282213
Title	Review of Governance Recommendations		
Wards affected	Not applicable		

1. Executive Summary

- 1.1 This report pulls together a number of recommendations relating to governance issues from the Policy and Public Initiatives Panel and Governance and Audit Committee to Cabinet. This report also takes forward initial proposals previously agreed by Cabinet.

2. Recommended Decisions

- 2.1 To agree the contents of this report.
- 2.2 To recommend to Full Council:
- (a) the proposals contained in paragraphs 5.1 (b), 5.3, 5.4 and 5.7 of this report; and
 - (b) that in accordance with the provisions of Section 17 of the Local Government and Housing Act 1989 the appointments to the Governance and Audit Committee and the Environmental and Sustainability Panel for the remainder of the municipal year shall not be on a Group basis and membership shall be as detailed in this report.

3. Alternative Options

- 3.1 Not to make the changes suggested in this report however this is not recommended.

4. Background

- 4.1 The Policy and Public Initiatives Panel at its meeting on 4 March 2020 considered a report entitled "Review of Political Management Arrangements". Minute 52 of the meeting is attached at Appendix 1 of this report. The recommendations were as follows:

RECOMMENDED to CABINET that the Cabinet and Leader model of political administration be retained, subject to the following enhancements: -

- (a) *Additional training and briefings on the budget setting process, to be provided for all councillors.*
- (b) *Cabinet to bring a motion to Full Council to decide whether to raise questions to Cabinet Members up the agenda.*
- (c) *Cabinet to acknowledge the importance of the Scrutiny Panel and advocate that the Panel exercise their powers to a greater degree, produce more recommendations and be assertive in their role as a 'critical friend'*
- (d) *Cabinet to request that the Scrutiny Panel consider re-introducing regular Portfolio question and answer sessions.*

- 4.2 The Governance and Audit Committee at its meeting on 10 March 2020 considered a report entitled “Review of Meetings and Ways of Working Update”. Minute 204 of the meeting is attached at Appendix 1 of this report.

RECOMMENDED to CABINET that the potential benefits of webcasting public meetings be considered further

- 4.3 Cabinet at its meeting on 11 March 2020 considered and agreed recommendations from the Scrutiny Panel on future arrangements regarding the governance of Task and Finish Groups meeting (minute 435 refers).

(d) The Conservation and Environmental Sustainability Task and Finish Group be succeeded by a sub-committee or panel of Cabinet, and further consideration be given to the terms of reference, membership and reporting arrangements of such a Panel.

- 4.4 In addition Cabinet agreed that there should normally only be one Task and Finish Group in operation at any one time. The Heritage Task and Finish Group at its meeting on 2 March 2020 concluded that the Group had completed the task set for it and resolved that it should be dissolved.

- 4.5 Cabinet at its meeting on 11 March 2020 also considered and agreed recommendations from the Alternative Methods of Service Delivery Task and Finish Group (minute 443 refers). In particular;

“(g) A Policy Development Panel (or equivalent) be tasked with looking at ongoing opportunities for alternative models of service delivery, including mutuals and cooperatives, with a specific review of the grounds maintenance contract in good time prior to contract renewal.”

- 4.6 Additionally the Policy and Public Initiatives Panel at its meeting on 17 June 2020 considered a report entitled “Approach to the Council and Panels Work Programme 2020-21”. Minute 59 of the meeting is attached at Appendix 1 of this report. The recommendation to Cabinet was:

“RECOMMENDED to CABINET that approval be given for the Policy and Public Initiatives Panel to investigate the potential use of different methods of service delivery, specifically with regard to the provision of the grounds maintenance service.”

- 4.7 The Revolving Investment Fund (RIF) Committee has ensured the recycling of capital receipts into profitable, income-producing development schemes and regeneration / economic growth projects. Due to the macro-economic uncertainty caused by the Coronavirus pandemic, and the Council’s ambitions for recovery investment and the provision of more affordable homes, the RIF Committee chairman has requested a review of the Committee’s work programme and terms of reference.

5. Proposals

- 5.1 With regard to the recommendations from the Policy and Public Initiatives Panel; Cabinet concurs that the Leader and Cabinet model be retained for the reasons mentioned at the meeting.

(a) Additional training and briefings on the budget setting process, to be provided for all councillors.

This is agreed and will be factored into the Members’ training programme.

- (b) Cabinet to bring a motion to Full Council to decide whether to raise questions to Cabinet Members up the agenda.*

Cabinet acknowledges that this is an important part of full council meetings and as this is a matter for full council to determine, Cabinet refers this accordingly.

- (c) Cabinet to acknowledge the importance of the Scrutiny Panel and advocate that the Panel exercise their powers to a greater degree, produce more recommendations and be assertive in their role as a 'critical friend'*

Cabinet acknowledges that scrutiny plays an important role in Executive arrangements in holding the Cabinet to account and scrutinising decisions. It is for the Scrutiny Panel to determine their methods of working and Cabinet concurs with the recommendation.

- (d) Cabinet to request that the Scrutiny Panel consider re-introducing regular Portfolio question and answer sessions.*

The Scrutiny Panel has the ability to call Portfolio Holders before it, to hold them to account and to scrutinise their decisions. If the Panel could accommodate this suggestion within their work programme then Cabinet would support it.

5.2 With regard to the recommendation from the Governance and Audit Committee -

"that the potential benefits of webcasting public meetings be considered further"

This has largely been overtaken by events and the introduction of remote virtual meetings as a consequence of the Coronavirus pandemic. Whilst it was the ambition of the Council to eventually commence live webcasting, events have meant that we have had to introduce remote virtual meetings at pace. The decision to use Zoom has proved successful and the benefits of this method of broadcasting Council meetings have been evident and is the way forward irrespective of whether we need to continue with remote meetings. As we gradually emerge from the lockdown and social distancing and numbers permitted in gatherings change, we will keep this under review. It is worth remembering that the regulations that permit local authorities to hold remote meetings expire on 6 May 2021 and the Government will be reviewing whether they are extended. Until then remote meetings will remain the only way that the Council can conduct formal decision making for the foreseeable future.

5.3 Cabinet at its meeting on 5 June 2019 agreed the formation of the Conservation and Environmental Sustainability Task and Finish Group. With environmental and sustainability issues being at the forefront of the Council's agenda it is now appropriate following the decision of Cabinet at its 10 March 2020 meeting for the Task and Finish Group to be succeeded by a formal Panel which would be politically balanced and meet in public to take forward the Council's ambitious environmental agenda. Attached at Appendix 2 is the suggested membership and terms of reference of an Environment and Sustainability Panel. It is proposed that Full Council endorse its membership and terms of reference. The membership would comprise 3 Conservative, 2 Labour and 2 Liberal Democrat councillors. It has also been agreed that Councillor Goacher would be offered an additional seat on the Panel. Attached is a revised membership of all Panels and Committees.

5.4 Cabinet at its meeting on 10 March agreed to take forward the recommendation from the Alternative Methods of Service Delivery Task and Finish Group in its concluding report that a Policy Development Panel (or equivalent) be tasked with looking at ongoing opportunities for alternative models of service delivery, including mutuals and

cooperatives, etc. This is also broadly reflected in the recommendation from the Policy and Public Initiatives Panel of 17 June 2020. It is proposed that the Policy and Public Initiatives Panel be renamed Policy Panel and its terms of reference be as set out at Appendix 2. No changes are being proposed to its membership.

- 5.5 In the light of the resolution by the Heritage Task and Finish Group that it be dissolved, Cabinet formally agrees that the Group be dissolved and offers its thanks for the work done by Members and Officers.
- 5.6 In considering the RIF Committee, it is proposed that recommendations for the future governance of the Council's major capital investments is brought back to Cabinet in September, once the Council's economic recovery programme is more settled and the nature and purpose of the Council's RIF under 'new normal' conditions has been ascertained. Meanwhile RIF programmes and projects will be monitored and overseen alongside the General Fund and HRA capital programmes.
- 5.7 The terms of reference for the Governance and Audit Committee and the Scrutiny Panel have been revised and updated and are attached at Appendix 2. The only substantive change is the inclusion of monitoring of capital and revenue which the Governance and Audit Committee has been undertaking but was omitted from its terms of reference.
- 5.8 Following the resignation of Beverly Davies as a councillor, the Council is required to review the political balance across all Panels and Committees. The Council will have to carry a vacancy as we are currently not permitted to hold any by- elections for the foreseeable future. As and when a by- election has been held, the political balance will be required to be reviewed again. There are no implications to the political balance of any Panels or Committees.

6. Strategic Plan References

- 6.1 The manner in which the Council governs its business is an underpinning mechanism in the Council's Strategic Plan aims to set out the direction and future potential for our Borough.

7. Publicity Considerations

- 7.1 All changes to the Council's governance arrangements will be included in the Constitution which is published on the Council's website.

8. Financial, Equality, Diversity and Human Rights, Consultation, Health, Wellbeing and Community Safety, Health and Safety and Risk Management, Environmental and Sustainability Implications

- 8.1 None.

Membership of Panels and Committees Municipal Year 2020/21

Cabinet (8 seats)

Group representation: Lib Dem 5, Labour 3

Members:

Mark Cory
Julie Young

Adam Fox
Martin Goss
Theresa Higgins
David King
Mike Lilley
Andrea Luxford Vaughan

Portfolio

Strategy (and Leader of the Council)
Culture and Performance (and Deputy Leader of the Council)
Housing
Waste, Environment and Transportation
Commercial Services
Business and Resources
Communities, Wellbeing and Public Safety
Customers

Governance and Audit Committee (7 seats)

Licensing Committee (11 seats)

Local Plan Committee (9 seats)

Group Representation

Group Representation

Group Representation

Lib Dem	2
Con	3
Lab	2*
High	0

Lib Dem	3
Con	5
Lab	2
High	1

Lib Dem	2
Con	4
Lab	2
High	1

Members:

Nick Barlow
Paul Dundas
Mark Goacher
Sam McCarthy
Chris Pearson
Dennis Willetts
Barbara Wood

*To note that the Labour Group has agreed to relinquish one seat to Cllr Goacher (Green).

Members:

Lyn Barton
Roger Buston
Helen Chuah
Simon Crow
John Elliott
Dave Harris
Mike Hogg
Patricia Moore
Beverley Oxford
Barbara Wood
Tim Young

Members:

Lewis Barber
Nick Barlow
Tina Bourne
Phil Coleman
Andrew Ellis
Chris Hayter
Patricia Moore
Beverley Oxford
Lee Scordis

Membership of Panels and Committees Municipal Year 2020/21(continued)

Planning Committee (9 seats)			Policy Panel (7 seats)			Scrutiny Panel (including Crime and Disorder Committee) (8 seats)		
Group Representation			Group Representation			Group Representation		
Lib Dem	2		Lib Dem	2		Lib Dem	2	
Con	4		Con	3		Con	4	
Lab	2		Lab	2		Lab	2	
High	1		High	0		High	0	
Members: Lyn Barton Helen Chuah Pauline Hazell Brian Jarvis Cyril Liddy Derek Loveland Jackie Maclean Philip Oxford Martyn Warnes			Members: Christopher Arnold Sam McCarthy Phil Coleman John Jowers Derek Loveland Lee Scordis Martyn Warnes			Members: Kevin Bentley Tina Bourne Paul Dundas Chris Hayter Mike Hogg Sam McCarthy Lorcan Whitehead		
Environment and Sustainability Panel (8 seats)								
Group Representation								
Lib Dem	2							
Con	3							
Lab	2							
High	0							
Members: tbc Agreed to allocate additional seat to Cllr Goacher (Green)								

Independent Remuneration Panel
David Priest Richard Aldridge Amanda Westbrook

Appendix 1

Extract from the minutes of the Policy and Public Initiatives Panel meeting of 4 March 2020

52. Review of Political Management Arrangements

Andrew Weavers, Monitoring Officer, introduced the report which provided information on the Cabinet and Leader model, the Committee System model, their advantages and disadvantages and the history of political management arrangements at the Council since 1972.

The Council had operated the Committee system model from 1972 until 2001 when, in the wake of the Local Government Act 2000 and a subsequent consultation process, the Council had adopted the Leader and Cabinet model. The Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007 had required local authorities to reconsider their political management arrangements and introduced the 'strong leader' concept, investing the leader with executive powers. The amended Leader and Cabinet model was again chosen following a public consultation.

The Localism Act 2011 reintroduced the option for local authorities to adopt an updated version of the Committee system model, and it was noted that any decision to move to a Committee system would be based on that model, rather than the original 1972 version.

The Panel were notified that all but three local authorities in Essex operated the Leader and Cabinet model. Assurance was given that the Monitoring Officer keeps the current constitution and management arrangements under review and recommends any changes which they feel to be beneficial.

The Monitoring Officer explained the differences and similarities in the committees that are found in the two different models of management arrangements. Under the Committee system, service committees took decisions that were made by Cabinet or Portfolio Holders operating under the Cabinet and Leader model. The Cabinet and Leader model incorporated a statutory duty to operate an oversight and scrutiny committee, whilst this is optional under the Committee system model (if opted for, it holds the same powers as under the Cabinet and Leader model but operates as a committee of Council).

It was highlighted that a major benefit of the Cabinet and Leader model was the expedited decision-making which could be carried out, especially if a scheme of delegation to individual portfolio holders had been opted for. Authorities which did not opt to adopt such a scheme required more frequent meetings if they are to consider all executive decisions and still avoid a slowing of their executive decision making. It was stressed that decisions under this model still needed to be taken in line with the principles of openness and accountability, allowing opportunities for challenge where necessary.

The roles of the Policy and Public Initiatives Panel and task and finish groups at the Council were described.

The Monitoring Officer advised that, in his view, the current political management arrangements were fit for purpose and helped the Council in achieving timely decision making. It was, however, open to the Panel to consider what recommendations they might wish to make.

The Panel were informed of the preparatory work which would be necessary in the event that a change to adopt the Committee system model were to be considered by the Council. A significant amount of officer time and resource would be needed to scope and explore such a move, and the cost of this could not be estimated until initial plans and details are first set in place to guide this work. Should such a move be proposed, there would be no statutory duty to

consult on a change to the Council's political management arrangements, however it was the Monitoring Officer's strong advice that public consultation should be carried out before deciding upon such a change.

It was noted that adoption of the Committee system model would necessitate a review of councillors' allowances.

Councillor Tim Young attended and, with the permission of the Chairman, addressed the Panel to pay tribute to Alderman Ken Cooke and his work and contribution to Colchester, and to speak on the Cabinet and Committee models for political management.

Councillor Young informed the Panel that he had had experience of both systems whilst serving as a councillor at this Council. He noted certain drawbacks of the Committee system model, including slow decision making, inefficiencies, not always getting to the heart of issues, committees splitting on party lines and the greater power of officers to set agendas. The system did involve more members in decision making, but did not necessarily give wider experience or power to councillors.

In comparison, Councillor Young posited that the Cabinet system was preferable, but that improvements could be made in the way that the Council operates this system in Colchester Borough. One example given was a recommendation that the operation of the Scrutiny Panel be strengthened and operated more in the style of a select committee, giving backbench councillors more power and involvement. It was noted that the Licensing and Planning Committees provided opportunities for backbench councillors to gain experience of decision making and the exercise of powers. The Committees currently in operation were working, but Councillor Young gave the view that their operation could be further improved.

Commencing the Panel's deliberations, Councillor Arnold explained that he had requested that the different forms of political management arrangements be discussed following requests from Colchester's High Steward, Sir Bob Russell, that the Council consider whether to return to using the Committee system model. Sir Bob was a former councillor who had served for many years on the Council and had experienced the Committee system model.

Councillor Arnold clarified that he was not advocating a return to the 'old' style of Committee system but had concerns at some of the effects of operating under the Cabinet and Leader system. These included a perceived lack of transparency and information sharing regarding actions by the administration, as evidenced by recent work conducted with Citizens' Advice, of which opposition councillors were unaware, and by a perceived lack of information on the North Essex Garden Communities Project. Much work had been carried out by portfolio holders without backbencher councillors being informed. This made it more difficult for backbench councillors to hold the administration to account and to properly conduct scrutiny of decision making.

Councillor Arnold ventured that there was now less briefing on portfolio holder actions and reduced opportunity to question members of the Cabinet, with the 'Questions to Cabinet Members' item now at a lower/later position on the agenda for Full Council meetings, which could give the impression that it is seen as being less important.

It was argued that the Committee system model allowed new councillors an opportunity to learn processes, get to know officers and build relationships. The current Cabinet model was described as preventing this, with decisions often being discussed in private Leadership Team meetings and only given minimal discussion in the ensuing public Cabinet meeting. In comparison, the Committee system ensured that decision making occurred in public and allowed for greater transparency.

The Panel discussed the report and the views proffered. A Panel member gave the view that the current Cabinet and Leader arrangements were more positive for allowing quicker decision-

making, although there could be difficulties. Support was given for the suggestion that the Scrutiny Panel should play a bigger, more activist role, including an increase in call ins by councillors.

A Panel member stated that their experience was that members of Cabinet were open to discuss issues with, and provide information to, councillors from all political groups, and that councillors should request this if they wished to discuss any matters under consideration by the administration.

A further member of the Panel, through their personal experience, agreed with the view that the Committee system that had previously been in operation was somewhat vague and slow to operate.

Building on this, another Panel member gave their experiences and noted that there had been successes under the previous Committee system, such as the completion of a full property audit, and the establishing of the Colchester Women's Refuge, and that wider discussions had been possible on issues and decisions. However, the member viewed any potential move to a future Committee system as being expensive, requiring a torturous process, and be difficult to produce a system which commanded support across the Council Chamber. This led to the suggestion that the Cabinet and Leader model should be retained, but with improvements, such as a strengthened Scrutiny function, greater information sharing with backbench councillors and more transparency around executive decision making.

The Chairman summarised the positives and negatives which had been ascribed to the two different types of political administrative arrangements possible for the Council to operate. The Committee system model was generally seen as less efficient, could provide more involvement for members but also could potentially put more power into the hands of officers. The Committee model was seen as being more transparent and enabling decision making and discussion in public, however a return to this model was seen by some members as being expensive and complex.

The Cabinet and Leader system had strengths and drawbacks, but the potential for a more active and activist Scrutiny Panel was highlighted and recommended. More transparency from Cabinet and better communications with councillors and the public were also recommended, alongside the provision of better opportunities for councillors to question Portfolio Holders. Decision making could be explained more fully to councillors and the public, with more information to be provided to opposition groups on the Council, especially with regard to the Council's commercial bodies and partnerships.

The Monitoring Officer summarised the themes raised as relating to three key issues of transparency, communication and scrutiny. He noted that, regarding North Essex Garden Communities Ltd, the minutes of their Board meetings were published on the company's website. The Monitoring Officer also notified members that Full Council can move and approve a motion to change the order of Council meeting agendas, to have questions to Cabinet Members occur earlier in meetings.

The Panel were informed that the current Scrutiny Panel possessed all due statutory powers, and it was suggested that the Panel should explore and exercise the powers which it already possessed, including the making of more recommendations. A Panel member raised concern that the scheduling of items for Scrutiny Panel consideration currently appeared to be heavily officer-led, and that the Scrutiny Panel needed to be more assertive in laying out its work programme.

The Monitoring Officer agreed that transparency of Portfolio Holder decision making was an issue that had been identified and asked if the Policy and Public Initiatives Panel may wish to make a recommendation regarding this. A potential change could be to revive briefings of the

Scrutiny Panel by Portfolio Holders. Members agreed that this could be a positive way to give backbench councillors an opportunity to learn more about each portfolio.

The Panel discussed the budget-setting process for the Council and agreed that it would be beneficial for training and briefings for all councillors on the budget process would be desirable and would allow for effective scrutiny of budgets and the proposal of meaningful amendments. More training would result in better debate and challenge. One member noted that it was currently possible to ask for officer assistance in understanding subjects such as budget setting, however it was agreed that additional training sessions would be a positive thing.

RECOMMENDED to CABINET that the Cabinet and Leader model of political administration be retained, subject to the following enhancements: -

- (a) Additional training and briefings on the budget setting process, to be provided for all councillors.
- (b) Cabinet to bring a motion to Full Council to decide whether to raise questions to Cabinet Members up the agenda.
- (c) Cabinet to acknowledge the importance of the Scrutiny Panel and advocate that the Panel exercise their powers to a greater degree, produce more recommendations and be assertive in their role as a 'critical friend.'
- (d) Cabinet to request that the Scrutiny Panel consider re-introducing regular Portfolio question and answer sessions.

Extract from the minutes of the Governance and Audit Committee meeting of 10 March 2020

204. Review of Meetings and Ways of Working Update

Richard Clifford, Lead Democratic Services Officer, introduced the report, updating the Committee on developments since the 2016 Review of Meetings and Ways of Working, noting the work to improve use of technology and public access. Digital agenda use and new arrangements for 'Have Your Say' sections had been introduced and were detailed in the report. Audio-streaming was now routine for most formal meetings and was being accessed by the public in sometimes considerable numbers. It was also used by the media.

The Lead Democratic Services Officer highlighted the work underway to explore options for video-streaming, with potential costs and considerations detailed within the report, relating to one provider under consideration, Public-i. Estimates of costs had been based on a 60-hour contract, covering the Council Chamber for Full Council and Planning Committee meetings, which had been identified as the two bodies whose meetings garnered the greatest public interest. Benefits of the service included improving accessibility of meetings, an ability to link it to CMIS and the addition of a transcription service. This would help the Council meet its duties regarding new accessibility regulations due to come into force in September of this year, and would increase remote viewing of meetings, consistent with work to address the Climate Emergency declared by the Council.

Video-streaming would require fixed cameras to be installed in the Council Chamber, and it was confirmed that Public-i has experience of doing this in heritage buildings. Public-i had indicated that they would be willing to brief members further on the details and benefits of this system.

The Chairman gave a summary of the initial 2016 Review, which had been instigated to explore ways to improve accessibility and the way that members operated. A public consultation had been carried out to gain views. Streaming had been a popular idea, and the Chairman considered video-streaming to be the next step. The updated 'Have Your Say' arrangements had

generally been found to be successful, with the chance for public speakers to follow up after receiving an answer. It was queried how this might be opened up further for residents.

A Committee member agreed with the value of increased broadcasting of meeting and gave the view that any video-streaming arrangement should cover Cabinet meetings, which were a prime focus of important decision making within the Council. This would require camera coverage of the Grand Jury Room as the usual venue for Cabinet meetings. It was member's view that the Council would have capital available to allow for video-streaming in the Council Chamber and Grand Jury Room. The Chairman and members agreed that this was a valid point and that video-streaming from the Grand Jury Room should be included in any contract, if it was to continue to host Cabinet meetings. An additional suggestion was made that a 'mobile' broadcasting facility should be sought, to allow for coverage of meetings in the Moot Hall, which would include the more-important Planning Committee meetings, which drew a large amount of public interest.

It was suggested that the Council could establish a YouTube channel to carry meeting footage, amongst other types of video. It was also queried as to the expected remaining life expectancy of the current audio amplification and broadcasting systems and whether it would be prudent, if these were due for replacement in coming years, to replace them at the same time as installing video facilities.

Amanda Chidgey, Democratic Services Officer, highlighted the audio-streaming statistics which showed that Full Council and Planning meetings attracted the largest audiences, and which had led to the recommendation to prioritise these meetings for video-streaming. The use of cameras in the Grand Jury Room would involve more issues, as the room was used for a multitude of purposes, and the cameras and tables would need to be carefully set prior to each meeting to ensure coverage of meeting proceedings. It would be possible to hire a mobile system via Public-i, which would also enable broadcasting from the Moot Hall, but would increase the cost. Some local authorities were already developing solutions using YouTube. This was also under consideration and could be integrated with Public-i.

Approval of the ability for members of the public to have a one-minute follow-up to responses to their 'Have Your Say!' participation in meetings was echoed, although concern was raised that the 'Have Your Say!' item on meeting agendas often overruns the 15 minutes allocated by the Council's constitution. Whilst the general view was that it is important not to curtail the public's right to speak, the time taken on this section of meeting agendas at Full Council often had the effect of pushing councillors' questions to Cabinet to a much later time, or to prevent these questions at lengthy meetings where a guillotine motion is called to end proceedings. The importance of councillors' questions was stressed in relation to their role in holding administrations to account, although one member considered them to be of limited use, due to their partisan nature. It was noted that the Committee could review the 'Have Your Say!' provisions within the Constitution and Meeting Procedure Rules.

Another Committee member spoke in defence of maintaining the greater engagement of 'Have Your Say!' with the proviso that a point may come where speakers intending to make similar points may need to be asked to choose which should speak, to avoid repetition. It was suggested that a wide-scale review of arrangements to ensure accountability should be considered.

The discussion of meeting arrangements led to one Committee member giving the view that use of the Council Chamber should be minimised, on the grounds that the Chamber was not suitable for effective meetings, with cramped seating, minimal desk space and obstructive microphone/speaker units. Amanda Chidgey, Democratic Services Officer, agreed and noted that none of the Town Hall meeting rooms were entirely adequate, especially regarding access for those with mobility difficulties.

In response the Monitoring Officer clarified that a 15 minutes total meeting limit for 'Have Your Say!' had formed part of the Meeting Procedure Rules of the Constitution for a considerable time,

with the caveat that the Chairman of a meeting had absolute discretion on limiting or extending the time for contributions from the public. The importance of not stifling public participation was stressed and the Committee was informed that, with regard to improving arrangements for councillors' questions at Full Council, a recent meeting of the Policy and Public Initiatives Panel had recommended that these questions are scheduled earlier in the agenda of Full Council meetings.

It was queried whether a return to holding Portfolio Holder briefings and question and answer sessions was possible. It was further suggested that an annual meeting could be set for Cabinet, to be devoted entirely to 'Have Your Say!' contributions, and/or to hold a Cabinet 'Have Your Say!' meeting on a Saturday. The Monitoring Officer informed the Committee that the Policy and Public Initiatives Panel had recently recommended that the Scrutiny Panel return to scheduling Portfolio Holder scrutiny sessions in its Work Programme.

The Lead Democratic Services Officer provided an update on the use of digital agendas for Committee meetings. Trials of this had commenced in 2017 and had then been rolled out to all Committees which met in the Grand Jury Room, becoming widely accepted. A significant saving had been achieved on printing costs and the use of digital agendas had helped to show the Council's commitment to modernising its ways of working. Officers agreed that it was important to likewise modernise the Council Chamber to make it fit for digital working. Work on this could be possible alongside the installation of a new audio-visual system and could involve charging points, better desk space, improved microphones and an electronic voting system.

The Committee noted the need for a comprehensive solution to modernise the operation of meetings and to better-equip the Council Chamber. The use of digital agendas was welcomed, but it was noted that some members struggled with digital working and that, where needed, hard copy agendas must be available for those who requested them.

A concern was voiced that members currently did not have rooms in the Town Hall that permitted informal and private conversations to be held. The Portfolio Holder for Business and Resources agreed that, if the Council was to invest in improved facilities, value for money must be maximised by the consideration of a number of alternative options. The Committee were informed of current developments regarding plans to modernise the use of rooms at the Town Hall. The conversion of the current Liberal Democrat group room into a room for all councillors had been deferred by Planning Committee and the Members' Development Group would consider the plans for re-allocating Town Hall rooms further, so as to ensure this works best for councillors, for use by the public, including commercial clients, and to keep the collegiate standard required for the Council to maintain its Charter Status for Elected Member Development.. The Committee stressed the importance of the duty of care to maintain and use the Town Hall for the public good.

RESOLVED that the Committee noted the progress on the recommendations arising from the Review of Meetings and Ways of Working.

RECOMMENDED to CABINET that the potential benefits of webcasting public meetings be considered further.