



Uttlesford District Council

Chief Executive: Dawn French

Constitution Working Group

Date: Thursday, 21 July 2016
Time: 18:00
Venue: Chief Executive's office
Address: Council Offices, London Road, Saffron Walden, CB11 4ER

Members: Councillors R Chambers, ADean, J Freeman, S Harris, B Light, E Oliver, J Parry, V Ranger (Chairman)

AGENDA PART 1

Open to Public and Press

- 1 Apologies for absence and declarations of interest
- 2 Minutes of the meeting held on 23 June 2015 5 - 8
- 3 Matters arising
- 4 Community Engagement arrangements to replace Area Forums 9 - 10
- 5 Deletion of "matters arising" from agendas
- 6 Power for lead officers to re-arrange committee dates in consultation with the chairman

- 7 Procedure for cancelling scrutiny call ins when the relevant executive member agrees to the item being reconsidered by Cabinet

For information about this meeting please contact Democratic Services

Telephone: 01799 510433, 510369 or 510548

Email: Committee@uttlesford.gov.uk

General Enquiries

Council Offices, London Road, Saffron Walden, CB11 4ER

Telephone: 01799 510510

Fax: 01799 510550

Email: uconnect@uttlesford.gov.uk

Website: www.uttlesford.gov.uk

**CONSTITUTION WORKING GROUP held at COUNCIL OFFICES
LONDON ROAD SAFFRON WALDEN at 6.30pm on 23 JUNE 2015**

Present: Councillor V Ranger (Chairman)
Councillors A Dean, J Freeman, B Light, E Oliver and J Parry

Officers present: J Mitchell (Chief Executive), M Perry (Assistant Chief Executive - Legal) and P Snow (Democratic and Electoral Services Manager)

CWG1 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors R Chambers and S Harris.

CWG2 MINUTES

The Minutes of the meeting held on 2 December 2014 were approved and signed by the Chairman as a correct record.

CWG3 ALTERNATIVE ARRANGEMENTS TO REPLACE AREA FORUMS

The Chief Executive summarised the position following the Council's decision to remove area forums from the Constitution. The Leader had invited Councillor Davies, as lead member for communications, to head a project, in collaboration with the Working Group, to consider alternative ways of engaging with the wider community and with parish councils in seeking views on the provision of services in the district.

Councillor Davies was not present to explain his ideas (it subsequently transpiring that he had been prevented from attending by public transport problems on the main rail network).

In the absence of Councillor Davies, members discussed their ideas for public engagement. A number of suggestions were put forward for ways in which the Council could interact effectively with the community. This was in the context of obvious difficulties with the operation of area forums widely perceived as lacking in general interest and irrelevant to the provision of services to the public. There was a particular need to communicate effectively with parish councils.

There was now a need for analysis of what had gone wrong and why, and for an examination of alternative more effective methods of communicating. The expectation was that Councillor Davies would put together a paper for circulation. The Chief Executive said that a piece of work had already been undertaken by senior managers and this could be used as the basis for a new plan to be considered by the member task group set up to support Councillor Davies.

The Chief Executive agreed to put together a form of words for use in the paper to be prepared and would then speak to Councillor Davies.

After further discussion, it was AGREED to ask Councillors Dean, Light and Parry to join a group of members to be chaired by Councillor Davies to establish their own terms of reference, within the framework of what the Council had already requested, and to report back to the Constitution Working Group with a set of recommendations for establishing a better structure for communicating with the public and with parish councils by the end of October 2015.

CWG4

CRITERIA FOR THE NOMINATION OF HONORARY ALDERMEN

The Leader had asked the Working Group to consider tightening the definition of the process for nominating and appointing honorary aldermen. This had arisen following his nomination of former councillors J Ketteridge and Menell at the most recent Council meeting. A number of members had not supported one of the nominations put forward.

The Chief Executive explained the existing criteria and expressed the view that the correct procedure, as agreed by the Council in December 2010, had not been followed as this had presupposed a process of consultation between the Chairman and all group leaders before any nominations made were put to a vote.

The process for nominating and approving aldermen had never been formalised in the sense of being incorporated into the Constitution. The Chief Executive suggested this omission should now be rectified.

The Assistant Chief Executive Legal confirmed that the vote taken at Council on 26 May had been valid.

Consideration was given to the procedures operated elsewhere and whether these had any bearing on those in place at Uttlesford.

Members asked the Chief Executive to draft a set of rules to be presented at the July Council meeting to then be incorporated into the Articles of the Constitution. The rules would be laid on the table at the July meeting and adopted at the following meeting. He was also asked to research the cost of awarding civic badges to those nominated.

The rules would be drawn up on the following basis:

- The title of alderman may be conferred on any member having served at least 20 years or having performed exceptional service for a lesser period.
- The member will have either stood down or been defeated at an election and not expected to stand for election again.
- Candidates for the position of alderman may be nominated by any member.

- Nominations are to be made either directly to the Chairman of the Council or through the relevant group leader.
- The Chairman will consult all group leaders on any nomination received before deciding whether the nomination should go forward to Full Council for consideration.

It was AGREED that a report be prepared for Full Council proposing wording for an Article of the Constitution setting out the rules for the nomination and acceptance of the position of alderman.

The meeting ended 7.45pm

TO FORUM OR NOT TO FORUM? FORUM OR AGAINST THEM?

We have all been to Area Forums and come away thinking something along the lines of ...“well that was a waste of time and effort to talk to only a handful of people” or “we outnumbered the public pretty much 2:1” and as a result the view seemed to be generally accepted that Area Forums were ineffective and that the resources we, UDC, put into them could perhaps be better allocated.

Having read the background papers to the principle of public engagement I have reached the conclusion that Area Forums do have a place and a part to play in the Council year. They should continue but they need to be co-ordinated with other activities and the forecasted major issues of the times, so yes continue them but in a new format.

I am therefore putting forward the following suggestion for discussion by the Constitution Working Group.

It may well be that as a result of discussion among us we can evolve a proposition for submission to Full Council with a recommendation for acceptance as a structure for ensuring that no part of the District will feel left out of any process which leads to a Council Policy decision.

There are various changes that have been made to the Health and Wellbeing programme by Central government, by County Council and ultimately by UDC that have led me to arriving at the point where I feel it necessary to try to join up the dots as it were. There are also changes to the Local Plan making policy decreed by Central Government to be taken into account.

SUGGESTED PROGRAMME OF PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT AND INFORMATION.

TAKING THE MESSAGE TO THE PEOPLE:

1. Ensure that Members are engaging with Parish Councils by attending meetings as often as possible. It is accepted that meetings clash but the dates of all meetings, Parish and District, are known for the year in advance so calendars can be adjusted. A written update to the Parish Clerk prior to the meeting can be of great assistance for those times when absence is unavoidable. Members should be aware of all the mainstream activities of UDC so a report to their PCs is not difficult. A Member of a single Member ward will face more challenges than their colleagues so written reports to Clerks/ local newsletters will probably feature more when several parishes are involved

Local Member surgeries can sometimes bring a matter of concern to the fore but by reaching out and encouraging contact by email or telephone, Members can be more effective. Certainly there is a lot of work going on behind the scenes that never makes the “front page” or Facebook.

*Relevant matter for consideration and discussion: Should double hatting stop?
Should District Councillors also sit as Parish Councillors?*

As there are only 3 County Councillors in Uttlesford then is there so much of a conflict possibility in that area? But again we can discuss.

2. UDC has commenced a mobile service which will enable rural residents to access information on many subjects. This is a multi-agency initiative mainly due to the merging of Health and Wellbeing into the Housing Department. With the correct information available within the vehicle and the appropriate staff presence the aim is to make it pertinent to all parts of our society not just Council tenants.

Please refer to the Council's Programme of 8th February.

GETTING THE PEOPLE TO HEAR THE MESSENGERS:

2016 is going to be an unusually busy year for the year after an election.

We have a PCC election in May and an EU referendum in June for the whole District and Great Dunmow will have a Neighbourhood Plan referendum.

Essentially that will take us through until July/August.

We should be pressing the new PCC (together with the Chief Constable) to meet and address our residents and I believe that this will at best/earliest be July or August.

There will be public exhibitions regarding the Local Plan proposals in the Autumn.

Basically I feel that any Area Forums this year will be difficult to programme.

My proposal therefore relates to 2017 onwards.

3. Two Forums per area (North and South/Spring and Autumn) can be programmed as was the practise. In each area one would be a single topic agenda, the other a Q & A Open House. This latter event would have to be attended by enough Officers to enable positive reaction to questions. No Officer should have to attend both North and South events.

By careful selection a single item agenda should elicit more attendance. We will have had Policing and Local Plan so other topics have to be tabled for 2017. Future events will direct the focus on topics over time.

No Forum should run longer than 2 hours.

I believe this format will reduce the time that Officers have to dedicate to the Forums which inevitably have to be held in the evenings.

Light refreshments, paid for by Members, should be provided, i.e squash, water, cake & biscuits. No hot drinks.

So with a concerted effort by Members to engage with parishes; with a mobile information service that reaches out to those who for whatever reason cannot attend other events; a structured approach to airing the subjects of interest and concern to the electorate, I believe we can fulfil our obligation to inform and engage with our constituents.

Paper prepared by Councillor Vic Ranger – April 2016