

GOVERNANCE REVIEW WORKING GROUP held at COMMITTEE ROOM - COUNCIL OFFICES, LONDON ROAD, SAFFRON WALDEN, ESSEX CB11 4ER, on THURSDAY, 16 JANUARY 2020 at 6.30 pm

Present: Councillor A Coote (Chair)
Councillors J Evans, R Freeman, N Gregory, A Khan and G Sell

Officers in attendance: Bell (Solicitor), B Ferguson (Principal Democratic Services Officer) and D French (Chief Executive)

1 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Apologies were received from Councillors Criscione and Lees.

2 MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING

The minutes of the meeting held on 16 November were approved as a correct record.

3 PRESENTATION

The Chief Executive gave a presentation outlining the status of the current governance review.

The presentation covered:

- **Terms of Reference** – Members needed to articulate the principles considered relevant to the decision making process. Councillor Khan said it was vital that the Group was clear on what they were trying to achieve. Transparency and inclusivity were heavily referenced.
- **Areas for Improvement** – Members wanted: more involvement in the decision making process, an enhanced scrutiny role, an accountable and transparent council engaged with the local community, and the implementation of a culture that embraced these democratic principles. There was also mention of training to help Members cope with the significant amount of information sent to them on a regular basis.
- **Timetable** – changes to the constitution could be agreed at any Council meeting but a full-scale change of the governance model could not be implemented until May 2021. Many operational or cultural changes would not require constitutional change.
- **Current Member involvement** – since the local elections in May, a number of changes had been introduced which had increased Member involvement. The Cabinet had increased to 8 Members; Cabinet Deputies and Topic Leads had been appointed; 2 new Working Groups and 3 Task & Finish Groups had been established.
- **Scale of Member work** – excluding appointments to outside bodies, ward work and parish/town council positions, the average number of

appointments held by each Member is 6 (all hold at least 3 appointments, the largest is 10). These appointments were not weighted (one of the Members with 3 appointments is Chair of the Planning Committee).

- **Enhanced Scrutiny role** – due to the establishment of Task & Finish/Working Groups scrutiny was more prevalent in the formal sense, but it was also occurring outside of the Committee's remit e.g. more Cabinet member questions at Council.
- **Public Engagement** – progress had been made in terms of extending public speaking at Planning Committee, improving representation of Parish/Town councils at Planning Committee, and a commitment had been made to implement a public engagement programme over the summer.
- **Culture and Behaviours** – Council officers and Members were subject to the Nolan principles, as well as an officer/Member protocol. Members had positively engaged with training/induction, which in itself shaped workplace culture.

Members discussed public engagement, soft skills and the benefits and disadvantages of specialist/silo working. It was agreed that whilst these elements were a vital part of being a Councillor, it had no relation to which governance model was in operation.

The Group's attention turned to the level of Member involvement in the decision making process.

The Chair said he would like to trial a shadow system, by which the same decisions taken to Cabinet would be considered by an alternative cross-party committee. Following the end of the trial, one could compare the decisions made and ascertain whether the outcome of decisions would differ under a Cabinet or Committee system.

Members discussed the nature of the Cabinet system and whether it was easily subverted by strong personalities in the Executive. There was some agreement that the system was predisposed to strong personalities, but also that personalities and ego were an issue regardless of what system was in place. Members agreed that Local Government was not well suited to individuals of a narrow mind, and that the personality of the Leader was an important element in terms of an inclusive decision making process.

Members discussed the practicalities of trialling a shadow Committee system. There was agreement that a shadow system could not be rolled out for every committee, but instead a contentious area of Local Government would be selected and a group formed to shadow the decision making process of Cabinet.

The Chief Executive said proposals would be brought to the next meeting.

Councillor Gregory informed Members that he had attended the Centre for Public Scrutiny's (CfPS) annual conference in December. He said the importance of pre-scrutiny was made apparent and he raised the issue of the lack of resources dedicated to the scrutiny function at this council.

The Chief Executive said she agreed and that resources would be allocated to improve the scrutiny function. The CfPS would also be brought in to assist with the process. She said further details would be released to Members once the arrangements had been confirmed.

Councillor Evans said it would be helpful to look at what other Councils do in regards to pre-scrutiny and asked whether publication of agendas could be brought forward.

5 **NEXT MEETING**

The next meeting was scheduled for 11 February at 6.30pm.

It was agreed that the scope of the 'shadow committee' trial would be available for the next meeting. Councillor Khan said it was vital that members were clear on what they were trying to achieve and asked for this to be articulated in the scoping report.

The meeting ended at 8.20pm.