

**GOVERNANCE REVIEW WORKING GROUP held at ZOOM -
HTTPS://ZOOM.US/, on WEDNESDAY, 16 SEPTEMBER 2020 at 6.30 pm**

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

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

1 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Apologies were received by Councillor Criscione.

2 MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING

The minutes of the meeting held on 11 February were approved as a correct record.

3 GOVERNANCE REVIEW: SUMMARY REPORT AND POSITION STATEMENT

The Chair said he had asked officers to draft the report tabled before Members. He said he would take questions and comments from each Member before responding in kind.

Councillor Sell said he was disappointed with the recommendation to pause the Governance Review until the spring of 2021. He said this felt like a “U-Turn” and highlighted the Leader’s response to Councillor Loughlin’s question at the previous Council meeting when he stated that the review would proceed. He said he appreciated the resource implications of the Covid-19 response, but it was not a good reason to stop the review. He said governance changes would not be implemented in this council’s lifetime if the review was paused. He said this was about political will and he urged Members to continue and “get on with it”.

Councillor Khan said he agreed with Councillor Sell and he reminded Members that improving governance was part of the change agenda contained within R4U’s manifesto. He said this was effectively “kicking the issue into the long grass” when there was a real need to find areas for improvement. He requested that costs of the review so far were presented to members of the GRWG.

Councillor Gregory agreed with the previous two speakers although he said he was fully aware of the Chair’s personal commitment to the project and would follow his lead. However, he felt the reasoning behind the pause was inadequate and Covid-19 could not be used as an excuse for inaction. He urged the GRWG to redouble its efforts and to continue with the review. He pointed to the recent

upturn in the Council's financial situation, due to the efforts of the investments' team, as proof that this could be done.

Councillor Freeman said halting the review was wrong as there was an opportunity to amend the Cabinet system and make it more inclusive. He said he was undecided in terms of which system would best suit UDC as there were pros and cons to both Cabinet and Committee models. This was not a matter of resources and he urged Members to continue with the review, although the shadow committee pilot would be resource hungry and could be dropped for the time being.

In response to the comments received so far, the Chair explained his reasoning for the proposal to pause the review. He said the impact of Covid-19 had led to changes to the Corporate Plan, resulting in no budget allocation for the Governance Review. He said he had accepted the fact that the Council was stretched financially and therefore, in light of the emergency response, he was prepared to halt the review. However, he said he did not disagree with any of the previous comments and was delighted to hear that the financial situation was not as bad as first feared. He added that it was for the GRWG as a whole, not himself, to make a recommendation to Full Council and the proposal found in the report could be amended.

Councillor Evans said the initial statements were of a political nature and, whilst he would be in favour of continuing the review, it would be difficult to do so when resources were stretched. He said the Administration were not hiding behind Covid-19 but were being realistic in terms of how much work would be involved if a change in governance systems was to be implemented.

Councillor Lees said prioritising projects within the Corporate Plan had been a very demanding task and the proposal to pause the governance review had come about after much deliberation. She said the Chair's belief in the project was beyond doubt and it had been very difficult for him to accept that pausing the review was the right course of action. She highlighted the areas in which the Administration had improved governance arrangements, such as expanding Cabinet at no extra cost. She concluded that whilst the financial situation had improved, the Council was still not where it wanted to be and resources were tight. The shadow committee proposal would certainly be resource intensive and would need to be revisited when the financial situation had improved.

The Chief Executive said there was still provision for the GRWG to continue meeting but it would not be able to complete the review in time for Annual Council in May 2021, the next opportunity to implement a change in governance systems. She said there were concerns around the resourcing of the shadow committee pilot which would be resource intensive.

Members discussed resourcing the GRWG and there was general agreement that the issue was about political will and it was for the Administration to clarify its priorities

Councillor Isham said he had found the debate fascinating and welcomed the constructive criticism from opposition members. He said the review should continue.

Councillor Sell said he would be willing to work with the Chair to form a work programme for the GRWG. He added that he was not an advocate of the shadow committee pilot and it should be put on hold for now.

Councillor Lees said the review could continue but evidence should be gathered by researching practices and models in place at other councils.

Members discussed the prospective timetable if the review was to continue. It was agreed that a recommendation, with the intention of implementing a new governance model, could not be put to Full Council before May 2021. Instead, the Annual Council meeting in May 2022 was the target date, with a report outlining the GRWG's recommendations presented to Council in July 2021. It was agreed that a report would need to be considered by Council before mid-autumn of 2021, to allow officers time to form design principles for the new model and to re-write the constitution, in the event that the GRWG was to recommend a change in governance systems.

To facilitate the aforementioned timetable, Members agreed to produce a work programme. It was agreed that Councillors Coote, Sell, Gregory and Lees would produce this work programme for presentation at the next meeting of the GRWG.

RESOLVED:

That the review of the GRWG be continued with the intention that a programme of work be prepared in readiness for a recommendation to be presented to Full Council in July 2021.

The meeting ended at 8.15pm.