

**GOVERNANCE REVIEW WORKING GROUP held at ZOOM on THURSDAY,
28 JANUARY 2021 at 6.30 pm**

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

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

1 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Apologies were received from Councillor Gregory that he would have to leave the meeting at 7.00 pm.

2 MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING

The minutes of the meeting held on 16 September 2020 were approved as a correct record.

3 GOVERNANCE REVIEW: POSITION STATEMENT

The Chair introduced the report and updated Members on progress made since the previous meeting. He said that the intention was to make governance systems more democratic, to try and improve outcomes and that goodwill would be required to move forward. He said that the Leader/ Cabinet governance system could be amended, rather than replaced by a Committee system, in order to achieve cross-party and collegiate working practices. He said that one possible intention was that Portfolio Holders could meet with other Members in a working group environment prior to a decision- making meeting that would ensure significant input into the process.

Councillor Isham joined the meeting at 6.38 pm.

Councillor Sell said that he accepted the current position that the Council found itself in but that this was a missed opportunity to critically review the existing governance system. He said that residents in 2019 had been looking for something different. He said that he saw value in Portfolio Holders meeting regularly with Members of Opposition Parties, perhaps on a quarterly basis, and that this could provide a future constructive working relationship.

Councillor Coote said that he did not want to be held to quarterly meetings but that anyone outside of the Cabinet could have access to such meetings. He also said that the attached report on the Guildford model was purely an example of a governance review for information.

Councillor Freeman referred to Page 64 Annex D of the report that stated that if a formal change of the Council's governance model was made by a Council resolution alone then the change would be locked in for five years. He said that he quite liked the Cabinet system being light-footed but felt that improvements could be made. He said that any changes made would provide the greatest benefits to Opposition Members; he supported change but said that it was really down to Opposition members to decide whether to "buy-in" to possible changes.

Councillor Khan said that some good points had been made but questioned whether there was political will for changes to be made. He recognised benefits in Portfolio Holders meeting with Opposition Members but said that he did not want the work of Scrutiny Committee to be duplicated. He said that his preference was for a Committee system of governance.

The Chair confirmed that there was political will for change and that this was about making early changes in the decision-making process rather than about scrutiny which looked at the situation after the decision had been made.

Councillor Lees said that, speaking on behalf of other Cabinet members, she would welcome a collegial model whereby meetings were held between Portfolio Holders and Opposition Members ahead of decision-making meetings. She said that promises had been made to review the governance system and that this was now taking place but that all Members had to sign up to potential changes.

Councillor Gregory left the meeting at 7.00 pm.

The Chair said that no decisions had yet been taken as to how the governance system would move forward.

The Chief Executive said that any proposed changes to the Cabinet model would not have a time limit on them as the whole system of governance was not being changed. On-going changes could always be made to the existing system of governance.

Councillor Criscione welcomed the sentiments expressed but questioned whether the proposals went far enough. He said that he welcomed any steps to improve communications and accountability and expressed support for the current working groups and scrutiny arrangements in their collegial outlook. He said there would be possible concerns that if there were more meetings held prior to a decision-making meeting then this might remove some of the public debate.

The Chair said this was not a scrutiny issue but the aim was to improve democracy and to provide all Members with greater opportunity to contribute their experience and knowledge to the democratic process. He said that he hoped that revised arrangements might also reduce any potential hostile atmosphere.

Councillor Freeman said that changes in local government did not happen overnight and that it had obviously taken time for new Councillors to settle into their new roles and responsibilities.

Councillor Sell referred to the different governance systems in place at Tower Hamlets, Newham and Sheffield. He said that he and Councillor Khan would support any moves towards greater partnership working.

Councillor Evans said that there was impressive talent amongst Councillors in Uttlesford and this should be utilised to secure best advantage. He stressed the importance of efficiency and behaviour and spoke about the importance of having debate in the Chamber.

Councillor Isham said that, as a new Councillor, he recognised that there were hostilities in the Chamber but that many issues could be resolved through utilising interpersonal skills. He said that the necessity for remote meetings had not helped, as Members had lost the chance to mingle on a non-political basis and there was clearly a need for collegiate ambition. He said that he supported modification but that it needed an appetite across the whole Council and that full debate in the Chamber was important.

Councillor Criscione re-iterated how well working groups had been working, particularly the Investment Board where Opposition Members had a direct line into the decision-making process. He suggested that there could be a working group for each Portfolio Holder.

The Chair said that one of the aims moving forward was to get Opposition Members closer to the decision-making process through early involvement. He said that working groups did not have opportunity for pre-meetings to be held.

Councillor Khan said that he felt that the word “collegiate” was overused and that the words “culture change and respect” were more appropriate. He referred to the importance of trust and the necessity for debate in the Chamber. He said that he could move forward with the recommendations made by the group: he supported Paragraph 13 bullet point two that referred to Portfolio Holders meeting with nominated shadow Portfolio Holders/ Opposition Parties Group representatives as a working group but could not support the other recommendations.

There was then some discussion about national party politics as opposed to local party politics.

Councillor Sell said that he agreed with Councillor Khan in that there needed to be a commitment to change from the Council leadership. He said that he felt that Uttlesford was different from many other Councils in that it was not as much political party based.

The Chair said that he was looking to take the recommendation forward but that if it did not have support of the working group then he would report back to Council that there was not the will to move matters forward. He asked if there was any dissent to the proposal that officers be authorised to work towards proposals regarding an amended Cabinet model.

Councillor Sell said that, although he had reservations that the governance issues had not been taken far enough and that the principles of exploring the Committee model had not been taken further, he would not dissent from the recommendation.

RESOLVED:

Officers be authorised to work towards proposals regarding an amended Cabinet model.

The meeting ended at 7.57 pm.