

GOVERNANCE REVIEW WORKING GROUP held at ZOOM on TUESDAY, 7 SEPTEMBER 2021 at 6.30 pm

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

Officers in attendance: B Ferguson (Democratic Services Manager) and C Gibson
(Democratic Services Officer).

1 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Apologies were received from the Monitoring Officer.

2 MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING

The minutes of the meeting held on 26 April 2021 were approved as a correct record.

3 EVALUATION OF CURRENT POSITION AND POSSIBLE NEXT STEPS

The Chair introduced the report; he said that there had been a change in stance at the Council meeting from a previously agreed position at GRWG and that had been why he had asked for the matter to be referred back to GRWG. He said that in his view if the Opposition parties would not support the previously recommended way forward of holding Portfolio Holder briefings on a trial basis, then there was little point in continuing to meet as a working group. He said that, although there had been delays in the work of the group due to COVID, he felt that he had failed to deliver in his position as Chair and that his intention would be to report this back to Full Council recommending disbanding the group. He invited Members to comment.

A general discussion took place covering various areas:

- It was said that one of the original reasons for setting up the GRWG had been to ensure that there was not an extreme concentration of power held by the leaders of the Administration and that all Councillors should contribute to the decision-making process. Some concerns were expressed that the current Administration had become slightly technocratic; it was highlighted that it was the job of Opposition parties to challenge the Administration.
- It was questioned whether or not the Administration and the Opposition parties really had the will to make changes to governance arrangements.
- It was recognised that the merits of a Cabinet system as opposed to a Committee system had been previously debated by GRWG and that the preference remained for a Cabinet system.
- The merits of introducing Portfolio Holders' briefings were discussed and it was felt that agreement was unlikely to be reached on this matter.

- It was stated that there was a need to run an efficient Council, not just a “chatroom”. The need for greater accountability was also highlighted.
- Concerns were expressed that some areas of the Council had appeared to have become officer led.
- Many “softer” culture issues had been identified and minuted at previous GRWG meetings. Views were expressed that the actual system of governance was less important than the relationships between Councillors and their standards of behaviour. It was felt there was a need for transparency, openness, honesty, respect for one another and trust. It had been recognised that there would be disagreements and challenges but that there was a need to disagree well in a non-hostile atmosphere.
- Some concerns were expressed about the need for continuous improvement and a perceived lack of training for Councillors was highlighted. It was recognised that long standing Councillors were in a position to pass on their experiences. However, it was stated that even long-standing Councillors did not necessarily always demonstrate good practice.
- The importance of the Opposition parties being able to feed into processes was stressed and there was a need to recognise that some Opposition Councillors were also still on a learning curve as were some of those in the Administration.
- It was recognised there had been some good examples of all parties working together most notably through the Investment Board. It was stressed that Councillors needed to be team players.
- The idea of picking up cases where the Cabinet had perhaps fallen down was put forward as a possible future area for review.
- The need to make the role of Councillor more attractive for “new blood” was identified. In the past new District Councillors had often come through “the system”, invariably having had parish council experiences first; this had not necessarily been the case in the new intake of Members in 2019.
- It was recognised that other areas of governance improvements should in future be taken forward by GAP, specifically through reviewing and updating the Constitution and the Scheme of Delegations.
- It was stated that the appointment of a new Chief Executive could be an opportunity for a re-set.

Members concluded that the Chair had certainly not failed but that collectively they had ended up in a different place. Agreement was given at looking to disband GRWG and for the Chair to report back to Council.

Officers would work with the Chair to produce a summary of issues that would be circulated to all GRWG Members ahead of being taken back to Council.

A vote of thanks was given to the Chair and officers.

The meeting closed at 8.00 pm.