

NOTE OF GOVERNANCE REVIEW WORKSHOP FACILITATED BY LGA ON 4 SEPTEMBER 2019

Present:

Chair: Councillor Coote

Councillors Criscione, Freeman, Gregory, Lees, Khan and Sell.

Officers: Dawn French; Lucinda Bell, Ben Ferguson, Simon Pugh.

LGA: Kirsty Human, Bob Jennings.

1. Welcomes and Introductions – ‘What are we trying to achieve?’

Members discussed the purpose of the Governance Review, their views on the current Cabinet System and what they wanted to achieve.

The following points were raised:

- The Review was being undertaken due to perceived/actual shortcomings of the current governance structure:
 - The Cabinet system is perceived as remote, undemocratic and unengaged with the wider public. Members brought up instances of door knocking and hearing the common complaint “the Council isn’t listening.”
 - The Cabinet structure excludes non-executive members, particularly those of the Opposition, from the decision making process. This is disrespectful to both the electorate and the members they have elected.
 - Cabinet concentrates too much power at the top of the organisation.
 - The Cabinet system is vulnerable to strong willed individuals and there is a perceived lack of accountability and transparency (an identical comment was also raised regarding the potential weaknesses of the Committee System).
 - A lack of checks and balances in the decision making process.
 - The existing culture was ‘personality led’ resulting in a further concentration of power.
- These perceived shortcomings could be overcome by establishing a more democratic and inclusive governance structure. As well as an inclusive decision making process, members highlighted the following as desired elements of an improved structure:
 - Member independence – councillors should vote as they wished and not be whipped on party lines.

- Transparency, accountability and good governance – the best possible mechanism should be in place that serves in the best interest of the public.
- The direction of the Review should be led by evidence based research.
- Robust checks and balances
- A system that utilises the skills of all councillors.
- A stable yet flexible system that's fit for purpose in the 'modern world' e.g. efficient decision making.

2. Design Principles

Kirsty Human and Bob Jennings (LGA) led an exercise on Design Principles. Members raised the following points on what they perceived as the strengths of the current system, and areas that needed improvement:

STRENGTHS	AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT
History	Silo working practices
Speed of decision making	Lack of accountability for Portfolio Holders
Cross party openness on Cabinet	No cross party work on council initiatives
Back benchers can choose how much to be involved	Backbenchers feel disengaged
Officer/Member relations	Officer/Member relations
Strong Leadership	Strong Leadership
	Role of Scrutiny
	Inclusivity
	Political culture (exclusive decision making, strongman leadership, concentration of power)

In summary, Kirsty Human said a council's culture and personnel were just as important as the governance system in place. She gave scenarios in which one could have a Committee System that still concentrated power and decision making in too few hands, and, in comparison, a Cabinet System that delegated powers and encouraged inclusive decision making. She said there were many avenues to explore and a modified version of the Cabinet or Committee system could address many of the problems members had raised.

The slides that were presented by the LGA have been circulated with members of the WG.

3. Next Steps

Members discussed practical considerations of the Review and next steps:

- Timetable – members were informed that the timetable for implementation (as attached to the Council report, 30 July) was extremely tight and clarity on a way forward would need to be achieved before Christmas. The adoption of a new governance structure would need to be approved at Annual Council in May 2020, or May 2021, depending on the speed and outcome of the Review. The Constitution would also need to be redrafted and submitted for Council approval. If members opted for May 2020, there would be no time for public consultation.
- Cost – members were informed that the average cost of a change in Governance arrangements was between £17,000 and £250,000 depending on the size of the Local Authority (LGA source).
- Next meeting – Members would have further opportunity to evaluate current governance arrangements and learn more about the legal framework, which in turn would inform the scope of the Governance Review.