

Constitution Review: Full Council**Section 1: Current Position**

From 11 September 2001, when the Council adopted a Cabinet and Leader model for its decision making structures, the Full Council meeting relinquished the majority of its decision making powers to the Cabinet. Retaining decision making power only over a relatively few major Policy Framework documents (including the Budget and Capital Programme) and other functions relating to the Council Tax; the Council Tax Base; the Treasury Strategy; borrowing limits, the Constitution and the Scheme of Delegation.

As a result the Full Council has become the main political debating forum, but its ability to effect change on a day to day basis has been considerably diminished.

However, a change, which appears to have found some favour with Members, is the role of the Council in holding the 'Executive' to account, particularly through the Members' Question Time. A similar opportunity is also available to the public through Public Question Time, although this has had limited use, except where particular 'burning' issues are facing the community.

Also some dissatisfaction has been expressed by Members, this being particularly evidenced at the seminars facilitated by Professor Leach, at the overall conduct of the Council meeting; the over politicisation of issues; and the feeling of being 'disenfranchised' expressed by some non-executive Members. Dissatisfaction has also been expressed from the public gallery at the conduct of the Council meeting and the continued low public attendance suggests a failure to capture the public imagination.

It has also been recognised in various inspection reports that the Council is weak in fulfilling a community leadership role; and in providing an opportunity to consider matters of major public interest.

Section 2: Research Findings

Several Councils have been contacted regarding any changes/improvements which have been made to the Council meeting as a result of new democratic structures.

(a) Themed Meetings.

Feedback from Councils included the following.

- Cardiff City Council has held themed meetings, for example on Resources and Leisure/Lifelong Learning which were found to be initially useful although the practice of holding themed meetings has been discontinued. One disadvantage of themed meetings was felt to be that it was difficult to deal with matters that didn't "fall" within the theme .

- Bedfordshire County Council will hold a themed Council Meeting in June on Improving Bedfordshire's Services.

Feedback from Members (67%) and senior offices (75%) agreed strongly that Council meetings should be themed on particular issues.

(b) State of the Borough Debate

- Cardiff City Council is due to hold a "State of Cardiff" debate to discuss the Cabinet Policy Statement for 2003/04.
- Kirklees Metropolitan Council holds State of the Borough Debates generally on an annual basis, generally felt to be successful
- Greenwich Council, Havant Borough Council, Chester City Council and Stockport Metropolitan Borough Council have all held a State of the Borough Debates, most have felt that they were successful
- Telford and Wrekin Council is to call State of the Borough Debate annually with the aim of enabling the widest possible public involvement and publicity.
- Dover District Council has carried out a public consultation meeting but reported that they were unsuccessful in getting any interest

(c) Separate Chair/Speaker of Council Meeting.

- Cardiff County Council has a Presiding Officer who chairs the Council Meetings, a role separate from the Council Leader and Lord Mayor.
- Telford and Wrekin Council has a speaker for Council Meetings who assumes the role of Chair. Functions quite successfully.

There is however, a question over the legal basis for a Member other than the mayor to chair meetings of the Council and current legal advice would suggest that the Mayor must chair meetings of the Council.

(d) Other issues

A high proportion of Members (79%) and senior officers (78%) responding indicated that Council should set aside time to receive reports on the Cabinet activities and items from Overview Committees (Members (86%) Senior Officer (67%))

Section 3: Options

- **OPTION 1:** Do nothing - leave Council as it is
- **OPTION 2:** Revise the format of Council meetings on trial basis which could include one or more of the following alternatives:
 - (a) Themed meetings (an example of a possible programme of themed meetings is attached as an **Appendix** to this Annex)
 - (b) Speaker
 - (c) Annual State of the Borough Debate
 - (d) Cabinet and Overview reports

Section 4: Conclusions

Themed Meetings and Speaker - Not enough authorities have experimented to draw a conclusion that such changes could be successful or otherwise. However, Members are keen for themed meetings. The question as to the legality of a speaker needs to be clarified and until this is the case it is not suggested that the Council adopts this approach.

It would be necessary to establish a mechanism to manage the Council's business particularly the programme of themed meetings, if this option was adopted.

Annual State of the Borough Debate could address issue of community leadership role and engaging public in matters of major interest.

Members and senior officers keen on **reports from Cabinet and Overview Committees**.

Section 5: Recommendations

That Option 2 be pursued and that Members be invited to identify, with the exception of adopting a speaker for Council meetings, which of the changes they would wish to adopt on a trial basis.

Section 6: Changes to the Constitution

For the Council to adopt, even on a trial basis, any of the suggestions under Option 2 it would be necessary to make a number of changes to the Council Procedure Rules.

Section 7: Appendices

Indicative Programme of Themed Meetings