

AUDIT AND GOVERNANCE COMMITTEE

Thursday 17 July 2025

Present:

Councillor Wardle (Chair)

Councillors Moore, Atkinson, Banyard, Begley, Holland, Knott, Miller-Boam, Mitchell, M, Payne, Snow and Williams, M

Also Present:

Head of Legal and Democratic Services & Monitoring Officer, Planning Solicitor and Democratic Services Officer (LS)

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MINUTES

The minutes of the special meeting held on 17 April 2025 were taken as read, approved and signed by the Chair as correct.

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DECLARATION OF INTERESTS

No declarations of disclosable pecuniary interests were made.

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AMENDMENTS TO TERMS OF REFERENCE FOR THE JOINT CONSULTATION AND NEGOTIATION COMMITTEE

The Monitoring Officer presented the report making the following points:

- the Unison branch officer had input into the amendments to the Terms of Reference;
- the previous meeting of the Audit and Governance Committee had sought clarification on consultation with all unions which had now been undertaken with no response;
- the Strategic Director for People and Communities had clarified that the wording in points 1 and 6 remained as 'Consultation' as this described the joint decision-making and consensual approach taken in the group; and
- the rationale for the removal of reference to 'terms of service' was that those documents still applied but the Terms of Reference recognised the wide range of issues over and above pay which were considered.

The Monitoring Officer responded to a question from a Member stating that as with any other committee should there not be a majority decision the Chair would cast the deciding vote.

Councillor Atkinson proposed, seconded by Councillor Knott, that given there had been full discussion on the matter at the previous meeting the committee move to the vote.

The Chair moved the recommendations as set out in the report which following a unanimous vote were CARRIED.

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CONSTITUTIONAL CHANGES

The Monitoring Officer introduced the report making the following points:

- the Governance Sounding Board had been set up by this committee and Members had considered the City Development functions which had subsequently been approved by Council;
- the Governance Sounding Board played an important role in scrutinising amendments to the constitution;
- he drew attention to the reduction in the size of committees to 11 councillors and the move to allow substitute members; and
- the Solicitor would present the report in further detail.

The Chair invited Councillor Wright to speak as she had registered under Standing Order No. 44.

Councillor Wright, as Portfolio Holder for Corporate Services, Community Safety and City Centre made the following points:

- thanked everyone on the sounding board as this had been a cross-party endeavour with good input and some political questions raised;
- she drew attention to the closure motion at full council to avoid going beyond 3 hours to ensure more efficient work, especially as many councillors cross-party had raised the length of meetings over the last year as an issue;
- thanked the officers for their hard work in re-formatting, adding digital links and making the constitution more understandable and easier to navigate;
- there was nothing currently in the constitution regarding numbers of councillors on a committee and she believed these had increased over time with some councillors sitting on more than one committee meaning a lot of strenuous work whereas 11 retained political balance and the introduction of substitutes would ensure sufficient members are present which was important having been asked about sharing committees for health or caring reasons; and
- these changes would bring the Council in line with employment conditions where work continued if people are unable to attend and would support equality and allow councillors to take on the role and know they could have a substitute if they had a health condition.

The Solicitor presented the report making the following points:

- the constitution was the legal framework which underpinned everything we do: Members, officers and citizens;
- there had been piecemeal updates over the last 20 years but under the new Monitoring Officer this governance review would be carried out in two stages, this being the first;
- there would be a built-in annual review to reflect it would be a living document and there may be other elements which required amendment;
- the Monitoring Officer would lead the ongoing reviews;
- there would be a key change to the Standing Orders which were difficult to follow currently and not logically set out;
- Existing Standing Orders had been transposed into a modern format making them easier to read and use and more helpful to councillors during council meetings;
- The proposed reduction of committee membership in some cases from 14 to 11 would mean an overall reduction to 55 from 68 which would reduce the burden on Members and allow them to develop a specialism and enhance scrutiny;
- any concern that the reduction in numbers may impact decision-making due to absences would be offset by the introduction of substitutes who must be from same political party and have undertaken the requisite training and there would be a procedure to alert the Chair in advance;

- Council procedure rules would include more formality regarding Member questions at Council and would expand the scope of who these could be directed to whereas currently to the Chair or Leader;
- removal of the requirement to give advance notice of questions, however, should a substantive response be required then give notice would be recommended otherwise an answer would be provided in the minutes;
- the Length of time allocated to questions and answers would be formalised;
- additional notice for motions would give officers more time to process; and
- the scope of motions would be narrowed to ensure they remained relevant to city council functions and not relate to a motion discussed during the last 6 months.

The Chair thanked the Monitoring Officer and Solicitor for their work on this matter. During debate Members of the committee made the following points:

- annual reviews would be a vast improvement;
- reduction in numbers, maintaining political balance would ensure a more engaged group of councillors and more lively debate with the safeguard of appointing substitutes;
- language could be ambiguous therefore the ability to make amendments would be good;
- limiting the length of meetings should bring better focus and quality of debate;
- in other authorities substitutes were named at the beginning of the year and undertook training alongside substantive committee members;
- public speaking at extraordinary meetings had received mixed views at the sounding board; and
- some extraordinary meetings were in Part 2 which would then be difficult if there were to be public questions.

The Chief Executive, Monitoring Officer and Solicitor responded to Members questions in the following terms:

- rule 26 related to substitutes and Members must have undertaken the relevant training, verified by the Monitoring Officer;
- the logistics of training were not too prescriptive but groups and parties may wish to consider this at the beginning of the municipal year with potential substitutes undertaking the training;
- substitutes could be put in place up until the start of the meeting under rule 26.1 and the Monitoring Officer would need to be satisfied that papers had been read if a substitute was requested at 5pm on the day of a meeting;
- should any rules be deemed not fit for purpose they could be reviewed at the annual review;
- the issue of removing notice for questions being problematic could be looked into;
- substitutes would apply to official meetings of the council; and
- there was additional work to be done on other committees these changes related to full Council.

Councillor Moore proposed and Councillor Banyard seconded the motion that “public questions be allowed at extraordinary meetings only on the items on the agenda” which following a vote was NOT CARRIED.

During debate on the recommendations Members made the following points:

- as a closure motion would be 30 minutes there would be time to bring up each item and vote as to whether to adjourn, move to the next meeting or convene an extraordinary meeting;

- much of the wording was standard rules of debate which had lasted the test of time; and
- a glossary would be helpful as some language was technical.

The Monitoring Officer and Solicitor responded to Members comments and questions in the following terms:

- in respect of the closure motion there would be a vote in order to opt out of the closure procedure which would allow time for debate;
- there was an option to adjourn a meeting or debate as a motion without notice or to call an extraordinary meeting via resolution which would allow flexibility over unfinished items;
- a closure motion would not negate the ability to move another motion to move or defer an item;
- councillors to 'indicate' or 'stand if able' rather than that they will rise and the addition of a glossary could be dealt with as a minor amendment;
- the petition scheme was not in the next amendments to be undertaken as those would look at the Executive and committees but would be looked at in due course; and
- amendments to minutes of meetings procedure was clear as it was.

The Chair moved and Councillor Payne seconded, the recommendations as set out in the report which following a vote were CARRIED.

(The meeting commenced at 5.30 pm and closed at 6.55 pm)

Chair