

REPORT TO EXECUTIVE

Date of Meeting: 6 October 2020

Report of: Corporate Manager, Democratic & Civic Support

Title: Governance Review Update

Is this a Key Decision?

No

Is this an Executive or Council Function?

Executive

1. What is the report about?

1.1 This report updates members on the new governance arrangements which were agreed in October 2019, as is required in minute 100 of the Executive meeting of 8th October 2019, and minute 64 of the Council meeting of 15th October 2019.

2. Recommendations:

That the Executive note the update on the Council's revised governance arrangements, and requests a further update be brought back in 12 months.

3. Reasons for the recommendation:

3.1 Whilst there is a requirement to bring back a review of the Council's revised governance arrangements after 12 months of operation, it is felt that due to the on-going Coronavirus pandemic, and the impact it has had on the operation of the Council's decision making process, it is too early to fully appreciate the changes that were made. It is therefore suggested that a further review be brought back in another 12 months, when it is hoped that a more normal decision making process will have been in operation.

4. What are the resource implications including non financial resources.

None

5. Section 151 Officer comments:

There are no financial implications contained within this report.

6. What are the legal aspects?

None.

7. Monitoring Officer's comments:

No comment.

8. Report details:

8.1 Members will recall that, after a cross party working group, various changes to the Council's governance model were recommended, and approved.

8.2 The main principles of the changes were:-

- (1) The deletion of the Exeter convention requiring the Leader to allocate a seat on the Executive to a member from each political group;
- (2) That the opposition group leaders shall not be required to give notice under Standing Order 44 to speak on any item on the Executive Agenda;
- (3) The reduction to the number of scrutiny committees from three in number to two to be known as Strategic Scrutiny Committee and Customer Focus Scrutiny Committee;
- (4) To increase the membership of both scrutiny committees from 10 to 14 Members;
- (5) To set up a Scrutiny Programme Board ("SPB") to be made up of one Member appointed by the Leader together with the Chairs and Deputy Chairs of each of the two Scrutiny Committees;
- (6) To cease the current practice of pre-scrutinising reports destined for the Executive;
- (7) To encourage public participation in city council meetings by agreeing public questions at Council meetings, the Executive and Scrutiny Committees;

8.3 These recommendations were approved on 15th October 2019, and came into force immediately, and following some initial settling in issues, were, it is felt, working well.

8.4 However, due to the Coronavirus pandemic which took hold in March 2020, immediate decisions were taken which affected the council's decision making process. There were:-

- The immediate suspension of all non business critical meetings - this meant that only Planning Committees, Licensing Committees, the Executive and full Council operated after the 23rd March when lockdown was imposed;
- Following the passing of the appropriate legislation, all meetings have been held via virtual means;
- Once the impact of the pandemic started to ease in June 2020, the Scrutiny Programme Board took the decision to restart meetings of the two Scrutiny Committees, although they would, for a period of at least 6 months, only deal with COVID-19 issues.

8.5 The COVID-19 situation has meant that for more than 6 months of the operation of the new arrangements, the decision making process has been working in a different way to that which had been agreed.

8.6 This has not stopped some of the new arrangements from being monitored as follows:-

The opposition group leader's attendance at Executive:

Cllr Leadbetter Attendance: 4 Executive meetings since 10 December 2019

Cllr Mitchell Attendance: 3 Executive meetings since 10 December 2019

Public Questions

Public Questions at Executive: 10 questions since 10 December 2019

Public Questions at Council: 5 questions since 10 December 2019

Petitions Received

No of Petitions: 1 (with the petition organiser speaking at full Council)

Scrutiny

Public Questions at Scrutiny

Customer Focus Scrutiny: 1 question since 10 December 2019

Strategic Scrutiny: 0 questions since 10 December 2019

Member Questions at Scrutiny

Customer Focus Scrutiny: 25 Questions

Strategic Scrutiny: 25 Questions

Petitions Received for Scrutiny

Customer Focus Scrutiny: 3 Petitions

Strategic Scrutiny: 1 Petitions

Increase to 14 Members on Scrutiny

Attendance at Customer Focus Scrutiny: Average 85% attendance

Attendance Strategic Scrutiny: Average 64% attendance.

No of Task & Finish Groups formed: 3

- 8.7 From the above, it is pleasing to note that the number of public questions which have been asked total 16. Under the previous arrangement, none of these would have been possible. This it is felt meets one of the key objectives of the review which was to increase public engagement in the Council's democratic process. This has been all the more pleasing due to the fact that the majority of these questions have been asked whilst the Council has been operating virtual meetings, with all the added complications that they bring when compared to the traditional physical meetings.
- 8.8 Similarly, a different format for the recent meetings of both Scrutiny Committees has been operating, whereby the relevant portfolio holders have given an update on the work of the teams within their areas of responsibility during the COVID-19 pandemic, with all members being given the opportunity to question the portfolio holders on their work. This has gone some way to holding the Executive to account during these difficult times, with a total of 25 questions for Customer Focus Scrutiny Committee and 25 for Strategic Scrutiny Committee, having been raised at the meetings which have been held. Whilst a similar opportunity to ask portfolio holders questions on COVID-19 matters was afforded to members of the public, no such questions were received. This approach is also being taken with the current round of Scrutiny committees.
- 8.9 It is hoped that over the next 12 months, matters will return to be similar to that which were the case before the pandemic struck. As such, it is suggested that a further review take place in the autumn of 2021 to see how the new structure is working at that time.

9. How does the decision contribute to the Council's Corporate Plan?

It ensures that the Council is working as efficiently as possible.

10. What risks are there and how can they be reduced?

There are no risks associated with the proposals.

11. Equality Act 2010 (The Act)

In recommending this proposal no potential impact has been identified on people with protected characteristics as determined by the Act because: because

Assessment has been included in the background papers for Member's attention.

12. Carbon Footprint (Environmental) Implications:

No direct carbon/environmental impacts arising from the recommendations.

13. Are there any other options?

No

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Local Government (Access to Information) Act 1972 (as amended)

Background papers used in compiling this report:-

None

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