

Proposal to hold 11 Overview and Scrutiny Committee meetings per Council year to accommodate the introduction of three working groups

1. Members will recall that at the last meeting I was asked to look at how it might be possible to set dates for as many as 18 additional two hour meetings to accommodate the three subgroups just agreed (Minute SO/48 (26.11.18) refers).
2. It was then, and is now, acknowledged that it was unlikely that all these meetings would be required, recalling that the sub-committees previously in existence would only normally meet four times each in the council year.
3. Subsequent discussions with Democratic Services have shown that it would be very difficult, if not impossible, to insert the 18 meetings in the evenings. It should be noted that generally meetings at HDC are scheduled for Mondays, Tuesdays and Wednesdays evenings only. Thursdays are reserved for Cabinet, formal or informal as the case may be; the requirement for these meetings is that in general terms both Monitoring Officer and Director of Finance, are required to be present, as they are for Scrutiny meetings and may be so for Scrutiny sub-group meetings discussing financial matters.
4. There is also the difficulty of allocating officer time although there is a recruitment process currently underway which may address some of these issues.
5. During my calendar discussions with officers the possibility of increasing the number of full O&S meetings to accommodate some of the subgroup time requirements was proposed. We therefore now have a draft calendar for 2019/20 which indicates 11 meetings, none in August so if needed, additional time will be available. When there are to be Cabinet meetings, the O&S is scheduled to have a meeting on the Monday before.
6. The O&S Chairman and myself have also discussed the benefit to the committee of having cabinet members attend by rote and have agreed that these sessions have not have been uniformly beneficial. For example, questions submitted by members are not many, and are from the same few members. Indeed the Cabinet member who should have had most to deal with, the Leader, had none at all. In general, these interviews have generated some discussion but the benefit of the answers given is, in general, not proportionate to the time taken. Ending the routine interviews will gain 35 or 40 valuable minutes for substantive issues, many of which are not being addressed.
7. This is not to say that cabinet members are not to be summoned to appear before the committee. There are times when Cabinet members (and Leader), supported by officers if required, should be called, such as when the committee is looking at a particular issue such as the budget or a housing company.
8. The net gain in committee time under the proposals above would be 5 x 2 hours in additional meetings plus say and additional two hours by not having cabinet members routinely present to deal with mostly routine issues so about 12 hours gained versus the perceived requirement of 36 which is likely to be a good deal less in reality.

At this point I should make it clear to all that during the Engagement group I was not supportive of the proposals that we reverted to the three subcommittees, or as now known as subgroups. Members will recall that in the discussions leading up to the changes in 2017, it was envisaged that an efficient committee, having read the committee papers and prepared its questions, should be able to dispose of the subjects under discussion in less than 30 minutes.

The committee however, by majority vote, opted to go with the recommendations of the Engagement group, hence this report in which I am trying to accommodate the wishes of the committee within the perceived difficulties caused by a limited number of evening slots available.

So how would the three subgroups operate within the proposed additional meeting time available?

One suggestion is that the groups (up to five strong is suggested, but open to all) should meet informally, outside the confines and public view of the O&S committee to examine the subject for which the group is constituted and to prepare a list of questions which can then be put to the relevant officers/Cabinet members at the full S&O meeting, even allowing for debate the business should, in the committee, be concluded within 30 minutes.

The question has been raised about the possibility that something confidential may be raised when a meeting is in public. This should not generally arise when cabinet documents are being considered because they will be in the public arena already; in the event that a question and the answer is likely to be confidential, then the officer will be aware of the need for confidentiality and has the option to request a closed session, or and much more likely, offer to provide the answer later.

I am sure that there are other possibilities to be explored.

Councillor David Coldwell
Vice-Chairman, Overview & Scrutiny Committee

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