

Governance Working Group

Held at:	Zoom - remote meeting
Date	Monday, 11 October 2021
Present	Councillors Connor McConville, Ian Meyers, David Monk, Tim Prater, Lesley Whybrow and David Wimble
Apologies for Absence	None.
Officers Present:	Amandeep Khroud (Assistant Director), Susan Priest (Chief Executive) and Jemma West (Committee Service Specialist)
Others Present:	Ed Hammond (Chairman) – Centre for Governance and Scrutiny

1. **Welcome and introductions**

The Chief Executive welcomed Ed Hammond from the Centre for Governance and Scrutiny to the meeting, and invited those present to introduce themselves.

2. **Declarations of interest**

There were no declarations of interest at the meeting.

3. **Minutes of previous meeting and matters arising**

The minutes of the meeting held on 27 February 2020 were agreed as a true record.

4. **Hybrid technology in the Council Chamber**

The Committee Services Specialist gave a presentation, which sought consent for budget to be allocated, in order to implement hybrid technology in the council chamber.

The Working Group Members made points including the following:

- It was important that the system linked remote attendees in to the microphone system, to ensure there was no distortion, and the sound was clear for those watching the webcast.

- Was it possible for webcasts to be subtitled?
- It was important to ensure that key officers were present at meetings, such as Planning Officers and Heads of Departments.
- Was this be a one off cost, for implementation?
- Although hybrid meetings were not presently lawful, installation of hybrid technology would be a tool in the box in the event that legislation was implemented.
- It could be useful to allow members of the public to read their questions for Full Council remotely, although this would need to be managed carefully.
- Hybrid meetings would be greener, and save travel time for members.

The Committee Services Specialist responded to some of the issues raised, and made the following points:

- Remote participation would be linked into the AV system, so sound would be clear on the webcast.
- A query would be put to the webcasting provider about whether subtitles for webcasts could be implemented.
- The detail around how hybrid meetings would operate would be agreed once legislation permitted.
- The costs were one off, there were no ongoing contractual costs other than what was already being paid for webcasting.
- Public participation being conducted remotely could be considered, providing it was permitted by legislation. The Assistant Director for Governance and Law added that there was much debate around this issue, and it would need careful consideration.

The Chairman then gave an update on the position with legislation for hybrid and remote meetings. He stated that there had it had been challenging getting a response on this and he hoped there would soon be movement. He added that it was important to recognise that there could be accessibility issues to consider, and remote participants could be at a disadvantage. Consideration needed to be given as to how the Chairman managed remote participation. Detailed guidance on this matter would soon be issued in Wales, which could be a useful resource.

It was agreed to proceed with purchasing the hybrid technology for installation in the council chamber.

5. **Options for Governance arrangements**

The Chairman introduced the item, and advised that any changes to Governance arrangements could only be introduced at the Annual Meeting of the Council. He also stated that the lead in time for such a change needed consideration, and a period of six months was recommended, although it could be actioned in less time.

The Chief Executive added that there had been a significant change in culture in the last 18 months, with the changes to Overview and Scrutiny, and

introduction of working groups and all member briefings. She stated that any change to Governance arrangements needed to be led by Members.

A discussion then took place and the Working Group Members each outlined their individual views on the governance arrangements. There was broad agreement that the current arrangements, with regard to opposition groups being represented on Cabinet, had been working well. A discussion took place and the following points were made:

- The changes to Overview and Scrutiny were positive, although still at an early stage.
- Working Groups were informative, but low attendance was an issue, and it was not clear how they shaped decision-making. With regard to Member briefings, it was not clear what happened to the feedback given by Members at sessions. More feedback would be helpful.
- Decision-making needed to be transparent and members welcomed that fewer restricted papers were being used.
- There was a public perception that the council was officer-led, but this was disputed by the leader.
- A mixed Cabinet could not be enshrined in the constitution, meaning that the current make up of Cabinet rested on the ongoing political commitment of the Leader.
- National structures prohibited the Labour Group from joining the Cabinet, so a Committee structure was the only way that Labour Members could be involved in decision making.
- There was also presently no democratic vehicle for appointments to outside bodies, such as the Folkestone Parks and Pleasure Grounds Charity.
- Whatever the Governance arrangements of the council, the majority group would always have the upper hand.
- Introducing a Committee system could mean longer meetings.
- The Cabinet controlled the political agenda of the Council. The current rainbow coalition arrangement worked well, and it was unfortunate that labour could not join. The Leader then gave reassurance that he would not change the current political make-up of the Cabinet.

The Chairman then invited views on what the group member's expectations were in respect of decision making, and their role in policy development. The following points were discussed:

- In terms of operational issues, members were accountable to the public.
- Members could still influence operational issues via portfolio holders to officers.
- As an example, the number of houses to be built was a strategic decision, as was insisting that the houses be carbon neutral.
- Although a committee system would result in the same end point, there would be more debate at meetings, and clear rationale for decisions.

Governance Working Group - 11 October 2021

- A more streamlined version of the committee system, with no more than two committees, would be favoured above the traditional model.
- Would the expected government white paper on levelling up have an impact on any potential decision to change governance models, and if so, was it worth waiting for the outcome of the white paper prior to any decision making?

The Chairman then added that any new governance options would need to fit within the resources for the existing arrangements.

It was agreed that a report prepared by the CfGS, setting out the work to date and factors for consideration in changing governance models, be considered at Full Council in January/February. The report would be for noting, and a decision would then be put to Full Council at the Annual meeting in May, and subject to that decision, any changes to existing governance arrangements would take effect from May 2023.