



GENERAL PURPOSES COMMITTEE

MEETING : Tuesday, 9th November 2021

PRESENT : Cllrs. Williams (Chair), Taylor (Vice-Chair), S. Chambers, Hilton, Padilla, Pullen, Tracey and Wilson

Others in Attendance

Jon McGinty, Managing Director

Tanya Davies, Policy and Governance Manager

APOLOGIES : Cllrs. Field

1. APPOINTMENT OF CHAIR AND VICE CHAIR

The Committee noted the appointments made by Annual Council of Councillor Williams as Chair and Councillor Taylor as Vice-Chair of the Committee.

2. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

3. MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 12th January 2021 were confirmed and signed by the Chair as a correct record.

4. PUBLIC QUESTION TIME (15 MINUTES)

There were no public questions.

5. PETITIONS AND DEPUTATIONS (15 MINUTES)

There were no petitions or deputations.

6. CONSTITUTIONAL CHANGES

The Committee considered the report of the Head of Paid Service concerning proposed changes to the Council Procedure Rules within the Council's Constitution in respect of questions by the public and elected Members at meetings.

GENERAL PURPOSES COMMITTEE
09.11.21

The Chair introduced the report, explaining that the proposals centred around the introduction of a notice period for questions by both Councillors and members of the public at Council and Committee meeting, and asked the committee for their comments.

Councillor Hilton stated that he did not support the proposal to require notice of questions in advance. In respect of public questions, he indicated that the existing informal approach whereby members of the public could turn up on the day to ask a question worked well and that there was a risk that the question time facility could become overloaded with questions from single issue groups who would then not attend to ask their questions in person. In respect of questions from Councillors, he raised concerns that the burden for providing detailed answers would be passed on to officers instead of answers being given in real time by Cabinet Members. He stated that the current system whereby opinion-based questions were dealt with under verbal questions, and technical questions were dealt with under written questions worked well and should not be changed to a more restrictive approach, noting that Cabinet Members should be well briefed and Councillors were not always in a position to submit questions in advance. He noted that the requirement for 5 clear working days' notice for questions to be asked by Councillors at meetings of the Cabinet did not allow sufficient time for Councillors to consider the reports on the agenda before submitting any questions.

Councillor Pullen stated that requiring notice for public questions would create an additional unwanted barrier to engagement, but that he supported the proposal to allow members of the public to request that their question be read out if they were unable to attend a meeting in person. In respect of questions by Councillors, he raised concerns that requiring notice would stifle debate and have a negative impact on the council's meetings. He noted that he was generally satisfied with the verbal answers provided under the current system and saw no benefit to changing it.

Councillors Hilton and Pullen noted that the proposal had not been discussed with Group Leaders in advance.

Councillor Wilson stated that he could not identify any benefits to changing the current approach to questions, as the proposals would result in more work for officers and barriers for the public, and Councillors would lose the ability to be spontaneous during meetings. He stated that the proposals would make the council less accountable to the public and would put members of the public off from engaging in the democratic process.

In response to a question from Councillor Taylor, the Managing Director advised that the requirement for notice was common practice at some councils and the Chair noted that Gloucestershire County Council also required notice.

In response to questions from Councillor Tracey, the Managing Director explained that the Administration was in favour of the proposals because it ensured that quality responses could be provided to every question. He further noted that the proposals included provision for urgent questions to be included at shorter notice.

GENERAL PURPOSES COMMITTEE
09.11.21

Councillor S. Chambers and Padilla indicated that they supported the proposals because it enabled quality responses to be prepared and provided.

Councillor Tracey proposed that the proposals be adopted, but with a requirement to review them after a specified amount of time and Councillor Pullen proposed that the committee recommend to Council that the review take place after three ordinary Council meetings under the new arrangements.

Councillor Taylor proposed that the notice required for questions by Councillors at meetings of the Cabinet be reduced to three clear working days from five.

The General Purposes Committee **RESOLVED TO RECOMMEND** to Council that:

- (1) The proposed changes to the Constitution as set out in the report be adopted, subject to:
 - Reducing the notice required for question by Members at meetings of the Cabinet to three clear working days.
 - A requirement that General Purposes Committee will review the operation of the proposed changes after three ordinary meetings of Council and decide whether to recommend to Council a return to previous arrangements or any other changes.

- (2) It be noted that, as the report proposes to make changes to the Council Procedure Rules, in accordance with Council Procedure Rule 10 and 12, the proposed amendments, if agreed, shall stand adjourned until the next ordinary Council meeting.

Time of commencement: 6.00 pm hours
Time of conclusion: 6.40 pm hours

Chair