

# **Review of the timetable of meetings for the remainder of 2021/22 and associated governance matters**

## **Strategy & Resources Committee - Tuesday, 5<sup>th</sup> October 2021**

Report of: Head of Legal Services & Monitoring Officer

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Purpose: For recommendation to Full Council

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Publication status: Open

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### **Executive summary:**

This report has been prepared in view of the following resolution by Full Council at the annual meeting on the 27<sup>th</sup> May 2021 (upon considering the timetable of meetings for 21/22):

*“ the Strategy & Resources Committee formally review the calendar of meetings at its meeting on 5th October 2021, so as to make an appropriate recommendation to the subsequent Full Council meeting.”*

The report explains the rationale for the current timetable and the merits of changing meeting dates during the final cycle. It also addresses other related matters, including a proposal to change the standard start time for evening meetings from 7.30pm to 7.00pm; the scope to reduce the length of meetings; issues regarding meetings held during the pre-election period (previously referred to as 'purdah'); and the process for agreeing the 2022/23 timetable.

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**This report supports the Council's priority of: "Building a better Council"**

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## Recommendations to Committee:

It be recommended to Council that:

- A. the dates of meetings during March / April 2022 be changed as per section 14 of this report;
- B. the following amendment be made to paragraph (1) of Standing Order 30 whereby the standard item for asking questions will cease to be included on agenda for Committee and Council meetings held during pre-election periods for District and County Council elections:

*.... with the exception of the Annual Council meeting and any Council or Committee meeting taking place during the pre-election period for District or County Council elections, a Councillor, or a person resident, working or studying in the District, may put a question to the Leader or a Committee Chair at any meeting of the Council ~~(other than the Annual Meeting)~~ or to the Chair presiding at a Committee meeting on any matter in relation to which the Council / Committee has powers or duties or which affects the District ...*

- C. the standard start time for Committee and Council meetings be changed from 7.30pm to 7.00pm with effect from the 2<sup>nd</sup> November 2021 (notwithstanding the possibility of meetings being convened at different times in special circumstances);
- D. a provisional timetable of meetings for 2022/23 be presented to the Strategy & Resources Committee on 1<sup>st</sup> February 2022 for ratification at the following Council meeting.

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## Reasons for recommendations:

The current timetable was set on the basis that up to date budget monitoring reports would need to be submitted to Policy Committee meetings towards the end of each cycle. As that practice will now cease (in lieu of the distribution of monthly budget reports to Members via e-mail) Committee meetings could now be spread more evenly. However, as meetings have been diarised since last Spring, it is considered that November 2021 dates should not be altered and that timetable changes be confined to March / April 2022. The proposed revisions to March 2022 dates are also intended to avoid having Policy Committee meetings during the pre-election period. The opportunity has also been taken to suggest amendments to the scheduling of Planning Committee meetings in March and April 2022.

The proposed withdrawal of agenda items for Standing Order 30 questions for remaining meetings during election pre-election periods is intended to reduce the potential for breaching government guidelines on publicity restrictions.

The suggested 7pm standard start for Committee and Council meetings should help reduce the prospect of unreasonably late finish times.

The proposal to bring a provisional 2022/23 calendar of meetings to the Committee in the new year is intended to provide a more effective and inclusive process for confirming the timetable.

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## **Introduction and background**

1. The timetable of Council and Committee meetings (updated copy at **Appendix A**) was presented to the Annual Meeting on 27<sup>th</sup> May 2021 for confirmation. This followed consultation with key Officers (Executive Leadership and Finance Teams) and Group Leaders earlier in the year.
2. A motion for the calendar to be reviewed by this Committee on 5<sup>th</sup> October 2021 was agreed. This followed suggestions that the dates of certain Policy Committee meetings should be spread more evenly, e.g. to avoid the need for two Committees having to meet in the same week.
3. The current 2021/22 meeting dates were scheduled according to the following principles / assumptions:
  - (i) the current committee structure should be retained
  - (ii) there should continue to be five committee cycles per annum (there were four cycles, and therefore fewer meetings, until 2017/18 when an additional cycle of meetings before Christmas was introduced at Members' request)
  - (iii) Friday evenings, August and school holidays are to be kept free of meetings if possible
  - (iv) Planning Committee meetings should usually be held every four weeks, but never more than six weeks following the preceding meeting
  - (v) for each cycle, Policy Committee meetings should be scheduled to receive up to date budget monitoring reports for the same reporting period
  - (vi) Audit & Scrutiny Committee meetings (with the exception of those convened for specific purposes) should be held towards the end of each cycle to capture the latest performance & risk reports for the four Policy Committees.
4. As a result of 3(v) and (vi) above, more Committee meetings are now clustered towards the end of each cycle.
5. During the previous 12 months, concerns have been expressed by some Members and the Executive Leadership Team about the time being consumed by meetings, both in terms of their frequency and duration.

6. Last April, challenges associated with Committee and Full Council meetings taking place during the pre-election period of sensitivity also emerged.

### **Scope for arranging a more even spread of meetings throughout each committee cycle**

7. This could be achieved now that, following consultation with Group Leaders, agenda for the four Policy Committees will no longer include budget monitoring items. While no changes to November 2021 meeting dates are recommended due to any amendments being at such short notice, the draft 2022/23 timetable will attempt to provide a less clustered sequence of meeting dates throughout the Municipal Year. As far as the remainder of 2021/22 is concerned, new dates for March and April are proposed as per section 14 below, which also take account of issues regarding the pre-election period discussed in paragraphs 10 to 13.

### **Budget setting meetings in January 2022**

8. Members who have experienced the Council's budget setting process in previous years will note that the customary mid-January week of back to back Committees has been replaced with a slightly less intense series of meetings over a two week period, with S&R only having to meet once in January/February (i.e. to approve its own budget **and** recommend the Council wide budget and Council Tax etc at the same meeting).
9. Two alternative dates for the budget setting Council meeting in February 2022 have also been programmed, i.e. 10<sup>th</sup> February and, as a contingency, 17<sup>th</sup> February if it isn't possible to prepare the necessary report in time for the earlier date. However, the 17<sup>th</sup> February option falls in the half term school holidays.

### **Pre-election issues**

10. Certain restrictions on publicity apply during the pre-election period (previously known as 'purdah'). These are governed by Section 2 of the Local Government Act 1986, as amended in 1988. Councils should '*not publish any material which, in whole or in part, appears to be designed to affect public support for a political party*'. Section 4 of the Act provides that Councils need to have regard to the code of recommended practice, the key extracts from which are:
  1. *In general you should not issue any publicity which seeks to influence voters;*
  2. *Particular care should be taken between the time of publication of a notice of an election and polling day;*
  3. *Consider suspending the hosting of third party material or closing public forums if these are likely to breach the code of practice;*
  4. *Do not publish any publicity on controversial issues; and*

5. *Publicity relating to individuals involved directly in the election should not be published unless expressly authorised by statute.*
11. Some confusion arose prior to last April's Full Council and the matter is therefore considered relevant to this review of the 2021/22 meetings timetable with the 5th May 2022 District Elections in mind. The pre-election period is triggered by the publication of the Notice of Election which must be no later than 25 working days before the poll (28<sup>th</sup> March as far as 2022 is concerned). At this stage, it is understood that the likely publication date will be the 21<sup>st</sup> March 2022, in which case the following meetings within the present timetable for 2022 will be affected:
- Community Services Committee – 22<sup>nd</sup> March
  - Planning Policy Committee – 24<sup>th</sup> March
  - Housing Committee – 29<sup>th</sup> March
  - Strategy & Resources Committee – 31<sup>st</sup> March
  - Planning Committee – 19<sup>th</sup> April
  - Council – 21<sup>st</sup> April
12. The suggested amended dates in 14 below would remove the March 2022 meetings of all four Policy Committees from the pre-election period, based on a 21<sup>st</sup> March Notice of Election. Although a rescheduled 24<sup>th</sup> March Audit & Scrutiny Committee would now fall within the pre-election period, this is not considered to be such a significant risk.
13. The more radical option of not having any Council or Committee meetings during the pre-election period is not recommended. However, a revision to Standing Order 30 is proposed whereby the regular item for questions would be removed from agenda for meetings taking place during the pre-election period (Recommendation B). This alone would not, of course, prevent debates at meetings from breaching the pre-election period guidelines. As in previous years, Members would have to be mindful of the guidelines when speaking at the relevant meetings, having due regard to any rulings from Chairs and advice from the Monitoring Officer.

## Proposed revisions to meeting dates in March and April 2022

14. Partly arising from the issues discussed in paragraphs 7 and 10 to 13 above, revised meeting dates are proposed as follows (darker shading indicates new dates):

MARCH 2022	APRIL 2022
1 Tues <b>CS</b>	
2 Weds	
3 Thurs <b>P</b>	
4 Fri	
7 Mon	4 Mon
8 Tues <b>S</b>	5 Tues
9 Weds	6 Weds
10 Thurs <b>PP</b>	7 Thurs
11 Fri	8 Fri
14 Mon	11 Mon
15 Tues <b>H</b> <del>JCC</del>	12 Tues
16 Weds <del>JCC</del>	13 Weds
17 Thurs <del>A&amp;S</del> <b>S&amp;R</b>	14 Thurs
18 Fri	15 Fri Good Friday
21 Mon	18 Mon Easter Monday
22 Tues <del>CS</del>	19 Tues <del>P</del>
23 Weds	20 Weds
24 Thurs <del>PP</del> <b>A&amp;S</b>	21 Thurs <b>C</b>
25 Fri	22 Fri
28 Mon	25 Mon
29 Tues <b>H</b>	26 Tues
30 Weds	27 Weds
31 Thurs <del>S&amp;R</del> <b>P</b>	28 Thurs <b>P</b>
	29 Fri

School Holiday

15. An additional meeting of the Planning Committee is also proposed for the end of March, together with a later meeting of the April Planning Committee in place of the one currently scheduled immediately after Easter.

## Scope for limiting the duration of meetings / reducing potential for late finish times

16. Occasionally, the need for 'heavy' agenda and lengthy meetings are unavoidable. Otherwise, participants might concur that conducting business at, say, 10.30pm is not usually conducive to good decision making. In this respect, the average length of TDC evening meetings has increased in the last two years or so, and questions about whether formal measures should be introduced to regulate the hours spent in the Council Chamber (or on Zoom as the case may be) have arisen.

17. Recommendation C goes some way to addressing this issue by proposing a change to the customary start time for Council and Committee meetings from 7.30pm to 7.00pm. Officers are aware of the need to respect the demands placed upon working Members with their daytime commitments who may welcome 7.30pm meetings. The same applies to residents who wish to participate in evening meetings. Therefore, the possibility of standard 6.30pm or earlier start times is not being advocated.
18. Moving the start times to 7.00pm will also benefit those Officers who attend and support the meetings. Where practicable, Officers are entitled to take compensatory time off through the flexi-time scheme or lieu time. In some instances, it may not be practicable for Officers to work their hours flexibly or to take time off in lieu due to the need to maintain service cover.
19. A further option that has been considered, but not recommended at this stage, is the imposition of a Standing Order to enable Full Council or Committee meetings to finish if the business hasn't been completed by a certain time. Such provisions are commonly known as 'guillotine motions' and are used by some other authorities. A typical guillotine provision within a Council's Standing Orders is:

*"If the business is not completed by 10.30 p.m., the Council / Committee shall decide, in relation to all or part of the remaining business, to:*

*(a) approve items without debate; or*

*(b) continue the meeting to complete the business; or*

*(c) refer the business to the next Ordinary Meeting; or*

*(d) adjourn to a specific date.*
20. More pragmatic approaches to expediting business at meetings could rest with Chairs in controlling debates or setting notional time limits for dealing with individual agenda items.
21. A further measure could be to limit the submission of reports for Committees 'to note', as per the recent cessation of routine budget monitoring agenda items in lieu of the information being e-mailed to Members instead.

## **Reviewing the committee system and other constitutional issues**

22. As referred to in 3(ii) above, it is assumed that Members are content with the current five committee cycles per annum which forms the basis of the present timetable of meetings. Determining this matter, and the wider issue of whether the current committee structure remains fit for purpose, is beyond the scope of this report.

23. This report has also considered the use of Standing Orders in the context of meetings during the pre-election period; start times; and guillotine measures. This highlights the potential for establishing a Member level group for reviewing constitutional issues. Indeed, the 2020/21 Annual Governance Statement included an action to:

*"Establish an ongoing process to review the constitution, supported by a Member-led Constitution Working Group"*

24. At this stage, it is considered premature to convene such a Group, although it remains an option should the Council wish to explore more comprehensive alternatives to current decision making processes

### **Process for confirming the 2022/23 timetable of meetings**

25. Recommendation D proposes that the draft timetable be presented to the Committee's 1<sup>st</sup> February 2022 meeting. For the last few years, timetables have been set by officers in consultation with Group Leaders but a more formal, Member driven process is now considered appropriate before the 2022/23 timetable is confirmed.

## **Key implications**

### **Comments of the Chief Finance Officer**

The Chief Finance Officer supports the approach of realigning the meeting dates for 2022/23 given that budget monitoring reports will no longer be reported to Committees. However, meetings will still need to be scheduled to consider:

- a 21/22 outturn report (S&R in June 2022)
- a draft 23/24 budget report (S&R in December 2022)
- 23/24 budget setting reports (all four policy committees in January / February 2023, culminating in a report to Full Council in February 2023).

### **Comments of the Head of Legal Services**

All legal implications are outlined in this report.

### **Equality**

There are no equality implications associated with this report.

### **Climate change**

Other than the carbon footprints associated with Members having to travel to the Council Offices for meetings, there are no climate change implications associated with this report.



## **Appendices**

Appendix A – current timetable of Council and Committee meetings for 2021/22

## **Background papers**

None

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