

Democracy and Standards Committee

At 7.00 pm on Monday 12th September, 2022

Held as a Council Chamber, Swanspool House, Wellingborough, Northants. NN8 1BP

Present:-

Shadow Members

Councillor Lora Lawman (Chair)

Councillor Robin Carter

Councillor Paul Marks

Councillor Andy Mercer

Councillor Gill Mercer

Councillor Michael Tye

Officers

Also in attendance – Councillor

The Chair welcomed members and the viewing public to the meeting.

32 Apologies/Adjournment of meeting

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Addison, Lyn Buckingham, Fedorowycz, Harrison, Nichol and Watt.

The Chair welcomed Councillor A Mercer to the meeting as a member of the committee.

Period of Mourning

Following the death of Her Majesty, Queen Elizabeth II, the Chair paid tribute to Her Majesty's dedicated service to the country and expressed the condolences of the committee to King Charles III and the Royal family.

She asked Members to stand and observe a two minute silence.

In recognition of the period of mourning the Chair suggested the meeting be adjourned to Monday 10 October 2022 at 7pm. This was proposed by Councillor A Mercer and seconded by Councillor Marks. On being put to the vote the motion was declared carried unanimously.

Resolved that the meeting be adjourned to be reconvened on 10 October 2022..

The Chair adjourned the meeting at 7.05pm.

The meeting was reconvened at 7pm on 10 October 2022.

The following councillors and officers were present:

Councillors Lora Lawman (Chair), Macaulay Nichol (Vice-Chair), Jean Addison, Lyn Buckingham, Robin Carter, Emily Fedorowycz, Kirk Harrison, Paul Marks, Dorothy Maxwell, Andy Mercer, Gill Mercer and Michael Tye.

Adele Wylie, Director of Governance, Human Resources and Monitoring Officer, Paul Goult, Interim Democratic Services Manager, Ben Smith, Democratic and Electoral Services Manager and Carol Mundy, Senior Democratic Services Officer (Committees/Members).

An apology was received from Councillor Kevin Watt.

33 Members' Declarations of interest (if any)

The Chair invited members to make a declaration if they wished to do so.

Resolved to note that no declarations were made.

34 Minutes of the Meeting held on 11 July 2022

Resolved to note that the minutes of the meeting held on 11 July 2022 were approved and signed as a true record.

35 Notification of any requests to address the meeting

Resolved to note that no requests had been received to address the meeting.

36 Start time of Full Council meetings

The annexed circulated report of the Director of Governance, HR and Monitoring Officer was received to consider the formulation, by the committee, of a recommendation to full Council on the start time of future Full Council meetings.

In September 2022 Full Council agreed to trial an alternative start time for ordinary full council meetings of 2pm, instead of 7pm, with an agreement to review the decision after a reasonable number of council meeting had been held.

Since that decision seven meetings of full council had taken place, along with the Budget Full Council meeting, which started at 10am and a Special Full Council meeting, which commenced at 7pm.

A recent questionnaire to councillors had resulted in 53 responses being received, details of which were appended to the report.

Also appended to the report were the following:

Appendix A - Details of Apologies, meeting duration and public participation;

Appendix B - Number of views on YouTube;

Appendix C - Comparison of start times of Council meetings with other authorities.

The decision on the start time of future Full Council meetings needed to be made by Councillors.

Members discussed the available options with views summarised below:

- It was mooted that some full time/self-employed Members had found it difficult or impossible to attend daytime meetings because of work commitments and therefore evening meetings were preferable.
- Some councillors raised concern that to do a full day's work and then attend an evening council meeting, which potentially could continue until late at night, was also not conducive to good decision making.
- Travel time to Corby, could often take over an hour from many parts of North Northamptonshire and needed to be factored in. A meeting would be followed, for some, by a lengthy return journey, after a tiring meeting. There was a duty of care to both Members, the Public and employees to ensure they returned home safely.
- Analysis of attendance levels indicated that regardless of the time of meetings there was little difference in average attendance year on year from either councillors or the public.
- Public participation was also at the forefront of members thoughts and It was noted that public participation, with a few exceptions, had been low and that consideration needed to be given to encouraging more public participation. It was generally conceded that the public would attend if the subject matter on the agenda was something that they considered would strongly affect them, regardless of time.
- It was suggested that should meetings be held late afternoon that public participation be moved to later the agenda. It was however, cautioned that this would not be advisable as the public generally needed to speak prior to council debating an item and making a decision.
- Advice was sought on whether the format of the full Council agenda could be reconsidered. Currently questions from members and supplementary questions were raised at the beginning of the agenda; this frequently resulted in a delay in commencing the 'business of the agenda'.
- It was noted that there was a 'guillotine' on the conclusion time of meetings, where Members had the option to extend the length of the meeting to conclude the agenda business. If questions were moved to the end of the agenda more time could be given to discussing the important business first when minds were fresh and alert and a decision on whether to extend the meeting could be made, depending on the time. It was noted that answers to questions were already provided prior to the meeting.
- It was also noted that during the first year of the council the meetings had been longer as there had been a great deal to discuss and consider. The length of meetings had often been extended with questions, and supplementary questions.

- Prior to standing for election potential members had been informed that meetings would be held at different times of the day/evening and that this needed to be considered before putting themselves forward.
- There were very few Full Council meetings during the year, and where possible every effort needed to be made by Councillors to attend on behalf of their constituents. It was noted, however, that there were always occasions where apologies needed to be submitted.
- Members considered it important to encourage the younger generation to stand for election and that with different methods of working, and often more flexibility offered to employees with remote working, future participation should become an easier option, though it was appreciated that this would not be the case with all types of employment.
- The Full Council meeting to discuss the budget would continue to be held at 10am due to the volume of business under discussion and the expected length of the meeting. This was noted.
- Generally, it was agreed that 7pm was too late for a meeting of Full Council to start. It was noted that a 6pm start could result in traffic delays with peak traffic periods. Many considered that 2pm was not an ideal option and felt that a late afternoon start would be more appropriate.

It was proposed by Councillor Gill Mercer that the start time of Full Council meetings be moved to 5pm. This was seconded by Councillor Kirk Harrison.

Members debated this proposal with most agreeing that this would be a good compromise for many councillors. It would ensure that travel time was prior to the peak rush hour, minds would be fresh and alert for the decision-making process. Public transport would be more available and accessible to attend and return home for both councillors and the public as meetings would conclude at a reasonable time for the return journey.

Following the debate, the Chair put the proposal as moved by Councillor G Mercer and seconded by Councillor K Harrison to the vote.

The motion was declared carried with nine votes in favour and two against.

Resolved to recommend to Full Council that:

- (i) future meetings of the Full Council commence at **5pm**;
- (ii) the exception to this be the Budget Full Council meeting which would commence at 10am.

37 Constitutional Working Group

The annexed circulated report of the Director of Governance, HR and Monitoring Officer was received to confirm the membership of the Constitutional Working Group for the remainder of the municipal year 2022/23, following changes to the membership of the committee.

It was agreed that the current membership of the working group remain as four Conservatives, one Labour and one Green Alliance, as follows:

Councillors K Harrison, L Lawman, Nichol and G Mercer (Conservatives)
Councillor Lyn Buckingham (Labour)
Councillor E Fedorowycz (Green Alliance)

It was proposed by Councillor Harrison and seconded by Councillor Fedorowycz that Councillor L Lawman remain as Chair.

On being put to the vote this was declared carried.

Resolved that:

- (i) Councillors K Harrison, L Lawman, Nichol and G Mercer (Conservatives), Lyn Buckingham (Labour) and E Fedorowycz (Green Alliance) continue as members of the Constitutional Working Group for the remainder of 2022/23;
- (ii) Councillor L Lawman continue as Chair for the remainder of 2022/23.

38 Appointment of Independent Persons and Town & Parish Representatives

The annexed circulated report of the Director of Governance, Human Resources and Monitoring Officer was received to seek approval to the process for the recruitment of independent persons and town and parish representatives to the Democracy and Standards Committee.

The report detailed the responsibility of the committee to oversee and develop the council's Code of Conduct and overall standards of conduct for councillors, co-opted councillors and Parish and Town Councillors in North Northamptonshire.

Independent Persons and Town and Parish representatives needed to be appointed for the purpose of assisting the authority's obligations to deal with allegations of breaches of the code. Such persons would attend meetings where standards matters were to be discussed at the invitation of the Chair.

North Northamptonshire Shadow Authority, at its council meeting in February 2021, appointed three independent persons for standards, to ensure compliance with the Localism Act 2011. Those appointed are Vivienne Barnard, Mike Sawford and Dean Smith, all had previously undertaken this role in sovereign councils.

No town and parish councillors had been appointed.

Details of the proposed recruitment process were provided within the report along with a timeline, subsequently updated, of when this would commence and be concluded. It was expected that a report would be presented to committee on 9 January 2023 with a recommendation included to go to the council meeting on 26 January 2023.

Members queried the requirement for three independent persons and three parish and town representatives.

Officers explained that with 106 parish councils the workload could be vast with the potential for numerous code of conduct complaints. The views of the independent persons/representation could potential be sought on various and numerous aspects during any investigations.

It was intended to use Northamptonshire County Association of Local Councils (NCALC) to assist with the recruitment process. Officers explained that each Parish Clerk would be contacted by NCALC to encourage applications from any of the parish councils in the North Northamptonshire area.

The Director of Governance, HR and Monitoring Officer also explained that the role of the independent persons was important as they could also be used to investigate a potential issue with a senior officer of the council. It was essential that they were independent.

The roles would also be advertised in the local newspaper and the communications team's expertise on advertising and encouraging diversity would also be sought through the process.

The motion within the report was proposed by Councillor Harrison and seconded by Councillor Nichol. Upon being put to the vote the motion was declared carried.

Resolved that the:

- (i) independent nature of the independent persons and town and parish representatives, along with their role on the committee when attending meetings, be noted;
- (ii) recruitment process for the appointment of independent persons and town and parish representatives to the committee, as detailed within the report, be approved;
- (iii) outcome of the recruitment process will be reported back to the committee, to recommend appointments to full Council for approval.

39 Update on Local Government Boundary Review

The annexed circulated report of the Director of Governance, HR and Monitoring Officer was received to update members on Phase One – Council Size, as part of a review of electoral arrangements in North Northamptonshire by the Local Government Boundary Commission for England.

The report detailed the work undertaken by this committee on the review and the recommendation approved on 23 June 2022 for submission to the Boundary Commission. The primary objective of the review was to improve electoral equality to ensure that each voter had the same or similar representation on the council.

The Boundary Commission responded to the submission on 24 August 2022, with the letter being appended to the report, advising that it could not reach a decision on Council size based upon the evidence in the submission and invited further evidence to be submitted by 21 October 2022.

The report explained the role of the Local Government Boundary Commission for England (LGBCE), who is responsible for carrying out reviews of local authority electoral arrangements. Such review would look at the total number of councillors

elected to the authority, the number and boundaries of wards for the purposes of the election of councillors, the number of councillors per ward and the name of such ward.

The Director informed the committee that work was ongoing to progress this further and the Lead Commissioner would meet with the leaders of each political group.

Members commented that they were disappointed with the Commissioner's decision as a considerable amount of work had been put into the submission, which they considered had been robust and evidence based. They were also concerned over the timeline, which the Director confirmed had been extended since the report had been produced.

Members could also submit individual comments to the Commissioner.

Resolved to note:

- (i) the letter and delay on the decision of the Local Government Boundary Commission;
- (ii) that the political leaders will meet with the Leader Commissioner;
- (iii) that further evidence, to support the submission, in relation to Council Size would be submitted to the Local Government Boundary Commission,

40 Close of Meeting

The Chair closed the meeting at 8.25pm.

The meeting closed at Time Not Specified