
POLICY DEVELOPMENT AND REVIEW COMMITTEE

MINUTES of the Meeting held in the Council Chamber, Swale House, East Street, Sittingbourne, Kent ME10 3HT on Wednesday, 17 July 2019 from 7.00pm - 8.18 pm.

PRESENT: Councillors Lloyd Bowen, Mike Dendor, Alastair Gould (Chairman), Ann Hampshire, Benjamin A Martin, Ken Pugh, Ken Rowles, Julian Saunders, Sarah Stephen and Ghlin Whelan (Vice-Chairman).

OFFICERS PRESENT: David Clifford, Jo Millard, Sarah Porter and Bob Pullen.

ALSO IN ATTENDANCE: Councillors Mike Baldock (Deputy Leader), Ken Ingleton, Denise Knights, Peter Marchington, Hannah Perkin, Bill Tatton and Roger Truelove (Leader).

133 EMERGENCY EVACUATION PROCEDURE

The Chairman drew attention to the emergency evacuation procedure.

134 MINUTES

The Minutes of the Meeting held on 19 June 2019 (Minute Nos. 57 – 61) were taken as read, approved and signed by the Chairman as a correct record. A Member drew attention to paragraph two at minute no. 60, and spoke positively about the previous cooperative working of the Committee.

135 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

No interests were declared.

136 OBJECTIVES OF A CONSTITUTION REVIEW

The Chairman welcomed the Deputy Leader to the meeting and invited him to introduce the report.

The Deputy Leader explained that one of the objectives of the new coalition was to increase engagement with the public and parish councils in policy making. He spoke about Councillors making suggestions at an early stage of policy making, and being able to share their experience and make proposals. The Deputy Leader said there was no set way going forward but there should be a proper consultation with the public to include their ideas in policies.

In the discussion that followed, Members raised points including:

- Members would need to be mindful of the potential costs of proposals and any additional costs to the tax-payer;
- Members should look at how scrutiny worked within the different models;
- there should continue to be a separate body to hold decision-makers to account if there was no scrutiny committee;

- Local Engagement Forums (LEFs) were stopped previously due to little public attendance - how could the public be encouraged to attend meetings?;
- support for a constitution review; and
- the Kent County Council model of Cabinet with committees worked well.

Members suggested objectives which included:

- clear lines of demarcation;
- involving more Members in decision-making;
- consideration of timeliness of decision-making;
- working more effectively with the public going forward;
- the additional burden on officer time; and
- the costs of a new system.

Members gave their personal experiences of working within different models.

The Chairman asked what were the benefits of the current system, which might be retained in the future? The Deputy Leader said that it was essential to retain a scrutinising role in any model. He spoke of the popularity of some LEFs compared to others and welcomed suggestions on how to improve attendance and engagement with the public. The Deputy Leader said there was no pre-determined plan and all options should be considered.

The Head of Policy, Communications and Customer Services said that Scrutiny was obligatory in the Leader and Cabinet model but not in the committee structure.

137 CONSTITUTION REVIEW - AREA COMMITTEES

The Chairman opened the debate by asking the Deputy Leader what the role of area committees was? The Deputy Leader responded by saying that the coalition wanted to introduce area committees to assist with public engagement, make democracy more transparent, and facilitate a closer link to Councillors with the public. He suggested a working group could be set up to decide on the purposes of the committees, how they should be split and what their spending powers should be.

Councillor Benjamin A Martin welcomed the introduction of area committees and spoke enthusiastically on public engagement and having the tools and funds to deliver local projects. He proposed the setting up of a working group to discuss ideas and report back to the Policy Development Review Committee (PDRC). Councillor Mike Dendor seconded the proposal which Members agreed. Later in the meeting the Deputy Leader suggested that Councillor Benjamin A Martin should chair the working group and liaise with the Policy and Performance Officer in recruiting other Members, including co-opting Councillor Ingleton.

The Head of Policy, Communications and Customer Services confirmed that there was no restriction on the geographical size of an area committee.

Members raised points which included:

- Researching ways of encouraging public to attend meetings;
- should take care that parish councils and area committees were not duplicating, and the relationships between parish and town councils should be considered;
- would there be extra funding for parish councils?;
- impact on and cost of officer time;
- the public were often only interested if there was funding for schemes;
- previous LEFs did not always communicate back after questions raised;
- the use of social media to inform residents was a powerful tool;
- parish councils should be kept separate;
- guest speakers at LEFs encouraged the public to attend;
- needed to differentiate between engagement and local decision making;
- the public would welcome decisions made at local level;
- there should be more joined up working with neighbouring wards;
- Swale Borough Councillors should all be engaging with the public anyway;
- consider use of technology such as webcasting meetings to engage the public;
- there needed to be a consistent approach in all areas;
- the definition of area committees should be set;
- there should be more use of local knowledge;
- consider using parish councils to pass information onto residents;
- some smaller issues could be dealt with at local level helping to reduce workloads;
- area committees should report back to Council to consolidate shared agendas; and
- consider excluding partner organisations from attendance as this was not successful in the past.

In response to a question from a Member, the Policy and Performance Officer clarified that item 3.12 on page 12 of the report was just an example of how other organisations operated.

The Leader clarified that area committees should be viewed differently to the previous LEFs. He said that area committees must have decision-making powers from those from within that area and advised that there was no extra funding available. He suggested that as there could be no changes to contracts, only those functions that could be devolved should be looked at.

The Chairman suggested that the first item on the working party agenda should be confirmation of the areas and what powers there were, and this would shape the structure going forward.

A Member said that different areas had different needs and suggested the area committees be divided into four committees – Sittingbourne Urban, Sittingbourne Rural, Isle of Sheppey and Faversham. Another Member added that four committees would provide a better focus on the needs of areas.

Resolved:

(1) That a working group be established to look at Area Committees as outlined in this minute.

138 CONSTITUTION REVIEW: MODELS OF GOVERNANCE

Councillor Lloyd Bowen proposed that the Models of Governance report be discussed after the area committee Working Group reports back to the PDRC meeting. The Chairman seconded the proposal, which Members agreed.

Resolved:

(1) That the Models of Governance report be considered at a future meeting.

Chairman

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All Minutes are draft until agreed at the next meeting of the Committee/Panel