

**TONBRIDGE & MALLING BOROUGH COUNCIL
PEER CHALLENGE SCRUTINY REVIEW PANEL**

25 August 2015

Report of the Management Team

1 PEER CHALLENGE SCRUTINY REVIEW

1.1 Update from the Initial Panel Meeting

1.1.1 The first meeting of the peer challenge scrutiny review panel took place on the 23rd July. The main purpose of the meeting was to scope the review in more detail to identify those specific areas that the Panel might want to investigate in more detail. It was agreed that the following three areas would provide the focus for the review:

- A review of the number of Council meetings that are currently held
- A review of a draft of the transformation strategy
- A review of the Council six key priorities as a precursor to the preparation of a new corporate strategy.

1.1.2 Discussions at the Panel meeting focused mainly on the first of these issues and a wide range of views were expressed on the overall number of Council meetings and their individual remits. These discussions covered both council meetings in general and, more specifically, the role of the Area Planning Committees.

1.1.3 Given the considerable interest shown in the Council meetings issue, we suggest that the scrutiny review panel now focuses on this issue in more detail. The two remaining issues regarding the transformation strategy and the key priorities could best be dealt with by way of reports direct to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

1.1.4 This report will therefore focus on the suggested general review of Council meetings. A separate paper deals specifically with the Area Planning Committees.

1.2 Review of Council Meetings

1.2.1 A number of issues were raised at the first meeting of the Panel which can be summarised as follows:

- Whilst the premise that Council meetings need to be reduced in number to enable Members to better engage with their communities was not accepted, it was felt that there was a case to review the meetings programme to free up time and ensure meetings are not held just because they are already programmed. More thought needs to be given as to whether all of the programmed meetings are actually needed.
- The frequency of meetings could be reduced unless there is a statutory or other need to have them. The Council's Constitution might need to be revisited to achieve this. A reduction in the number of meetings could generate budget savings.
- There is perhaps too much rubber stamping of officer recommendations and rarely much informed debate at formal Council meetings. Members only tend to ask questions of fact/clarification which could be done direct with officers outside of formal meetings.
- Meetings should be held only when there are substantive decisions to be made. If there are none, meetings could be cancelled. At times, meeting agendas are dominated by information items.
- Meetings with a more informal format (such as the O&S panel meetings) could be used at times in place of more formal meetings to enable Members to have more input in to the issues under discussion.
- It would be useful to avoid having any Council meetings on the first Monday/Tuesday of each month as these are Parish Council meeting days. This would enable members to engage more with their Parish Councils.

1.2.2 The Panel now needs to consider what specific recommendations that they may wish to agree for consideration by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee and, subject to its formal endorsement, to the Cabinet.

1.3 Next Steps

1.3.1 It is suggested that the recommendations of this Panel could seek to address two key issues:

- The overall number of Council meetings held annually
- The style of meetings and specific arrangements.

1.3.2 At its initial meeting, the Panel expressed a clear view that a reduction in the current number of Council meetings held annually should be explored both to free up Member and Officer time and to save administrative costs. Some Council

meetings should perhaps, however, be considered 'essential' and should therefore not be included in any future review: These could include Council, Cabinet and the Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

- 1.3.3 In 2009/10, a reduction in the number of meeting cycles from 5 per year down to 4 was implemented. A further reduction in the number of cycles, for example, from 4 to 3 would, however, create difficulties for programming and accommodating formal Council business such as the budget setting process, the policy framework and approval of the Accounts. A further option would be to have no non-essential meetings in the annual programme at all but invite officers to call meetings on an ad-hoc basis but only when substantive decision items are needed. However, this is not favoured. It would be problematic to agree meeting dates with all participants and would cause problems for lead-in times and timetabling.
- 1.3.4 It is therefore suggested that a reduction in the number of non-essential meetings could be achieved via either of the following:
- by selectively reducing the number of non-essential meetings by identifying those specific Boards/Committees that perhaps do not need to meet so regularly which do not impact on regular Council business; or,
 - retaining all programmed meetings as at present, but develop an agreed protocol which would enable any meeting likely to have insufficient decision items to be cancelled with the agreement of its Chairman.
- 1.3.5 **The Panel is therefore invited to agree the above options and to recommend to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee that they be commended to the Cabinet for its further consideration.**
- 1.3.6 The Panel also expressed a wish for the format of some Council meetings to be reviewed to enable greater Member discussion and debate. Suggestions included a less formal, more round-table approach involving a smaller group of Members focusing on a specific issue or topic.
- 1.3.7 There are two ways in which this objective might be achieved. For programmed meetings such as Advisory Boards, there may be scope to hold these in more informal settings (for example in the Committee Room rather than the Chamber) with a revised room layout to help engender additional discussion and debate. In addition, informal Member meetings and briefings could be held, either as a separate meeting or, where appropriate, as a replacement to a formal Board meeting, to deal with a specific topic or issue of interest which required more in-depth review and/or for an informal steer to be obtained from Members prior to the issue being considered formally.
- 1.3.8 The suggestion that fewer Council meetings should be held on the first Monday/Tuesday of each month to avoid conflicts with Parish Council meetings is also worthy of further consideration given that the Peer Challenge review

indicated a need for greater community engagement including liaison with Parish Councils.

- 1.3.9 **The Panel is invited to agree the above suggestions regarding the format and style of Council meetings and informal Member briefings and to recommend to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee that these be commended to the Cabinet for its further consideration.**

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