

ABINGDON-ON-THAMES TOWN COUNCIL
FINANCE & GENERAL PURPOSES ADVISORY COMMITTEE

TUESDAY 20 JULY 2021

Agenda item 14: Report of the Town Clerk
Council Governance Review

Purpose of this report

1 The purpose of this report is to ask Members to consider the Governance Review undertaken by LGRC and make a recommendation to the Town Council/ Assembly and then the Urgency Committee for its approval and implementation.

1.1 The reason for this pathway for the Governance Review is that under council and committee terms of reference, matters in relation to democratic representation and management are the responsibility of the Finance and General Purposes Committee. Standing Orders then allow the Council to determine terms of reference for committees. However because of the legal limitations on the powers of virtual meetings the Council has delegated most of its powers to an Urgency Committee which meets “in-person” during this phase of the pandemic. The Finance and General Purposes Committee is for now an advisory committee as it meets virtually and the Town Council, meeting virtually, is for now a Town Council/ Assembly. Nonetheless the matter of the Governance Review is one which affects all members and would normally be a “Council matter” and so its consideration by the Town Council/ Assembly meeting allows wider consideration by Members.

Background

2 On 4 November 2020 the council agreed to undertake a Governance Review. The process outlined in the review is detailed in the report from LGRC. It included a survey of all members and staff who are involved in the governance process and two briefing sessions. At the full council briefing of 24 May Members largely gave approval to the direction of travel in relation to the review.

The report

3 Detailed work has taken place with LGRC and their final report is now presented to members, with a number of other documents:

- Appendix 1: scheme of delegations
- Appendix 2: draft standing orders
- Appendix 3: governance review checklist
- Appendix 4: reports
- Appendix 5: minuting policy
- Appendix 6: survey data
- Appendix 7: IAFC good governance in the public sector

4 Appendices 1, 4, 5, 6 and 7 are presented to the Committee for consideration in accordance with the committee terms of reference which include responsibility for democratic representation and management.

5 Appendices 2 and 3 are currently being considered by your officers. The draft documents are available on the members' SharePoint but are not for consideration at this meeting.

6 Members are requested to carefully consider the above documents ahead of the meeting.

Officer commentary

7 We support the implementation of the LGRC report.

8 The current committee system needs to be re-organised so that it focuses on delivering the council's four key objectives:

- i. To respond effectively and speedily to the climate emergency.
- ii. To develop a resilient, sustainable town which will provide a home for residents now and in the future.
- iii. To manage the Council's assets efficiently and effectively to meet for the needs of the community now and in the future.
- iv. To work with community partners to support those who are vulnerable and in need and to create opportunities to increase social inclusivity.

9 There is business that does not neatly fit in to our current division of responsibilities. As a result of this some matters are referred from one committee to another and partly as a result decisions are delayed and not always clear. The committee system should now mirror and concentrate on the council's objectives so they can be delivered and there should be a clear route for all business through the council, only being referred on to council if the committee does not have the delegation and not normally to another committee or group.

10 We feel that the role of members will be strengthened if the committees are re-organised to reflect our objectives as they will concentrate on the important outcomes for the council whilst delegating routine matters to the officers, releasing time for all.

11 The report suggests an increased emphasis on Members concentrating on strategy and more delegation to the officers implement matters. Nonetheless we are mindful at a town council there will be times when Members are more involved in certain areas than they would be at a larger authority where there would be more officer resource.

12 We feel that the reduction in the number of standing committees from 8 to 4, having increased delegations to committees and officers, more focused minute-writing style and increased clarity in the route of decision-making will be more efficient and save member and officer time. This will, in accordance with the staffing review, allow committee work to be managed by one officer and also release time for other projects in the forward plan to progress within the existing staffing resource.

13 The division of responsibilities between the proposed standing committees looks to be reasonable and spreads work out across the committees, with no committee being over or underloaded.

14 If adopted then we would caution against the creation of lots of sub-committees and working parties which would if we are not careful lead to the same number of meetings going on.

15 We consider that there would be some work to undertake as the council implements the new system but that the draft scheme of delegation incorporates all of the council's current activities. The main area which we would highlight is the need to re-organise our cost centres round the new committees, the more onerous work relating to the splitting of a number of cost centres between property and service costs. The interim position would be that some cost centres would have to be submitted to more than one committee, with the migration of budget lines being undertaken during the preparation of estimates for 2022/23.

16 In May 2021 the Council agreed dates of council and committee meetings for 2021/22 and these dates will be used for any new committees which are appointed.

Recommended

1. That the Committee recommend to the Town Council/ Assembly and then the Urgency Committee that the report from LGRC "Governance Review – Final Report June 2021" is approved and that its recommendations are implemented in a phased manner with completion, as suggested in the report, by 31 March 2022.
2. That the Committee recommend to the Town Council/ Assembly and then the Urgency Committee, in accordance with the report, that a governance working party for be appointed to serve until 31 March 2022, whose terms of reference are to oversee the implementation and consisting of "the Mayor, the Council Leader, the Town Clerk, the Deputy Town Clerk and the Committee Clerk. They would be joined by other chairs of the new committees once they are appointed."
3. That the Committee recommend to the Town Council/ Assembly and then the Urgency Committee that the following are approved for implementation with the following timelines:
 - 3.1 Appendix 1: scheme of delegations – 1 September 2021
 - 3.2 Appendix 4: reports – 1 September 2021
 - 3.3 Appendix 5: minuting policy – 1 September 2021

4. That the Committee recommend to the Town Council Assembly and then the Urgency Committee that the following are noted:
 - 4.1 Appendix 6: survey data
 - 4.2 Appendix 7: IAFC good governance in the public sector

5. That the Town Council/ Assembly and the Urgency Committee note that the officers will come back to members to consider appendix 2 – draft standing orders and appendix 3 – governance review checklist.

Nigel Warner
Town Clerk
16 July 2021