



<u>Committee and date</u> Annual Council 29 April 2010
--

<u>Item No</u> 9 Public
--

REPORT OF THE POLITICAL STRUCTURES MONITORING GROUP

Responsible Officer Richard Thomas
Email: richard.thomas@shropshire.gov.uk Telephone: (01743) 252725

1.0 Summary

- 1.1 This report seeks Members' agreement for recommended proposals for constitutional changes in relation to the operation of meetings of the Council, together with refinement of a protocol for members and officers in dealing with the media, and a comprehensive review of support arrangements for frontline members, including changes to the current "Backbenchers" meetings.
- 1.2 These are part of a continuing, wider programme of improvements in the way that the political decision making process is supported in the Council, in the light of its early experiences as a new authority.

2.0 Recommendations

It is recommended that Council agrees:-

- 2.1 the attached protocol (Appendix 1) for the Council to call to account senior representatives of the Executive and Scrutiny functions of the Council;
- 2.2 the attached protocol (Appendix 2) for members and officers in dealing with the media on Council business;
- 2.3 the establishment of a joint Task and Finish Group to review the support to frontline members in carrying out their community leadership role; and
24. the revised arrangements for briefings for political groups, prior to meetings of the Council.

REPORT

3.0 Constitutional Changes

- 3.1 The PSMG recently considered a report codifying changes to the Procedural Rules previously approved by the Council, which will enable the activities of both the Executive and Scrutiny functions to be reviewed at each meeting of full Council. These include a new requirement for members wishing to put a question to the Leader, a Cabinet Portfolio Holder, or a Scrutiny Chair to give five working days notice of this.
- 3.2 On reflection, the PSMG now feels that this requirement will be too restrictive and will be likely to replicate Members' Question Time, which is also being retained as part of the normal agenda for Council meetings. The Group would prefer to see something more timely, relevant and similar to Prime Minister's Question Time being developed. Consequently, PSMG members believe that a minimum of two working days notice would be more appropriate, with respondents then giving oral answers to the original and to any supplementary questions.
- 3.3 It was also decided previously that the original changes to these Council procedures should be codified in the Constitution, by amending the Procedure Rules as appropriate. However, the PSMG would now prefer to see the detailed operation of these arrangements set out in a separate protocol, which could be amended more easily in the light of experience, if needed.
- 3.4 A draft protocol is attached at Appendix 1 to this report as recommended by PSMG for members' approval.

4.0 Media Protocol

- 4.1 The PSMG also recently gave detailed consideration to a draft protocol for members and officers in dealing with the media. This is attached at Appendix 2 to this report. The protocol is intended to apply to all contacts which both members and staff might have with the media in the course of carrying out Council business.
- 4.2 Although it was felt that local members were now being better supported in this context, PSMG members believe that the current arrangement would be further improved by also seeking to include the views of local members on local matters as the norm in Council issued press statements, before those of the relevant Cabinet Portfolio Holder, and by including quotations from relevant Member Champions, where appropriate.
- 4.3 Subject to these changes being made to the draft protocol, and to it also being reviewed after 12 months operation, the Council is recommended by PSMG to adopt the media protocol.

5.0 Support for Frontline Members

- 5.1 The PSMG supports the establishment of a Joint Member and Officer Task and Finish Group, to review the nature and level of support given to all elected members in their frontline, community leadership role. If members concur with this proposal, the Task and Finish Group (which will comprise five members and be politically balanced) will make recommendations for improvements in this key area later this calendar year having surveyed and taken into account the views of all Council members.
- 5.2 It is generally recognised that, in terms of the expectations of both national government and local people, the demands placed on all unitary councillors are greater now than those experienced by either the former county or district/borough councillors prior to local government reorganisation in April 2009. We are moving quickly towards frontline councillors becoming, in effect, Cabinet Members for their own ward.
- 5.3 The wide range of local public services for which all members are now responsible, together with their expanded community leadership role in engaging local people, brokering consensus, and acting as advocates for local needs, places heavy demands on all members' time. It is timely and appropriate, therefore, to review the support, training and development provided directly to frontline members to enable them to carry out these difficult roles confidently and effectively.
- 5.4 Currently, the Council (through the Members' Secretary and also the work of our Organisational Development team) provides members with administrative and other support. However, in the past, the tendency has been to focus on and prioritise those aspects of political activity and decision making which take place in formal settings, like committees, rather than those happening every day within our diverse communities.
- 5.5 Of particular concern is the extent which all members, but particularly non-executive members, are assisted with the growing need to communicate regularly with the electors in their respective divisions, and to act as a useful resource on the detailed intelligence often needed about what is happening in the communities they serve. While a number of individual initiatives in this context have been developed in the past few months, a holistic review of these and other approaches to define the changing role and support needs of frontline members more clearly, could benefit all members, by making improvements to meet these needs more effectively in future.
- 5.6 In addition to examining the effectiveness of the current arrangements for producing newsletters/fliers and surgeries, such a review could also consider:-
- the changing nature of the role of the frontline Members and of public expectations of them
 - the level and nature of officer support for individual Member's 'patch' activities
 - a comparative analysis of the support currently provided for Shropshire members against best practice elsewhere, particularly in other (new and established) unitary councils.

5.7 The intention would be to identify areas needing development and to make recommendations for improvement in the Council's arrangements, which could be put in place quickly. PSMG recommends that Council agree the establishment of a joint Task and Finish Group for this purpose, on the basis set out above.

6.0 Backbenchers' Meetings

- 6.1 The PSMG has examined several options on how to better provide for the particular needs of non-executive members to be briefed on significant developments. The Group recommends the reconstitution of the Backbenchers' meeting, to provide a forum for briefing only those members who do not presently form part of the Administration, (as the latter have alternative arrangements in place for this).
- 6.2 The PSMG, after reviewing the effectiveness of the formal briefings given to non-Executive members in advance of Council meetings, considers that these would be made more effective if they reflected the different needs and expectations of the various political groups represented on the Council. Currently, all members of the Conservative Group benefit from the opportunity to attend the Administration Briefings specifically organised for them, and other groups could enjoy the benefits of a similar approach.
- 6.3 These meetings would mirror the format of the Administration Briefing and be serviced by the Council's Management Team, and could be termed "opposition briefings". They would continue to take place in the afternoon of the Monday in the week of the ordinary Council meetings.
- 6.4 So as to avoid any reduction in the present constitutional requirement for Executive members to account for their actions to their non-Executive colleagues, it is intended that the Leader of the Council and Cabinet members would attend a briefing for all non-Executive councillors at least twice each year, for that purpose.
- 6.5 PSMG recommends that Council agrees these proposed changes to the arrangements for Members briefings.

List of Background Papers (This MUST be completed for all reports, but does not include items containing exempt or confidential information)

Human Rights Act Appraisal

The recommendations contained in this report are compatible with the provisions of the Human Rights act 1998

Environmental Appraisal -

Risk Management Appraisal

A continual review and update of political structures is vital for an efficient and modern council.

Community / Consultations Appraisal

Cabinet Member

The Leader, Keith Barrow

Local Member:

All

Appendices:

Appendix 1 - Protocol for the Council to call to account senior representatives of the Executive and Scrutiny functions of the Council.

Appendix 2 - Protocol for members and officers in dealing with the media on Council business.