

REPORT OF THE POLITICAL STRUCTURES MONITORING GROUP

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1.0 Summary

- 1.1 This report relates to changes to the constitutional arrangements relating to audio and video recording of Council meetings, members attendance at conferences and amendments to the protocol on Task and Finish Groups

2.0 Recommendations

- 2.1 It is recommended:

- (a) That the Council adopts the guidance on the use of video and audio equipment, photography and social media, contained in Appendix 1 to this report, subject to a full video of future Cabinet meetings being published unless the Chairman regards the material as too sensitive to broadcast and that this be incorporated into Part 5 of the Constitution with immediate effect
- (b) That the Council's protocol on Members' attendance at conferences and external training events amended to accord with the wording set out in paragraph 3.5(i) to (v) of this report with immediate effect.
- (c) That the Council's protocol on Task and Finish Groups be amended by the deletion of the word "investigatory" from paragraph 2 and the inclusion of a paragraph confirming the right of all members to attend Task and Finish Group meetings unless the Chairman considers the material to be confidential or sensitive

REPORT

3.0 Background

- 3.1 The Political Structures Monitoring Group recently reviewed the current position in respect of the following matters:

(a) Use of Audio and Video Recording and Council Meetings

3.2 Political Structures Monitoring Group noted the need for the Council to be mindful of the use of social media by the public and to adopt its procedures accordingly. Members generally supported the introduction of the guidelines attached at Appendix 1 to this report. However, it was felt that, rather than an edited version, the full recording of Cabinet meetings should be posted on the Council's website.

3.3 One member questioned the reason for the proposal in the penultimate paragraph of Section 4 of the Appendix which require visitors to secure the prior permission of the Chairman on a "case by case" basis. He felt that the position should be reversed so that there was an automatic right for the public to record proceedings, unless the Chairman declared that this was inappropriate. However, this view was not supported by the majority.

3.4 The PSMG recommends the Council to adopt the guidance on the use of audio and video equipment, photography and social media during Council meetings set out in Appendix 1, but that a complete transcript of future Cabinet meetings be published with immediate effect unless it is considered that the material is too sensitive to broadcast and that the guidance note be included in Part 5 of the Council's Constitution with immediate effect

(b) Members' Attendance at Conferences

3.5 The PSMG considers that there are substantial benefits to be obtained from members attending particular conferences and training events. The Council's policy in this area is that Councillors should attend national events of this kind only where it can be demonstrated that they are directly relevant to their particular individual responsibilities and that there is likely to be a real benefit to local residents in Shropshire from such attendance, in terms of understanding of new Government initiatives or of best practice elsewhere; opportunities to influence and advocate on behalf of the County; and networking to promote inter-council collaboration and joint working.

Those councillors attending such events are requested to share with relevant colleagues afterwards those matters likely to be of wider interest. This avoids the need to send several people to the same event, and so reduces costs.

3.6 Consequently, PSMG recommends that the Council's arrangements be amended and that the text set out in paragraphs (i) to (v) below be substituted for that contained in the existing protocol, attached at Appendix 2 to this report and that the revised version be included in Part 5 of the Council's Constitution with immediate effect.

- (i) All members shall discuss and agree with the appropriate Group Manager the likely benefits to the Council of their attendance at a conference or external training event or seminar. Normally, attendance should relate to the responsibilities of their office or to a matter on which they are currently engaged as a Council representative. When necessary, final agreement on this will involve the Leader of the Council and the Chief Executive.
 - (ii) Before confirming their attendance at the event, all members shall ensure that this does not conflict with any other Council commitment, for example attendance at a Cabinet or Committee meeting.
 - (iii) The cost of such attendances, (excluding travel, subsistence and, where necessary, overnight accommodation), shall be met from the appropriate Group Manager's budget.
 - (iv) Following their attendance, members shall actively seek to share an oral or written report with relevant colleagues, outlining the substantive issues covered at the event and the implications for Shropshire within 10 working days.
 - (v) A list of all members' attendances at conferences, training events and seminars will be kept centrally by the Corporate Head of Legal and Democratic Services and will be available.
- (c) Protocol on Task and Finish Groups

3.7 Detailed consideration was given to the terms of the current protocol on Task and Finish Groups by the PSMG. Members continue to support the need for a protocol, and consider that the version, attached at Appendix 3 to this report, be amended by, first, the deletion of the word "investigatory" from line 2 of paragraph 2. But, because of the need for Task and Finish Groups to consider all possible options, a proposal enabling the material presented to them to be shared with others, either inside or outside the Council, in advance of their reports being published, was rejected.

3.8 Indeed, the PSMG emphasised the importance of all members abiding by the terms of the final paragraph of the current protocol with regard to the sharing of information in advance of the Task and Finish Group publishing its report. And, where a member feels that there would be benefit from the Group seeking the views of an external body, group or individual, then they should be invited to attend a future meeting for this purpose.

3.9 Nevertheless, members consider that there would be benefit from modifying the existing protocol such that in future all members are entitled to attend any Task and Finish Group, except when in the view of the Chairman, the material under discussion is regarded as confidential or sensitive.

- 3.10 The PSMG therefore recommends that the protocol be amended in this way with immediate effect and that the revised version be included in Part 5 of the Council's Constitution.

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

None

Cabinet Member (Portfolio Holder)

Keith Barrow

Local Member

All

Appendices

Appendix 1 – Guidance Note on use of audio and video recording, etc.

Appendix 2 – Members' Attendance at Conferences

Appendix 3 – Protocol on Task and Finish Groups