

NAME OF COMMITTEE	Council
DATE	13 December 2011
REPORT TITLE	Review of Democratic Arrangements
Report of	Democratic Arrangements Review Group
WARDS AFFECTED	All

Summary of report:

This report summarises the findings and conclusions of the Democratic Arrangements Review Group which looked at whether the Council's arrangements for dealing with its business could be made more efficient and effective. They recommend that Council consider moving to a single committee to deal with all business except planning, licensing, audit, standards and overview & scrutiny where the existing committees will remain, and that these revised arrangements should be reviewed after twelve months.

Financial implications:

The expectation is that introducing a single committee would be cost neutral in direct financial terms. There would be some savings in ceasing to convene two committees but it is possible that the Independent Remuneration Panel may recommend an increase in allowances; they would be paid from the same budget. There would be a significant indirect saving in terms of opportunity costs of officer time. The present system necessitates 14 meetings per year. The recommended option would reduce the number of meetings by nearly 50%.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

That Council fully considers this report at the 14 February 2012 Council meeting, with a view then to agreeing that from the next municipal year starting in May 2012 the introduction of a single committee to deal with the business currently delegated to the Strategies & Resources Committee, Economy & Community Committee and Future Planning & Housing Committee.

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1. BACKGROUND AND OPTIONS CONSIDERED

- 1.1 As part of the Shared Services and Beyond discussions, it was agreed at the Strategies & Resources Committee on 12 April 2011 to set up a Member Group to consider whether the Council's current arrangements for the disposal of its business could be made more efficient. This decision was ratified at an induction session following the May 2011 elections. The Democratic Arrangements Review Group was formed with the following seven Members being appointed: Councillors W Cann, D Cloke, M Govier, C Hall, C Marsh, R Musgrave and D Whitcomb. The Group met on four occasions.
- 1.2 At its first meeting the Group shaped up its approach, agreed the criteria it would judge alternative arrangements against and requested officers to research alternative "fourth option" Councils.

Criteria for judging any alternatives
Any proposed structure must be more efficient and effective in demonstrating: 1) Elected Members are leading the Council and more visibly seen to be leading in a corporate way; 2) A better balance between discussion and decisiveness/speed of decision making; 3) Decisions are reached democratically; 4) Political structures are aligned with the new officer structure.

- 1.3 Members came to the view that the present system did not meet these tests, did not provide the most efficient or effective way of doing its business and it was worthwhile exploring alternatives.
- 1.4 The second meeting took into account research material from seven different fourth option Councils before considering three options:
- (i) An "improved existing" model;
 - (ii) A "re-aligned" model to align committee structure with the new SMT groupings;
 - (iii) A "single Committee" model.
- 1.5 The strengths and weaknesses of each model were debated over the next three meetings.

2. PERCEIVED STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES OF EACH MODEL

2.1 The "Improved Existing" Model

Strengths:

- Well understood and works reasonably well;
- Delegation arrangements are clear;
- Decision making processes are clear;
- It could be improved with lead Members taking on more responsibility for presenting reports and demonstrating leadership, with officers in more of a support role.

Weaknesses:

- Members are not always perceived to be leading;
- Some decisions take undue time and resources with matters having to be referred to other committees and debates overlapping. Whilst these inefficiencies could be reduced by better timetabling of meetings, this would continue to be a problem whilst three committees work somewhat independently of each other;
- No one formal body except full Council can take a corporate overview of any issue. Members can be inclined towards their "Committee" view rather than the wider corporate view of the Council;
- The present committee structure does not align with the revised SMT roles and functions leading to inefficient use of officer time.

2.2 The "Re-aligned" Model

This would align three committees with the new SMT functions to create an Environment & Housing Committee, Planning, Economy & Community Committee and Strategies & Resources Committee. Appendix B provides the detail.

Strengths:

- This would have strengths over the existing arrangements in that Heads of Service would work more efficiently reporting to one committee with the ability to build closer working relationships with the Chair and Vice-Chair.

Weaknesses:

- The first three weaknesses identified in the previous model would not be removed. Whilst the re-aligned model was thought to be a better option than the first option, Members questioned whether the benefits from such an incremental change would bring about the desired efficiencies that a more radical option might provide and that earlier research had demonstrated worked well elsewhere in fourth option Councils.

2.3 The "Single Committee" Option

The Working Group's research revealed that several fourth option Councils had adopted this arrangement. As Members explored the option there was a growing consensus that it could be a better alternative rather than tinkering with the existing model or re-aligning to fit officer structures.

Strengths:

- It would meet all the tests agreed at the first meeting;
- Members would develop their leadership role; with responsibility shared between the Leader of the Council and lead spokespersons on the committee who could align with Heads of Service functions. The Members' Allowances Scheme could be re-adjusted to recognise the special responsibility of lead spokespersons;
- There would be a better balance between discussion, decisiveness and speed of decision making;
- Decisions would still be reached democratically with the Committee being politically proportionate, unlike the unfamiliar Executive model, where democracy plays out differently. Non-voting Members would make their input into debates to influence voting members of the committee;
- Senior officers and functions would be more aligned if lead Members were appointed to reflect the senior management structure;
- The committee would be able to take a broader corporate perspective in reaching its decisions, taking into account financial and other resource considerations as well as service policy issues;
- Such a move would also demonstrate to staff that Members are willing to be innovative and accept change in an era where officers have had to continually adapt and drive out efficiencies.

Weaknesses:

Members of the Working Group recognised many of the disadvantages voiced at Informal Council on 7 November 2011.

- This model does risk placing too much responsibility in the hands of a smaller group of Members
- It could be too high a risk to introduce significant change whilst our focus should be on finding financial savings
- Two-thirds of the elected members risk being less involved
- The demands on the Leader could be too great.

However, the Working Group's view remains that the model is clearly operating successfully elsewhere; the wider group of Members would have a greater chance to influence corporate decisions by attending meetings, making their contributions direct or through their group representatives who sit on the politically balanced committee and by becoming more involved in task and finish groups where policies can be developed. The risk of the Leader being overburdened could be significantly reduced where, as spokespersons, other Members are given lead roles for specific service areas. Re-timing the introduction of the scheme to the start of the next municipal year, May 2012, would overcome the concerns expressed about an over-hasty introduction.

- 2.4 Following the Informal Council meeting the Review Group reconvened to take stock and consider any further options. Two more alternatives were briefly discussed.
- 2.5 Option four could be to shrink the three existing committees into two, maintaining a business focus in a Strategies & Resources Committee but combining Economy & Community and Future Planning & Housing functions. This would lead to a more efficient set of arrangements compared to the present but would

not, in the view of the Review Group, be as efficient or effective as a single committee.

2.6 Option five is the most radical option of deleting all three committees and doing all business through full Council which would meet on a more frequent basis. This would have the major advantage of involving all thirty one Members in all decisions but would be unwieldy and potentially unworkable unless Council's Standing Orders were completely revised.

2.6 **Having re-considered and discussed further options following the debate at Informal Council, the Review Group continue to unanimously support the single committee option.**

3. RECOMMENDATIONS

3.1 **That Council fully considers this report at the 14 February 2012 Council meeting, with a view then to agreeing that from the next municipal year starting in May 2012 the introduction of a single committee to deal with the business currently delegated to the Strategies & Resources Committee, Economy & Community Committee and Future Planning & Housing Committee.**

3.2 If Council supports further discussion, officers will work on the details and members of the Review Group will endorse them and develop their thinking on the role of overview and scrutiny in any new arrangements, to bring a more detailed report back for approval by Council on 14 February 2012.

4. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

4.1 As a "fourth option" Council, West Devon is under an obligation to secure continuous improvement in the way its functions are exercised, having regard to a combination of economy, efficiency and effectiveness, and may arrange its committee structure as it thinks fit.

4.2 As the arrangements overall are not changing, and in particular there is no proposal to alter either the arrangements for overview and scrutiny or for the adoption of strategic plans (which will remain with Council), there is no requirement for public consultation.

5. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

5.1 The expectation is that introducing a single committee would be cost neutral in direct financial terms. There would be some savings in ceasing to convene two committees but it is possible that the Independent Remuneration Panel may recommend an increase in allowances; they would be paid from the same budget.

5.2 There would be a significant indirect saving in terms of opportunity costs of officer time. The present system necessitates 14 meetings per year. The recommended option would reduce the number of meetings to eight.

6. RISK MANAGEMENT

6.1 The risks of each option have been described in the main body of the report.

7. OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

Corporate priorities engaged:	All of them
Statutory powers:	Local Government Act 2000 ss 30 & 31
Considerations of equality and human rights:	None are engaged by this report
Biodiversity considerations:	None are engaged by this report
Sustainability considerations:	None are engaged by this report
Crime and disorder implications:	None are engaged by this report
Background papers:	Report to and Minute of Strategies & Resources Committee – 12 April 2011 Notes of meetings of the Democratic Arrangements Review Group
Appendices attached:	A – D: diagrams of alternative structures