

<b>NAME OF COMMITTEE</b>	<b>COUNCIL</b>
<b>DATE</b>	<b>4 April 2013</b>
<b>REPORT TITLE</b>	<b>Review of the Council's Political Structure</b>
<b>Report of</b>	<b>The Political Structures Working Group</b>
<b>WARDS AFFECTED</b>	<b>All</b>

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**Summary of report:**

To consider a report that advises Members of the discussions and recommendations arising from a recent meeting of the Political Structures Working Group.

**Financial implications:**

If Council supports each of the recommendations of the Panel, there would be some savings generated. These would notably relate to a reduction in the number of Council meetings held each year and the costs currently associated with operating the Tree and Hedge Appeal Group (e.g. officer time, print and post costs and Member Travel Claims).

However, there would be a cost to purchasing electronic voting equipment, which would be funded from an existing revenue budget arising from the installation of the audio / visual equipment in the Council Chamber.

**RECOMMENDATION:**

**That the Council RESOLVES that:-**

- 1. it be noted that a report will be presented to the Executive meeting on 6 June 2013 entitled: 'New Approach to Budget Setting and Monitoring';**
- 2. the number of ordinary formal Council meetings held each Municipal Year be reduced to four;**
- 3. the practice of lead Executive Members conducting presentations to Council on their respective service areas be discontinued;**
- 4. electronic voting equipment be purchased from the recurring revenue budget, which was set aside for the installation of the audio / visual system in the Council Chamber;**
- 5. the principle of webcasting public meetings be explored and reconsidered at a future meeting of the Working Group;**

6. on the occasions when the Development Management Committee is scheduled to consider Major (or particularly controversial) planning applications, these meetings commence at 10.00am;
7. Development Forums be convened to take place on the afternoon of Executive meeting days; and
8. the responsibilities of the Tree and Hedge Appeal Group be transferred to the Development Management Committee.

**Officer contact:**

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**Lead Member contact:**

*Cllr Tucker, Leader of Council (email: cllr.tucker@southhams.gov.uk).*

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## **1. BACKGROUND**

- 1.1 The Political Structures Working Group is a standing body of Members appointed at the Annual Council meeting to undertake a comprehensive review of the workings of both the political structure and decision making processes. The Group has no decision-making powers and is required to present its recommendations to the Council.
- 1.2 The Group last met on Wednesday, 6 March 2013 and considered agenda items in relation to:-
  - budget procedure and Scrutiny budget meetings;
  - the frequency of Full Council meetings;
  - voting at meetings held in the Council Chamber;
  - start times of Development Management Committee meetings and Development Forums; and
  - a proposal to transfer the responsibilities of the Tree and Hedge Appeal Group to the Development Management Committee.

## **2. ISSUES FOR CONSIDERATION**

### **2.1 Budget Procedure and Scrutiny Budget Meetings**

- 2.1.1 This agenda item had arisen in light of some feedback from Members whereby the democratic process should be improved to enable greater Member input and appraisal of the Budget.
- 2.1.2 During the Group discussion, assurances were given that, in the future, the budget papers would be produced differently and would include comparable figures indicating annual percentage changes. In addition, the Group was sympathetic to the view that each Scrutiny Panel could individually look at different elements of the Budget at their November meetings. It was felt that this could allow Scrutiny Panel Members to have a greater overview of the Budget, rather than simply focusing on the scrutinising element;

2.1.3 In conclusion, it was acknowledged that officers were also currently reviewing all aspects of the budget setting and monitoring process and it was felt that a report should be presented to the Executive meeting on 6 June 2013 which outlines some proposed ways forward.

## **2.2 Frequency of Full Council Meetings and Executive Member Presentations**

2.2.1 Consideration of this issue had been prompted following some concerns that a number of Council meetings were being held throughout the year with very few items on the agenda. This was particularly pertinent in the current budgetary climate, when considering the costs associated with holding full Council meetings;

2.2.2 The overriding view of the Group was that there was absolutely no need to hold Council meetings simply for the sake of it and support was therefore given to reducing the number of ordinary full Council meetings to four per year;

2.2.3 It is important to note that the Constitutional provision to arrange extraordinary meetings of Council will remain and therefore, such a reduction would not prevent the ability, in exceptional circumstances, to convene any such meetings;

2.2.4 If the Council is minded to support this recommendation, then it is suggested that these four meetings are held during the months of February, May, September and December;

2.2.5 The Group also felt that the standing agenda item in relation to Executive Members conducting a presentation to Council meetings on the achievements, aims and challenges in their respective Service Areas had served its purpose and was no longer particularly effective. As a consequence, the Group felt that the practice should be discontinued, with Executive Members instead utilising the Informal Council sessions to enable for some more detailed discussions on their service areas.

## **2.3 Voting at Meetings held in the Council Chamber and Webcasting**

2.3.1 This agenda item had been prompted following a number of public comments in relation to recorded votes not taking place for every planning application considered by the Development Management Committee. These members of the public felt this to be in contradiction to the transparency agenda;

2.3.2 Alongside these comments, the Group noted that officers were currently investigating the costs of purchasing new handheld voting equipment;

2.3.3 The Group therefore concluded that electronic voting equipment should be purchased from the recurring revenue budget (of up to £5,000), which was set aside for the installation of the audio / visual system in the Council Chamber (Minute E.104/09 refers);

2.3.4 When considering such a purchase, the Group felt that it should be capable of:

- being rolled out for all public meetings regardless of being held in the Council Chamber;
- illustrating how individual Members have voted; and
- not displaying any votes until every Member has voted.

2.3.5 As an extension to this issue, some Group Members spoke positively of their experiences of attending recent meetings which had been webcast and felt that as a further example of transparency and community engagement, this should be explored further. The Group agreed with this view and felt that officers should be asked to conduct some exploratory work (including costs) on webcasting formal meetings, with the matter being presented back to a future Group meeting.

## **2.4 Start Times of Development Management Committee Meetings and Development Forums**

2.4.1 The Working Group considered this issue in light of the length of the agenda of a number of recent Development Management Committee meetings. In addition, there were occasions when the start times could not be moved in light of there being a Development Forum having been arranged to take place on the same day;

2.4.2 As a way forward, the Group expressed its support for those Development Management Committee meeting agendas which include either Major (or particularly controversial) planning applications to start at the earlier time of 10.00am. To prevent any potential clash with Development Forums, the Group also recommended that such meetings should be held on the afternoon of Executive meeting days;

2.4.3 As a general point, there was broad support expressed by the Working Group for the membership of the Development Management Committee to be reduced. Members considered that the Committee was too large to be effective and a reduction in size would also help to lessen the duration of meetings. Since the Committee membership was set each year at Annual Council, it was acknowledged that this point could be picked up in May during the appointments process;

## **2.5 Proposal to Transfer the Responsibilities of the Tree and Hedge Appeal Group to the Development Management Committee**

2.5.1 The Group felt that the proposal to transfer the responsibilities of the Tree and Hedge Appeal Group to the Development Management Committee was sensible.

2.5.2 For clarity, it is suggested that such Tree and Hedge matters will be able to take advantage of the Council's Public Participation Scheme (e.g. permitting an objector and supporter to address the Development Management Committee). Furthermore, the Committee would still be able to defer a matter to a site inspection group (along the same lines as any planning application) if it is so minded.

### 3. RISK MANAGEMENT

The Risk Management implications are shown at the end of this report in the Strategic Risks Template.

### 4. OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

<b>Corporate priorities engaged:</b>	All
<b>Statutory powers:</b>	Local Government Act 2000
<b>Considerations of equality and human rights:</b>	None directly related to this report
<b>Biodiversity considerations:</b>	None directly related to this report
<b>Sustainability considerations:</b>	None directly related to this report
<b>Crime and disorder implications:</b>	None directly related to this report
<b>Background papers:</b>	The Council Constitution
<b>Appendices attached:</b>	None

### STRATEGIC RISKS TEMPLATE

No	Risk Title	Risk/Opportunity Description	Inherent risk status				Mitigating & Management actions	Ownership
			Impact of negative outcome	Chance of negative outcome	Risk score and direction of travel			
1	Budget Setting and Monitoring	Greater opportunity for every Member to be involved in the process.	4	1	4	↓	Greater Member involvement and awareness in the Budget should ensure a greater understanding amongst all Members in the process.	SMT
2	Frequency of Council Meetings	Fewer Council meetings could slow up the decision making process.	3	3	9	↑	Officers will need to factor this reduction into their work schedules to ensure that any matters which ultimately require a Council decision are programmed accordingly. In addition, in very exceptional circumstances, there is the ability to arrange extraordinary Council meetings.	SMT and Middle Managers
3	Voting at Meetings held in the Council Chamber	Will ensure no accusations of incorrect vote counting.	1	2	2	↓	It is acknowledged that Member Training will be required to use a new system, but electronic voting will remove the need to vote via a show of hands.	Democratic Services Manager
4	Start times of Development Management Committee meetings and Development Forums	An earlier start time will enable for a proper break in the agenda.	1	2	2	↓	A proper break should ensure that Members are less fatigued towards the latter end of the agenda.	Member Services Manager
		Attendance amongst Development Management Committee Members at Forums may not be so high if meetings are held on a different day.	2	2	4	↑	The majority of Members do attend meetings of the Executive, so it is hoped that this proposal should have a minimal impact.	

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5	Disbanding Tree and Hedge Appeal Groups	Members will not view a site as a matter of course.	2	2	4	↑	A full and detailed case officer presentation, coupled with the ability to defer to a site inspection should counter this potential risk. In addition, all Members have the opportunity to view an application site in their own time.	Democratic Services Manager

Direction of travel symbols ↓ ↑ ↔