

## Review of council meetings

### Comments from Green Party councillors

14 July 2017

1. We are pleased the discussions to date in the Members Working Group have been constructive.
2. Our view remains that a committee system is more inclusive and democratic and our position is that this should be re-introduced in place of the “strong leader” model.
3. We feel there should be at least some degree of public consultation, since the aim is to make meetings more accessible to the public.

### Broadcasting

4. We are strongly in favour of openness and transparency and therefore support full broadcasting using the public-I TV system at the earliest opportunity. We believe this to be only a modest cost but urge officers to obtain further details as soon as possible, given that the existing microphone system needs replacing.
5. All other local authorities in South Yorkshire put their council meetings online and this is now becoming the norm.
6. As an interim measure, we think the audio recording that is currently available should be streamed to the council website at the best quality the existing system can manage.

### Layout of the room

7. We would like to see how the proposed layout works in practice. It would be a concern if the layout contributed to a more aggressive, confrontational approach between two physically separated halves of the Chamber. It may be that the seating can be angled slightly towards the Lord Mayor.

### Time of the meeting

8. We have no firm views on the best time but do not object to a proposal to move to 5pm, subject to the issues below. The guillotine should be retained.

### Length of the meeting

9. We agree with the aim of making the meeting shorter and accept an aim of about 3 hours in length. Again, this is subject to the proposals for changing the content of the meeting.

### Petitions and public questions

10. We would like to maintain the current time of up to 1 hour for petitions and public questions.

### Ordinary petitions

11. We think there should be no formal change to the current scheme for petitions. We strongly feel it should be the right of the public to bring any petition or any question to any public meeting of the council.
12. Where petitions are presented, we would like Cabinet Members to shorten their responses just so that they just respond to the request in the petition briefly without making a speech. This is to save time in the meeting and to get to the point, for the benefit of members of the council and of the public.
13. Whilst the public should not be restricted from bringing petitions to the full council, it may be that some members of the public do not realise the full council is not a decision-making body. We therefore suggest that better information is given to petitioners as to possible committees and the advantages of each option so the petitioners can make an informed choice.

### Public questions

14. There has been slippage into members of the public regularly making speeches from the gallery. Whilst some context may be required, we would like to see a clear expectation that questions are limited to questions only. July's council meeting was better than usual in that the Lord Mayor actively called the public's attention to the need to ask questions. This could be supported by written guidance to questioners.
15. As with petitions, we would like to see Cabinet Members respond as concisely as possible, by answering the question rather than by making a speech.
16. Both these steps will save time in the meeting and help retain the public's interest in proceedings.
17. Where a Cabinet Member decides to respond in writing, a copy of the response should be placed on the website as a matter of routine.
18. We do not see any need to change the petitions scheme in respect of the 5,000 or 2,500 – signature thresholds.

### Members' questions

19. We think these should be held immediately after public questions with at least some time (say 20 minutes) for supplementary questions, as these are often topical and of interest to the public.

### Motions and amendments

#### Number of motions

20. We do not agree with the proposal to limit the number of motions that Members can put and would prefer the issue of the proliferation of motions to be dealt with less formally – see below.
21. We agree with others that motions and amendments are the main system by which parties set out their political visions in the Council.
22. The practical effect of the proposal to permit only 3 or 4 motions on a 'politically balanced' basis is that the smaller parties would be muted in being unable to put forward any motions at all except once every two years.
23. We accept that not every item can be debated in full but we believe in principle that motions by all Members should be allowed. The real issue is which motions are selected for debate (currently, on the basis of a formula) and the quality of the debate. At present, there are no Independent Members but any change to the constitution would need to cater for this possibility. We think the other proposed changes would help to make meetings more effective. However, we think it is necessary to keep the guillotine.

#### Time limits on motions

24. We agree with the proposal to reduce the time spent on each motion, for motions and amendments to be brought together where appropriate and for speeches to be limited. We agree with the proposal of 3 minutes for the proposer of each motion and amendment and 2 minutes for the seconder.
25. To avoid the concerns of repetition, we suggest the parties take steps to discourage members speaking unless, in exceptional cases, they really have something to add to the proposer and seconder's speeches.
26. We agree with the suggestion to have all the votes on a debate held together rather than after each amendment, as at present.

#### Voting in parts

27. We believe that voting in parts is essential, although other proposals may reduce the need for this.

### Number, length, and order of speeches

28. Where motions are put as an amendment to another party's motion and vice versa, we suggest these should be voted on together.

### Motions – content

29. We would like a “no bitching” rule: content that just criticises other national parties or their leaders has no place in a council debate. This should also have the effect of reducing the need to vote in parts.
30. Motions should not be brought unless their content is both relevant to Sheffield and relevant to the powers of the Council.

### Motions with cross-party support

31. Where motions have cross-party support– e.g. symbolic or congratulatory ones, we agree with the suggestion to have a declaration by the Lord Mayor. It is unhelpful to have a party debate, which makes it look to the public as if there is a dispute between the parties, when there is not.

### Deadline to submit motions

32. We think there is benefit to more discussion between the parties before the agenda is published. We therefore suggest we bring the deadline for submitting motions a couple of days earlier so that the parties can see where there is agreement before the agenda is published.
33. If at all possible, the amendments should be submitted before the agenda is published. Members of the public cannot get a true picture of the issues in debate unless both sides of the argument are shown.

### Agenda

34. Motions and amendments should both have descriptive titles. Both the proposer and seconder should be named on the agenda and the party of each member should also be specified, as this helps the public understand the proceedings without having to be familiar with each member.

### Motions in the guillotine

35. We believe time could be saved by dispensing with the formality of the Lord Mayor reading out the names of the proposer and seconder of each amendment, thus getting to the vote more quickly. This will be easier if the suggestions above are implemented

We therefore suggest the following order of events:

- Parties draw up motions, as currently. Motions must not contain party-political sniping directed at national parties or leaders. Parties should ensure motions are reasonably short (3 or 4 paragraphs)
- Draft motions submitted – 2 days before the present deadline
- Parties review each other's motions and agree which attract cross-party consensus (possibly with agreed modifications). They should also agree any motions which should be consolidated or dealt with together – i.e. if covering the same topic.
- Parties submit amendments

Agenda published

Prior to council meeting:

- Petitions received – petitioners given advice and options on which meeting they want to present their petition to.
- People in public gallery given information on only being able to make a speech if presenting a petition. Otherwise, limited to asking questions.

Council meeting:

- Lord Mayor reminds all to be concise etc.
- Public petitions and questions – up to an hour
- Questions to be actual questions
- Cabinet members to respond briefly to the question and without making a speech.
- Members' questions – including supplementary questions on topics not on the agenda for debate.
- Motions where consensus is reached – announcement by Lord Mayor (possibly with formal proposer and seconder)
- Motions for debate
- Order of speakers for each debate:
  - Proposer and seconder of motion (3 mins and 2 mins)
  - Proposer and seconder of first amendment (3 mins and 2 mins)
  - Proposer and seconder of second amendment (3 mins and 2 mins)

- Etc
  - Other speakers – 1 minute each (parties expected to avoid repetition)
  - Vote on all amendments and then substantive motion
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- Guillotine on any remaining motions if needed – Lord Mayor to dispense with formally calling on proposers and seconders for each motion and amendment and move straight to vote.
  - Other business like minutes etc