

# Scrutiny Review

## Meeting Start Times & Management of Meetings

RYEDALE  
DISTRICT  
COUNCIL



Overview and Scrutiny Committee  
April 2017

## **Executive Summary**

This Report sets out the results of a review of meeting start times and management of meetings. This review has been carried out by Ryedale District Council's Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

The aim of the review was to consider meeting start times as requested by Full Council on 8 December 2016, and to also consider the efficient running of proceedings at Full Council, including the length of meetings, as requested by Full Council on 21 February 2017.

The Committee made the following recommendations:

### **To Policy and Resources Committee and then on to Full Council:**

- (i) That the Constitution be amended to change the order of business for Full Council to put items for decision first;
- (ii) That the Constitution be amended to bring forward the guillotine, so that it takes effect after 3 hours;
- (iii) That the Constitution be amended to require corrections to the minutes to be submitted in writing in advance of the meeting;
- (iv) That working practices be amended so that questions to officers have to be dealt with ahead of, rather than during, meetings of Full Council;
- (v) That the Constitution be amended to require the circulation of the Leader's Statement with the agenda;
- (vi) That working practices be amended to stop reading out the Leader's Statement at meetings of Full Council.

The Task Group wishes to thank all those who gave their time in contributing to this review.

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## Scope of the review

The terms of reference for the Review were agreed at the Overview and Scrutiny Committee on the 16 February 2017 and revised on 30 March 2017. (See Annex A)

The aim of the review was to consider meeting start times as requested by Full Council on 8 December 2016, and to also consider the efficient running of proceedings at Full Council, including the length of meetings, as requested by Full Council on 21 February 2017.

The scope of the review covered the following:

The implications of both the current meeting start times and possible changes to these, including:

- What were the equalities impacts on Members, Officers and members of the public of daytime and evening meetings, and could these be mitigated?
- What were Members expectations around meeting start times when they decided to stand for election, and should any changes only be introduced at the beginning of a new term and with sufficient notice ahead of elections?
- What was the capacity of the organisation to support evening meetings and what was the impact on both Members and Officers in terms of quality of decision making and work the following day?

The options for improving time management at Full Council meetings, in terms of efficient running of proceedings and reducing the length of meetings, including:

- Was business dealt with in the right order at Full Council or should it be rearranged to put items for decision at the start of the agenda?
- Should the guillotine be brought forward or enforced more rigidly, rather than often extended, at Full Council meetings? When the guillotine falls should debate end on the item being considered and the vote taken?
- Would a timed agenda be helpful at Full Council meetings?
- Should amendments to the minutes be submitted in advance?
- Should amendments be submitted in advance?
- Should any questions to officers be dealt with ahead of the meeting instead of during the meeting?
- Would any measures proposed balance the efficient running of the meeting and the improved quality of decision making earlier in the evening, with the need to debate issues sufficiently thoroughly to reach sound decisions and to represent the views of residents in the democratic process and to hold the ruling group to account?

## **Membership of the committee**

Current : G Acomb (Vice Chairman), D Cussons, K Duncan, B Gardiner, T Jainu-Deen, E Jowitt, D Keal (Chairman), M Potter, J Sanderson, R Wainwright.

Meeting dates of the Scrutiny Review Task Group:

09/03/17 Considered information relating to start times of meetings, including an equality impact assessment, Members' expectations when standing for election, the capacity of the organisation and impact on quality of decision making.

30/03/17 Considered the results of the survey of other local authorities on meeting start times, and the pros and cons of various options for improved management of meetings.

Scrutiny Review Task Group supporting officers:

Simon Copley (Principal Specialist Democracy)

Will Baines (Programmes, Projects & Performance Officer)

Beckie Bennett (Delivery & Frontline Services Lead)

Clare Slater (Deputy Chief Executive)

## **Methodology**

The Committee/Task Group approached the review through:

- A discussion of the implications of meeting start times, including consideration of the equalities impact assessment, and a survey of other similar local authorities;
- An assessment of the pros and cons of different options to improve management of meetings.

## Findings

The research undertaken highlighted the following key findings:

### Meeting Start Times

- That the equality impact assessment, which covered Members, Officers and members of the public, indicated that different start times suited different groups of people and that any changes to start times were at worst neutral from an equalities perspective;
- That any change to meeting start times should only take place at an election so that any potential candidates had due notice;
- That daytime meetings may discourage younger and working age people from standing for election;
- That meetings running late into the evening has a detrimental impact on the quality of work of both Members and Officers, both at the meeting and the next day;
- That both the Corporate Peer Challenge report and the Independent Person have made reference to the lateness of meetings;
- That a survey undertaken of other councils in North Yorkshire and in Ryedale's "family group" (results attached as Annex B) indicates a range of start times, with the main reason for daytime meetings being to complete business during the normal working day and for evening meetings to allow Members and members of the public who work to attend meetings;
- That type of arrangement, presence/size of majority and length of meeting could also be influencing factors in relation to start times.

### Recommendations

The Committee decided to present their findings on meeting start times but not to make any recommendations for further consideration.

### Management of Meetings

A range of mechanisms were discussed for making meetings of Full Council more efficient as follows:

- *Changes to the order of business to put items for decision first* - Part B minutes and officer reports would be first, then motions on notice, followed by questions and the Leader's Statement. This would prioritise the most urgent and most important items of business to ensure the decisions were taken to keep the Council running on the date required, with sufficient time and when Members and officers were least tired. The flexibility for the Chairman to vary the order of business could still be retained.
- *Bringing forward the guillotine* - 3 hours was considered a reasonable amount of time for a meeting, although there was some risk that a backlog of business could arise which would have to be carried forward to the next meeting.

- *Enforcing the guillotine more rigidly* - Discretion needed to be retained to deal with this on a case by case basis, depending on the importance of the business, and ensuring it wasn't enforced solely for political reasons.
- *The guillotine taking immediate effect, with debate ending and a move to the vote* - This could curtail debate on key issues at an arbitrary time and effect the quality of the decision made.
- *Timed agenda* - Whilst this could help focus everyone's mind on dealing with the business efficiently and avoid filibustering and repetitive/similar amendments, it would be problematic assigning timings and ensuring there was no political interference in this. Similarly debate could be curtailed at an arbitrary time and the quality of decisions could be effected.
- *Submitting amendments to the minutes in advance of the meeting* - No reasons could be identified as to why this would not be a workable measure as any amendments to minutes could be anticipated in advance.
- *Submitting amendments in advance of the meeting* - The benefits of this including saving time at meetings and avoiding repetitive/similar amendments, allowing officers to provide advice on the legality and costings involved, allowing the Chairman to take a view on any procedural matters, and providing Members with written copies of amendments and time to consider them in advance. The disadvantages included not being able to take account of matters raised in debate and respond to these through drafting amendments, removing the flexibility to propose alternatives, and restricting the operation of Full Council, as the principal decision making forum in a fourth option authority. It was noted that this change could be made by political agreement between Group Leaders, rather than by constitutional requirement, with discretion still left with the Chairman to accept amendments at the meeting where they could not have been reasonably anticipated in advance.
- *Questions to officers ahead of, rather than during, the meeting* - Ryedale was unusual in allowing questions to officers during meetings of Full Council. Dealing with these in advance of the meeting would save time. It was not always possible for officers to fully answer questions without notice at meetings and this change would allow the attendance of fewer officers at meetings and the knock on impact on performance with tiredness next day after late finishes.
- *Circulate the Leader's Statement with the agenda* - This would allow the Statement to be available to Members well in advance of the meeting, to assist them in formulating questions, and also to make it available to the public well ahead of the meeting. Enforcing the constitutional requirement that questions be only about the content of the Statement and no other matters would also save time.
- *Stop reading out the Leader's Statement at the meeting* - No other document attached to the Council agenda is read out for the recording. All documents are available to the public online, including the Leader's Statement. This change would save time at meetings.

It was noted that there was a need to ensure mechanisms to support the efficient running of meetings did not curtail democratic debate on the key issues that matter to Ryedale and its residents.

## **Recommendations**

### **To Policy and Resources Committee and then on to Full Council:**

- (i) That the Constitution be amended to change the order of business for Full Council to put items for decision first;
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## **Annexes**

### **Annex A - Terms of Reference**

### **Annex B - Survey Results on Meeting Start Times**