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# **Democratic Structure Review – Twelve months on**

## **Report by Democratic Structure Review Working Party**

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### **1. INTRODUCTION**

- 1.1 When the Council approved the report of the Democratic Structure Working Party at meetings in April and June 2009, it agreed to review the impact of the changes after twelve months' operation. A meeting of the Working Party therefore was held on 14th September (at which Councillors K J Churchill (Chairman), Mrs M Banerjee, W T Clough, G S E Thorpe and R G Tuplin were present) to consider the outcome of a consultation exercise with Members on the changes that had been made and to advise Cabinet and Council accordingly.
- 1.2 As most of the changes to the Council structure had been introduced with effect from September 2009 onwards, all Members were asked for their views over the August period. Rather than pose open ended questions, an on-line questionnaire was designed to help focus on the changes that had taken place and the analysis of the results.

### **2. RESULTS**

- 2.1 35 completed responses were received which represents 67% of the Council's membership. A further 6 responses were attempted and either abandoned part way through or were not sent.
- 2.2 A copy of the full analysis of all the responses has been sent to all Members under separate cover.
- 2.3 The views received are summarised below. The figures in parentheses indicate the number of Members being in favour of or opposing a change –

#### ***Cabinet***

- 54% of councillors (19:16) disagreed that the Cabinet should increase in size to 10, inclusive of the Leader. (The increase was agreed by Council but its implementation was deferred.)
- Of those who disagreed, seven Members thought that the Cabinet size should be 9, four thought it should 8, one thought it should be 7 and one thought it should be 6.
- 69% (24:11) agreed that the Deputy Leader should continue to have no portfolio responsibilities but should continue to be responsible for supporting and deputising for the Leader and other executive councillors and for Member training.
- 83% (29:6) agreed that the Cabinet should continue to comprise members of the majority political party only.

- 71% (25:10) agreed that meetings of the Cabinet should continue to be held at 7.00 p.m.
- 77% (27:8) agreed that Cabinet briefings should continue to be held 2/3 days before Cabinet meetings.

### ***Overview and Scrutiny***

- 86% (30:5) agreed that there should continue to be three overview and scrutiny panels based upon the Council's social, environmental and economic well-being responsibilities.
- 74% (26:9) agreed that the Council should continue to co-opt two independent people to each overview and scrutiny panel.

### ***Council***

- 57% (20:15) agreed that meetings of the Council should continue to be held at 7.00 p.m.
- Of those who disagreed and gave a specific alternative time, three Members proposed 2.00 p.m., five proposed 2.30 p.m., one proposed 3.00 p.m., two proposed 4.00 p.m. and one proposed 5.00 p.m.
- 71% (25:10) agreed that there should continue to be 6 meetings of the Council per annum (excluding the annual meeting).
- 66% (23:12) agreed that the Council should retain the arrangements for a headline debate at Council meetings.
- 94% (33:2) agreed that the Council should retain the arrangements for 'green paper' items to be brought to the attention of the Council before consultation exercises commence.
- A question was not asked about the value of the cross party Council programme group which meets midway between Council meetings to discuss future agenda items as a limited number of Members have been involved in those meetings. Members of that group therefore were asked to comment separately, their response being that retention of the meeting is essential if the format of the Council meeting is to remain unchanged.

### ***Neighbourhood Forums***

- 54% (19:16) disagreed that any change should be made to the present arrangements that have been introduced for Neighbourhood Forums in Huntingdonshire.

## **3. OUTCOME**

- 3.1 In every case, the Members who responded supported the changes introduced by the Council with the level of support varying between 54% and 94%.
- 3.2 Although the review included the Cabinet arrangements, the move to an Executive Leader will mean that with effect from May 2011, all responsibility for the discharge of executive matters will be at the

discretion of that person as opposed to the Council. This will include the size (subject to the statutory limits) and membership of the Cabinet and the timing of meetings.

#### **4. CONCLUSION**

- 4.1 Despite the apparent misgivings on the part of some councillors over the changes agreed by the Council in the previous year, the majority of those who responded to the on-line questionnaire supported the new arrangements, therefore implying that they support their continuation.
- 4.2 The Working Party has therefore completed its remit originally set by the Cabinet of reviewing the Council's democratic structure and then assessing the impact of those changes twelve months on.
- 4.3 What is not now clear is how the coalition government's plans may affect the shape and structure of the Council's democratic arrangements. The imminent Decentralisation and Localism Bill, the possibility of a return to the committee system, the Department of Health white paper on changes in the delivery arrangements for health services, the localism and big society agenda and the future of the neighbourhood forums in Huntingdonshire are all likely to have some impact on the Council's democratic arrangements in the coming months. The Working Party would inquire therefore whether the Cabinet wishes it to remain in situ, meeting on an ad hoc basis to enable emerging developments to be analysed in a cross party manner and recommendations brought forward for consideration.

#### **5. RECOMMENDATIONS**

- 5.1 Having regard to the foregoing, the Working Party

##### **RECOMMENDS**

- (a) **that no change be made to the current democratic structure of the Council as a result of the review of the measures approved by the Council at its meetings held in April and June 2009; and**
- (b) **that the Cabinet considers the retention of the Working Party in its current format to consider and report on an ad hoc basis on legislative and other changes that may impact on the Council's democratic structure.**

#### **BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS**

Report of the Democratic Structure Working Party submitted to the Council meeting held on 22nd April 2010.

Results of replies to questionnaire by councillors in August 2010.

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