

Agenda item 5

For decision - Establish an Oversight Committee and formalise some informal groups to ensure Council accountability and transparency

Author: Paul Wynne, Town Clerk

Summary

This report proposes to establish a new Oversight Committee to ensure that the Council is fulfilling its scrutiny function of its core activities. It also proposes to formalise the appointment of Lead Cllrs and Cllr working groups and agree to re-invigorate Town Meetings.

If approved, these proposals would be implemented at the Annual Town Council meeting in May.

1. *Background - Council meetings*

Currently, we have one Council meeting a month. The purpose of the Council meeting is for Cllrs to come to a decision on matters of policy, finance, etc. Standing orders lists the things that only Council can decide on. In addition, part of the function of the Council meeting is a public forum as well; a place where residents can raise issues, for FTC it is a place where Cllrs and residents can discuss issues and a place where representatives from organisations can address Council. Sometimes, it might be appropriate to for FTC to stage separate Town Meetings on issues important to the town (see Town Meetings below).

We've always tried to make Council meetings as engaging as possible to promote and to welcome residents to be part of the debate. For example, setting up the Council Chamber in what could be described as a non-adversarial way we have created a relaxed environment for Cllrs and residents to discuss items while still ensuring formal decisions by Cllrs can be made. This is all very unusual to many other parish and principal councils. There is always room for improvement, however, and there is continual review of how FTC runs its Council meetings.

The advantage of a monthly Council meetings is its frequency; we don't need to wait weeks for the next meeting and so timely decisions can be made. A monthly Council meeting is also not too onerous on Cllrs, although the planning committee meets every three weeks as well. There's clarity too in that every decision that needs to be made will be made at this meeting.

However, having only a monthly Council meeting can lead to dense and long agendas and can lead to some items that demand Cllr scrutiny not being given sufficient time. Perhaps, in part due to only one formal meeting, some Cllrs have also expressed a view that they are not sure what is happening in some areas of the Council's work that they are less involved in. Combined, it could be argued that there is not enough oversight by Cllrs.

Given they represent corporate priorities, oversight of progress on programmes of work and the projects underneath comprising the core of the Council Plan should continue to be dealt with at Council. The Annual Work Programme is grouped under one of the core programmes

in the Council Plan. These, approximately, quarterly reviews will be written jointly by the lead Cllr and lead member of staff and will not be detailed. They will highlight the parts of the programme that are going and well and less well using a traffic light system. One programme will be reviewed at each meeting, and these will be timetabled in advance. Council will also continue to consider urgent, or new issues and opportunities as when required.

2. Proposed new Oversight Committee

This committee would enable Cllrs to scrutinise what is often called "business as usual" areas of work and explore how to improve performance and efficiency. It would give Cllrs and the public confidence that the Council is running optimally. Planned specific topics would be timetabled to enable a "deep dive". Specialists in the community and/or in other organisations would be invited to contribute to these debates as well as them being open to the public. This committee would meet quarterly. Frequency could be increased if need be.

A proposed remit for this committee that would be incorporated into Standing Orders is:

The committee will be responsible for and review of:

- a. Policies in the Council's constitution (excluding Standing Orders, Finance Regulations, Cllrs code of conduct that must be reviewed by Council);*
- b. Financial administration, including savings and investments, monitoring income and expenditure against the budget and making recommendations to Council accordingly.*
- c. All aspects of risk management and insurance*
- d. All aspects of Health and Safety policy and monitoring of health and safety incidents, such as staff accidents at work or accidents to the public on the Council's estate*
- e. The Frome Town Hall and the Council estate*
- f. Policies and processes related to communications and marketing, including FTC events and those events that FTC supports.*
- g. ICT planning and delivery (including websites and CRM) and matters relating to data protection.*
- h. All aspects related to human resources (both paid staff and volunteers) beyond the remit of the Council and the Town Clerk, and establishing a group comprising three Cllrs including the Chair of the committee to address staff grievance, complaints, and disciplinary issues beyond the authority of the Town Clerk*
- i. Civic and twinning matters*

As with all committees, all Cllrs will be able to discuss possible agenda items with the Town Clerk, will receive the agenda and reports in advance of meetings, will be able to attend all meetings and contribute to discussions and will receive all minutes. Only committee members will be able to vote, however.

Decisions around whether to bring items to this committee, to Council or whether they fall within the remit of the Clerk would be taken by the Clerk in discussion with relevant Cllrs such as the Leader, the Mayor and/or the chair of this committee.

Membership of this committee

The committee will comprise at least eight Cllrs who would be appointed by Council annually at the Annual Town Council meeting in May. It is good practice for the chair of a committee to be elected by Council as well.

3. Town meetings

Sometimes, the topic for discussion is too big for a Council meeting or it is felt that the topic is best discussed in another non-Council public meeting. The latter would include matters important to the town but not necessarily planned Council business. In the past we have hosted public meetings on Saxonvale, Mayday Saxonvale and Selwood Garden Community, for example.

FTC's role in organising town meetings is to enable the community to engage and discuss on matters important to it. This type of engagement is one of many engagement tools that FTC utilises.

Decisions about when to call a town meeting are made by the Clerk in consultation with the Leader (often other Cllrs and staff leads too).

4. Cllr only informal working groups and advisory groups

Informal Cllr working groups

Currently, there are some Cllr only informal working groups which were appointed by the IFF group with drafting the programmes in the Council Plan. The current cohort of informal Cllr working groups have no Council approved remit, membership or timescale. They report back informally to Cllrs only and have no Council oversight.

These types of group have been and can be useful in bringing together a small group of Cllrs and others to talk through a specific topics. They are useful in collating ideas, and should either be considered either a first (scoping) step in establishing an advisory group (see below), or a step towards creating a freestanding group in the town not administered by FTC or they simply fizzle out. Being informal and without a Council mandate, allocating Council resources (including staff) to these groups is difficult.

By bringing to the May Council meeting for approval, it is proposed to formalise the current list of Cllr working groups and develop them into a series of advisory groups or freestanding community led groups or disband any informal groups that are no longer required. Over time, more informal groups may evolve.

Advisory groups

In previous administrations, FTC developed the concept of panels and advisory boards. The difference between the two was that panels could include community members alongside Cllrs while advisory groups comprised only Cllrs. To simplify this, it is proposed to establish advisory groups appointed by Council that can include community members at Council's discretion.

Advisory groups are designed to address specific issues and can be a useful way of encouraging engagement beyond the Cllr (and staff) group with the community, who may be experts in their field, for example. Like, Town Meetings they can be an important element of encouraging and enabling a more participatory democracy. Conversely, sometimes it will be appropriate that advisory groups explore and discuss their remit only within the group of appointed Cllrs.

Advisory groups should have remits, timescales and membership approved by Council and return to Council with recommendations - they are not decision making bodies. They can be either short term intensively worked groups or more longstanding. Care needs to be taken to ensure that Cllrs and staff, who would administer and advise the advisory groups, have capacity to operate effectively and their number needs to be considered alongside other commitments. Experience suggests that having too many of these fora operating in parallel causes capacity problems.

It is proposed to establish an advisory group for each programme in the Council Plan. The Town Centre programme group may already be evolving into a freestanding group and clarity will be needed when drafting the remit of this group for approval at the May Council meeting.

The proposed remit is:

Advisory Groups

1. *Council and committees may establish Advisory Groups comprising only Cllrs or Cllrs and members of the community.*
2. *Each Advisory Group will include a member of staff to provide advice and administrative support.*
3. *The remit, timescale, and membership (including the Advisory Group chair) will be determined by Council or the appointing committee.*
4. *Advisory Groups make recommendations to Council and are not decision making forums.*
5. *Lead Cllrs*

This is the remit of Lead Cllrs in Standing Orders (p12) is

Lead Cllrs

1. *These roles advise, support, are a critical friend to the member of staff responsible for an area of work or a project and inform other Cllrs of progress.*
2. *A lead Cllr provides a strategic overview.*
3. *These roles are not decision makers and are appointed by Council.*

It is proposed to retain this remit. At present there are a few Cllrs acting as Lead Cllrs to the Business Manager and the Communications and Marketing Manager. It is proposed that each manager has a Lead Cllr to work with and that these are appointed by Council. The Leader is a "special" type of Lead Cllr who works closely with the Clerk.

There is merit in the chair of an advisory group for a programme in the Council Plan and a Lead Cllr to be one of the same.

6. Conclusions

If the recommendations below are approved, the Council meeting in May could populate with various advisory boards and Lead Cllrs.

Recommendations

1. From the May Council meeting establish an Oversight Committee with the remit as described in the report above
2. Note that FTC will continue to take opportunities to enable Town Meetings
3. Between the April and May Council meeting review the current tranche of informal Cllr working groups
4. Propose to the May Council meeting the remit, timescale and membership (including the chairs) of a series of advisory groups
5. Propose to the May Council meeting Lead Cllrs to work closely with each manager