

# CHESHIRE EAST COUNCIL

## Constitution Committee

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**Date of Meeting:** 21<sup>st</sup> November 2013  
**Report of:** Head of Governance and Democratic Services  
**Subject/Title:** Frequency of the Council's Meetings

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### **1.0 Report Summary**

- 1.1 This report seeks the views of the Committee upon whether the frequency of the Council's meetings should be reviewed and whether changes should be made to the Council's Calendar of Meetings.

### **2.0 Recommendation**

- 2.1 The Committee is requested to consider the detailed implications of changing the frequency of meetings and whether it wishes to recommend any changes to Council.

### **3.0 Wards/Ward Members Affected**

- 3.1 N/A

### **4.0 Policy Implications**

- 4.1 If the frequency of meetings was to be reduced, care would need to be taken in order to ensure that this does not create detrimental delays to the adoption of Council policies.

### **5.0 Financial Implications**

- 5.1 These are set out in the main body of the report.

### **6.0 Legal Implications**

None identified

### **7.0 Risk Management**

- 7.1 The risks of making changes to the Council Calendar of Meetings are possible delays in decision making and adoption of policies and an increase in the size of meeting agendas.

### **8.0 Information**

- 8.1 The Committee has previously considered a report on whether the frequency of the Council's meetings should be reviewed. Details of the

number of meetings held by the Council were submitted. A brief snapshot had been taken of the frequency of meetings held by 15 comparator authorities. It was considered that more detailed analysis of the information available would illustrate more accurately whether Cheshire East Council held more meetings than others and whether any changes should be made to the Calendar of meetings. The report considered the potential benefits and risks of holding fewer meetings.

Whilst there was support in principle for a review of the frequency of meetings, it was suggested that the officers should undertake more detailed work to assess the scope for and implications of any reduction in the frequency of meetings. This would also allow the new Scrutiny Committees and Policy Development Group framework time to settle in. It was agreed that a further report would be submitted to the Committee for consideration.

Cheshire East Council Members currently attend approximately 250 formal meetings of the Council's decision-making and other bodies each year and approximately 30 Policy Development Group meetings.

- 8.2 To aid local authorities in comparative and benchmarking exercises, the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy Information Services (CIPFA) provides statistical and research information to Councils on a range of issues, including specific 'family group' comparator information. Information has been obtained in respect of the frequency of the formal public meetings held by these twenty three comparator local authorities. The APSE Local Government benchmarking service provides a similar benchmarking service and information in respect of the Authorities as recommended by APSE has also be obtained in relation to full Council only. Comparator information has also been obtained from seven local neighbouring authorities and two authorities who became unitary authorities in 2009. (Details of the numbers of meetings held by comparator authorities are attached at appendix 1. (These figures are for scheduled meetings only).

For 2013-14:

- Cheshire East Council scheduled 6 meetings of full Council. The average number of full Council meetings scheduled amongst comparator authorities is 8 per year. Eight Councils have scheduled the same number of full Council meetings, five have scheduled fewer meetings, whilst the remaining twenty nine have scheduled more.
- Cheshire East Council scheduled 13 meetings of Cabinet. The average number of Cabinet meetings scheduled amongst twenty three comparator authorities is 10 per year. Three Councils have scheduled the same number as Cheshire East, fourteen have scheduled fewer meetings, whilst five have scheduled more.
- Cheshire East Council has scheduled 46 meetings of regulatory committees e.g. Planning Committees and Licensing Committee. Five

of the twenty three comparator Councils have scheduled more meetings, whilst the remaining have scheduled less. However, caution needs to be exercised when comparing the figures for Regulatory Committees, as a certain Committees, such as Licensing for example, are arranged as and when required and will depend on demand in a particular local authority area.

8.3 Whilst every local authority must ensure that Members meet frequently enough to make timely decisions, there should not be an assumption that the frequencies of meetings, which have applied since the authority was created, should continue to apply.

8.4 There could be a number of benefits arising from a reduction in the frequency of meetings:

- More time being available for Members to spend on constituency or other work
- More officer time available for other things and the potential of consequent efficiency savings.
- A reduced need to hire external meeting rooms and services such as PA equipment for meetings, thereby reducing costs.
- Fewer meetings for Members to travel to, with a consequent saving in mileage allowances and travelling time.
- Fewer agenda print-runs, resulting in reduced printing and postage costs. (Although, with no reduction in the number of decisions to be made and reports to be written, a reduction in printing costs would be negligible).

There may also be the potential for further savings by reducing the size of the decision making bodies.

8.5 In the light of the above and in these austere times, it is appropriate to challenge historical assumptions in respect of the frequency of meetings. However, care must be taken in order to ensure that fewer meetings would not lead to:

- Too much business on the agendas of the remaining meetings, when the bodies in question do meet.
- A delay in the consideration of business, which would prevent important decisions being made in a timely way.

8.6 If, for example, Cabinet met less frequently the average number of decisions per meeting would increase and the meetings would be likely to last longer. However, it is possible that the impact on the length of the meetings may not be proportionate.

8.7 It would be reasonable to assume that, if Cabinet and other bodies met less frequently, there would be the occasional need for special meetings to be called, in order to ensure that time sensitive decisions could be made. During 2012/13 there was a total of 11 special meetings of one kind or another.

8.8 For the 2013/14 municipal year, the Constitution Committee made a recommendation at its January meeting, to Council, to approve the Calendar of Meetings. The Calendar was then approved at the February 2013 Council meeting. It is recommended that this timetable is followed for the 2014/15 Calendar. (The current Calendar of Meetings is attached at Appendix 2).

## **9.0 Access to Information**

The background papers relating to this report can be inspected by contacting the report writer:

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