

A summary of responses to Cheshire East Council's

# Members Twilight Meetings Survey 2024



# Executive Summary

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## Introduction

At its meeting held on [27 February 2024](#), Full Council resolved that 'each Service Committee, including the Finance Sub Committee, arrange one twilight meeting over the course of its scheduled cycle of meetings during 2024-25'.

During 2024 Cheshire East Council conducted 9 Committee meetings as a trial starting during "twilight" hours e.g. they started between the hours of 4pm and 6pm.

Following the trials, a survey was conducted of Members. The purpose was to ascertain how Councillors felt about twilight meetings. The survey was conducted between 6 November and 1 December 2024.

All 82 Cheshire East Council Members were invited to complete the survey by email with one reminder being issued to stimulate responses. 44 Members completed the survey, giving a 54% response rate. Of these, 29 had attended at least one of the 9 twilight meetings.

## Level of meeting attendance

Member attendance at the 9 twilight meetings was high – 84% of expected Members attended in person, 14% sent a substitute to attend on their behalf, and 2% did not attend nor send a replacement.

Members appeared to be slightly more likely to attend the twilight meetings in person that started at 6:00pm (92%), compared to 4:00pm (83%), 5:00pm (77%) and 5:30pm (87%).

## Reasons for not attending meetings

14% of the Members completing the survey were prevented from attending any of the twilight Committee meetings because of the time they were conducted, 86% were not.

Reasons why Councillors were prevented from attending twilight meetings revolved around child, grandchild, family and personal commitments.

## Feedback on the twilight meetings

54% of Members who had attended a twilight meeting felt the meetings took the same length of time as they normally do, while 23% felt they were shorter. 23% felt that twilight meetings took longer than they usually do.

Opinions towards the twilight meetings were mixed among those who had attended:

- 38% agreed twilight meetings increase public participation in meetings (31% disagreed).
- 38% agreed twilight meetings have a positive impact on work/life balance (41% disagreed).
- 22% agreed twilight meetings have a positive impact on their abilities as Town and Parish Councillors (48% disagreed).

## **The future of twilight meetings**

50% of the Members completing the survey felt the council should continue to conduct Committee meetings during twilight hours, 41% felt it should not, 9% were unsure.

59% of Members completing the survey felt the time of meetings should be left to the committees themselves to determine, 23% felt they should not, 18% were unsure.

Of those who felt the council should continue to conduct Committee meetings during twilight hours, opinion was split over what time they should start, between 6:00pm (32%), 4:00pm (27%), 4:30pm (27%) and 5:00pm (27%).

## **General comments on twilight meetings**

Members were asked if they had any final comments to make about twilight meetings, with responses summarised below.

### **Support for twilight meetings (13 comments total)**

- Twilight meetings are beneficial for Councillors who work, enabling them to attend meetings more easily. Otherwise Councillors have to take annual leave to attend, or to ask for additional time off work.
- It is positive that the council now has more Councillors of working age than a few years ago; this has helped improve democratic representation across a broader spectrum of age ranges.
- Hopeful that this year's twilight meeting trial will be extended into 2025/26 and beyond.
- There should be a mix of daytime and twilight meetings.

### **Opposition to twilight meetings (13 comments total)**

- Officers and council staff shouldn't have to service these meetings after the end of their usual working day, twilight meetings also affect their work life balance.

- Twilight meetings are difficult for those who work into the evenings, and difficult for those with caring responsibilities.
- Twilight meetings are not convenient for residents to attend who have family routines, this also affects members of the public too.
- Travel to meetings is too far with no central location, and public transport is scarce in the evenings.
- Twilight meetings affect the eating routine and make people go hungry.
- Twilight meetings cause havoc with Parish Council meetings.

### **General comments (24 comments total)**

- Twilight meetings should only be conducted during the summer, April to August, and not during winter. Travel is easier when it is lighter, and there is less chance of inclement weather during summer months.
- The lack of central meeting location makes attendance difficult. Most meetings are now being organised in Crewe, which negatively impacts on Councillors and residents who wish to attend from the North of the Borough. Meetings should be in both Crewe and Macclesfield.
- Twilight meetings starting at 4pm or 4:30pm do not help anyone, it's hard to justify a 'twilight meeting' that early. If the start time for a twilight meeting is any earlier than 5.30pm, the benefits are negligible because of the travel time from work to the council offices.
- Consideration needs to be given to the length of the agenda. As meetings go on late items at the end of the agenda do not have the same level of rigour as items earlier in the agenda, as Members of the committee become fatigued. Meetings last too long.

## **Conclusions**

### **Attendance at twilight meetings**

The level of attendance at the twilight meetings was very high, with 98% of the Members who were expected to attend either attending in person, or sending a substitute. This suggests that twilight meetings are not a major barrier to attendance.

Furthermore, just 14% of Members said they were prevented from attending twilight meetings because of the time they were conducted, which seems a relatively small proportion.

### **The impact of twilight meetings**

That said, it is clear that twilight meetings do have a negative impact on the work/life balance of a significant proportion of Members – 41% of Members disagreed twilight meetings have a positive impact on their work/life balance.

Twilight meetings also seem to have a negative impact on a significant proportion of Members in their roles as Town and Parish Councillors, presumably given these meetings also take place during twilight hours. The council should look to mitigate this impact as far as possible if twilight meetings are to continue.

## **The future of twilight meetings**

It should be noted that a marginally larger proportion of Members said twilight meetings should continue (50%) compared to the proportion that said they should not (41%). Twilight meetings do seem to benefit those that work during the day, and as such perhaps lead to improved democratic representation among Members which is positive.

Although this is a marginal net support for twilight meetings, it must be acknowledged that twilight meetings do negatively impact a significant proportion of Members. This could perhaps be mitigated by:

- Only holding twilight meetings during summer months (April to August) when it is lighter for travel in the evenings
- Holding Committee meetings evenly split between Crewe and Macclesfield, to ensure travel distances are fair for all
- Allowing individual Committees to determine the time of their meetings – this was a proposal fairly strongly supported by Members in the survey

Further considerations about twilight meetings include:

- Holding them after 5:30pm – There is some indication attendance is higher the later they are held, and it is felt holding them earlier than this undermines the point of twilight meetings
- Reducing the length of meetings and agendas, and perhaps putting the most significant items at the start of agendas when attendees are freshest
- Considering how twilight meetings impact on Officers and council staff that must attend to ensure they go ahead

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# Introduction

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## Purpose of the survey

At its meeting held on [27 February 2024](#), Full Council resolved that ‘each Service Committee, including the Finance Sub Committee, arrange one twilight meeting over the course of its scheduled cycle of meetings during 2024-25’.

During 2024 Cheshire East Council conducted 9 Committee meetings as a trial starting during "twilight" hours e.g. they started between the hours of 4pm and 6pm.

The purpose of this “Cheshire East Members – Twilight Meetings Survey 2024” was to ascertain how Councillors felt about these twilight meetings.

The survey was conducted on behalf of the Constitution Working Group, with results from the survey to be considered by the working group.

The Cheshire East Members - Twilight Meetings Survey 2024 was conducted between 6 November and 1 December 2024.

## Survey methodology and response

All 82 Cheshire East Council Members were invited to complete the survey by email on 6 November 2024, with a reminder to complete the survey sent out on 25 November 2024.

In total, 44 Members responded to the survey, giving a 54% response rate.

Of the 44 Members completing the survey, 29 had attended at least one of the 9 twilight meetings that were conducted between 20 June and 30 September 2024.

## Level of meeting attendance

Member attendance to the 9 twilight meetings that were held during 2024 was high – 84% of expected Members attended in person, 14% sent a substitute to attend on their behalf, and 2% did not attend nor send a replacement.

| Committee                                   | Date       | Meeting time | No. present in person | No. that sent a substitute | No. that did not attend |
|---|------------|--------------|-----------------------|----------------------------|-------------------------|
| Highways & Transport Committee              | 20/06/2024 | 6:00pm       | 10                    | 1                          | 1                       |
| Adults & Health Committee                   | 24/06/2024 | 6:00pm       | 13                    | 0                          | 0                       |
| Children & Families Committee               | 16/07/2024 | 5:30pm       | 13                    | 2                          | 0                       |
| Corporate Policy Committee                  | 21/08/2024 | 5:30pm       | 13                    | 2                          | 0                       |
| Economy & Growth Committee                  | 10/09/2024 | 4:00pm       | 13                    | 2                          | 0                       |
| Finance Sub-Committee                       | 12/09/2024 | 5:00pm       | 8                     | 1                          | 0                       |
| Children & Families Committee               | 16/09/2024 | 5:00pm       | 12                    | 5                          | 0                       |
| Economy & Growth Committee                  | 25/09/2024 | 4:00pm       | 11                    | 3                          | 1                       |
| Cared For Children & Care Leavers Committee | 30/09/2024 | 4:00pm       | 9                     | 1                          | 0                       |
|   |            |              | <b>102</b>            | <b>17</b>                  | <b>2</b>                |

Members were slightly more likely to attend the twilight meetings in person that started at 6:00pm (92%), compared to 4:00pm (83%), 5:00pm (77%) and 5:30pm (87%).

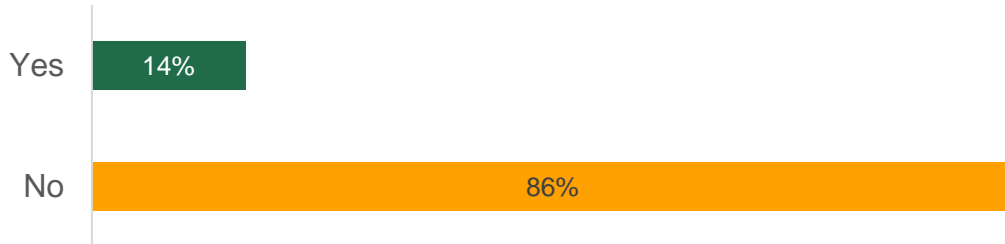
| Meeting time | No. of meetings | No. of Members that should have attended | No. of Members that were present in person | % of Members that were present in person |
|--------------|-----------------|--|--|--|
| 16:00        | 3               | 40                                       | 33   | 83%                                      |
| 17:00        | 2               | 26                                       | 20   | 77%                                      |
| 17:30        | 2               | 30                                       | 26   | 87%                                      |
| 18:00        | 2               | 25                                       | 23   | 92%                                      |
| <b>Total</b> | <b>9</b>        | <b>121</b>                               | <b>102</b>                                 | <b>84%</b>                               |



## Reasons for not attending meetings

14% of the Members completing the survey were prevented from attending any of the twilight Committee meetings because of the time they were conducted, 86% were not.

Were you prevented from attending any of these meetings because of the time they were conducted?



*Number of responses = 42*

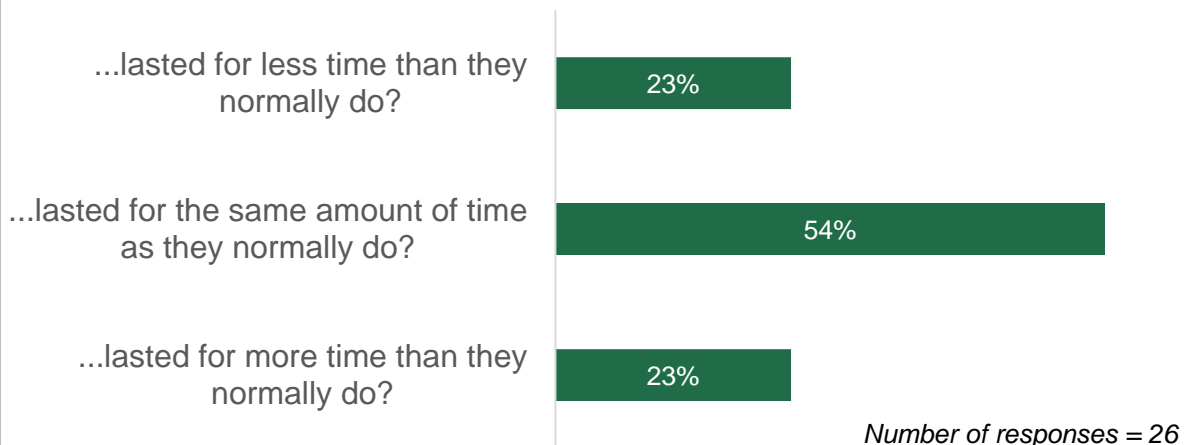
Reasons given as to why Councillors were prevented from attending twilight meetings because of the time they were held included:

- As a mother of dependent children, evenings are very difficult.
- Collection of grandchildren from school.
- Family Care Commitments.
- Personal commitments.

## Feedback on the twilight meetings

54% of Members who had attended a twilight meeting felt they lasted the same amount of time as they normally do, while 23% felt they lasted for less time, and 23% felt they lasted for more time than they usually do.

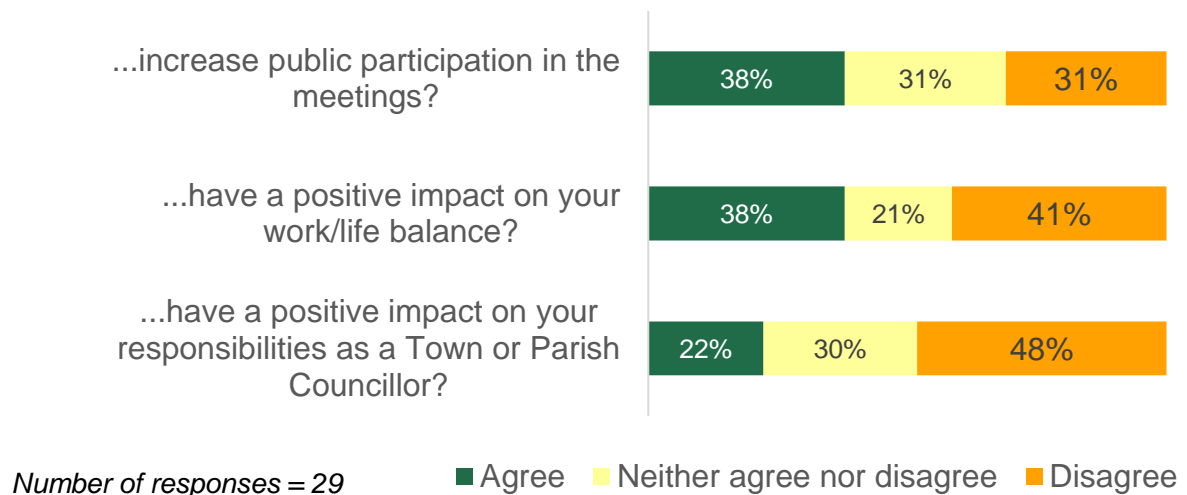
If you have attended a twilight meeting(s), would you say they...



Opinions towards the twilight meetings were mixed among those who had attended:

- 38% agreed twilight meetings increase public participation in meetings, 31% disagreed.
- 38% agreed twilight meetings have a positive impact on work/life balance, 41% disagreed.
- 22% agreed twilight meetings have a positive impact on their abilities as Town and Parish Councillors, 48% disagreed.

Generally speaking, how strongly do you agree or disagree that twilight meetings...

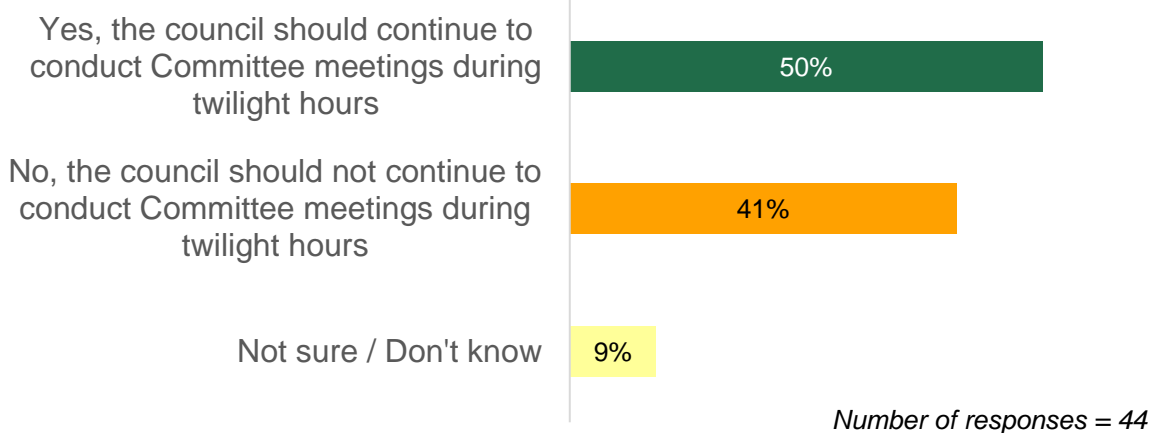


# The future of twilight meetings

## Should twilight meetings be conducted in future?

50% of the Members completing the survey felt the council should continue to conduct Committee meetings during twilight hours, 41% felt it should not, 9% were unsure.

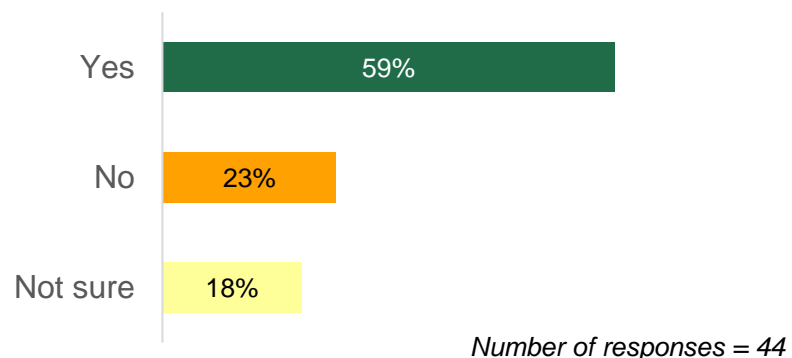
Overall, do you think the council should continue to conduct Committee meetings during twilight hours?



## Time of the meetings

59% of Members completing the survey felt the time of meetings should be left to the committees themselves to determine, 23% felt they should not, 18% were unsure.

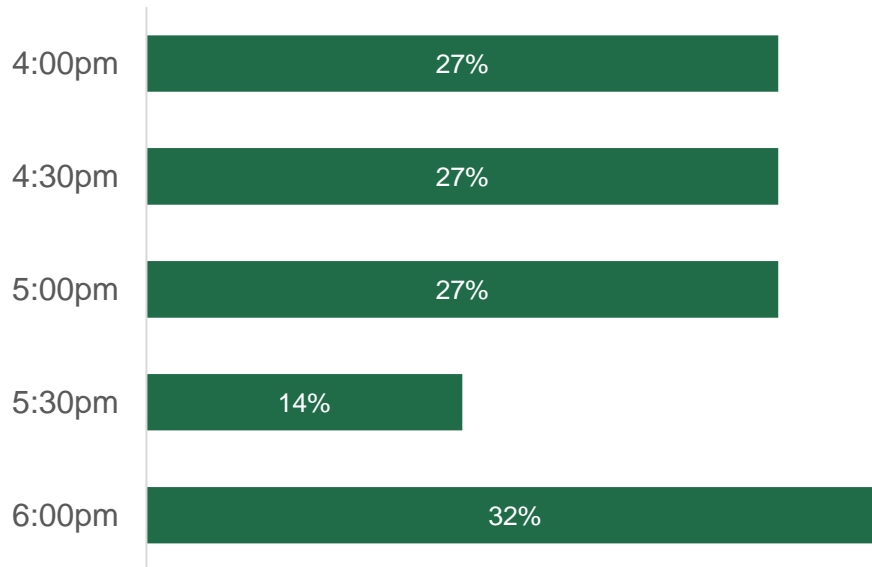
Do you think the time of meetings should be left to the committees themselves to determine?



Of those who felt the council should continue to conduct Committee meetings during twilight hours, opinion was split over what time they should start, between 6:00pm

(32%), 4:00pm (27%), 4:30pm (27%) and 5:00pm (27%). Respondents could select up to 2 of the 4 options presented.

If the council were to conduct Committee meetings during twilight hours in future, what time would you prefer them to start?



*Number of responses = 22*

## General comments on twilight meetings

Within the survey, members were asked “Do you have any final comments to make about twilight meetings?”.

In total, 27 Members answered the question, making a total of 50 different comments between them. These comments have been categorised and summarised in the table below.

| <b>Support for twilight meetings</b>  |  | <b>13</b> |
|---|--|-----------|
| Twilight meetings are beneficial for Councillors who work, enabling them to attend meetings more easily. It makes it very difficult to be a Councillor if all meetings are during the daytime, as people then have to take annual leave to attend, or to ask for additional time off work. The trial has made a significant difference to the ability of some to attend council meetings. |  | 8         |
| The council now has more Councillors of working age than was the case a few years ago, and this has helped improve democratic representation across a broader spectrum of age ranges. This is a positive thing.   |  |           |
| General support for twilight meetings.  |  | 2         |
| Hopeful that this year's twilight meeting trial will be extended into 2025/26 and beyond / More twilight meetings should be considered.   |  | 2         |
| There should be a mix of daytime and twilight meetings.   |  | 1         |
| <b>Opposition to twilight meetings</b>  |  | <b>13</b> |
| Officers and council staff shouldn't have to service these meetings after the end of their usual working day, twilight meetings also affect their work life balance. This puts an additional strain on Officers, and includes Officers attending the meetings, as well as building support staff.   |  | 4         |
| Twilight meetings are difficult for those who work into the evenings, and difficult for those with caring responsibilities.   |  | 2         |
| Twilight meetings are not convenient for residents to attend who have family routines, this also affects members of the public too.   |  | 2         |
|   |  | 2         |

|   |   |
|---|---|
| Travel to meetings is too far with no central location, and public transport is scarce in the evenings.   |   |
| General opposition to twilight meetings - "I am totally against these meetings".  | 1 |
| Twilight meetings affect the eating routine and make people go hungry.  | 1 |
| Twilight meetings caused havoc with Parish Council meetings, this was juggled as it was a pilot exercise, but it would be difficult to manage on a permanent basis. | 1 |

| General comments  | 24 |
|---|----|
| Twilight meetings should only be conducted during the summer, April to August, and not during winter. Travel is easier when it is lighter, and there is less chance of inclement weather during summer months. Night driving in the dark, especially in winter, is extremely unpleasant and even frightening for some, especially for older Councillors. Public transport is also potentially more hazardous in the darker Autumn / Winter months.                            | 9  |
| The lack of central meeting location makes attendance difficult. Most meetings are now being organised in Crewe, which negatively impacts on Councillors and residents who wish to attend from the North of the Borough. Travelling in the winter in the dark for a 3 hour round trip will not encourage people to attend. Meetings are a long way to drive for some. It's a long evening travelling to twilight meetings. Meetings should be in both Crewe and Macclesfield. | 6  |
| Twilight meetings starting at 4pm or 4:30pm do not help anyone, it's hard to justify a 'twilight meeting' that early. Meetings at these times still prevented full-time working Councillors from attending. If the start time for a twilight meeting is any earlier than 5.30pm, the benefits are negligible because of the travel time involved from work to the council offices. Twilight meetings should also start at 7pm.  | 5  |
| Consideration needs to be given to the length of the agenda. Children and Families Committee have significant agendas which are not well planned as noting issues tend to be at the beginning, and decision items later in the agenda. As the meeting goes on late the items at the end of the agenda do not have the same level of rigour as items earlier in the agenda, as Members of the committee become fatigued. Meetings last too long.                               | 2  |

|  |   |
|--|---|
| Daytime meetings can only be attended by those who work by taking annual leave.  | 1 |
| For the question about whether Committees should decide on the time of meetings it is not clear if this is deciding on whether to have twilight meetings or not, or just deciding what time twilight meetings should happen e.g. 4pm or 6pm. | 1 |

# Conclusions

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## Attendance at twilight meetings

The level of attendance at the twilight meetings was very high, with 98% of the Members who were expected to attend either attending in person, or sending a substitute. This suggests that twilight meetings are not a major barrier to attendance.

Furthermore, just 14% of Members said they were prevented from attending twilight meetings because of the time they were conducted, which seems a relatively small proportion.

## The impact of twilight meetings

That said, it is clear that twilight meetings do have a negative impact on the work/life balance of a significant proportion of Members – 41% of Members disagreed twilight meetings have a positive impact on their work/life balance.

Twilight meetings also seem to have a negative impact on a significant proportion of Members in their roles as Town and Parish Councillors, presumably given these meetings also take place during twilight hours. The council should look to mitigate this impact as far as possible if twilight meetings are to continue.

## The future of twilight meetings

It should be noted that a marginally larger proportion of Members said twilight meetings should continue (50%) compared to the proportion that said they should not (41%). Twilight meetings do seem to benefit those that work during the day, and as such perhaps lead to improved democratic representation among Members which is positive.

Although this is a marginal net support for twilight meetings, it must be acknowledged that twilight meetings do negatively impact a significant proportion of Members. This could perhaps be mitigated by:

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Further considerations about twilight meetings include:



- Holding them after 5:30pm – There is some indication attendance is higher the later they are held, and it is felt holding them earlier than this undermines the point of twilight meetings
- Reducing the length of meetings and agendas, and perhaps putting the most significant items at the start of agendas when attendees are freshest
- Considering how twilight meetings impact on Officers and council staff that must attend to ensure they go ahead

