

Area Panels – Public participation

1. Summary

As a result of conversations with members this report contains suggestions for a way forward in order to encourage greater meaningful public involvement in the work of the Panels.

2. Recommendations

- (1) That all Panels agree to introduce either a public forum or public question time to take place at the commencement of all Panel meetings.
- (2) That each Area Panel have the discretion to appoint one co-opted member per ward subject to Council approval.

3. Report detail

As members will be aware this current form of Area Panels was established in 2013 as Committees of the Council recognising the role of elected members as leaders within their communities, with these meetings becoming a recognised forum for local people to bring forward their concerns and ideas for local improvements.

4. Co-options to Panels

- 4.1 It is important for Panels to consider how many co-opted members they nominate in order to strike a balance between the number of elected members at each meeting in relation to the number of ward members. The idea of co-opted members is to enhance understanding of issues existing in a ward whilst not overshadowing the role of elected members and their democratic responsibilities. One co-opted member per ward has been a principle which has been applied historically and has worked well.
- 4.2 Panels can co-opt members of the public at any time during the municipal year for the duration of that municipal year, subject to approval by Council. In order that co-opted members can take their seats at the beginning of the new municipal year an item will be placed on each Area Panel agenda at the last meeting of the municipal year so that appointments can be made at the Annual Meeting of Council.
- 4.3 Members are reminded that the Area Panels are formal committees of the Council and as such are bound by the Council's Constitution in the way in which they proceed. Co-opted members are bound by the Members' Code of Conduct in the same way as elected members and will be required to sign a declaration of interest form in line with the requirement placed on elected members. Co-opted members can speak on any matter but do not have a vote.

5. Participation by the public

- 5.1 In order to allow the public, who are not co-opted onto the Committee, the opportunity to raise issues within the public arena, Committees have in the past held a public forum at the start of the meeting, this item being the first item on the agenda. This public forum has been scheduled to last for 30 minutes. This process does require the Chair of the meeting to be strict with time limits when trying to achieve a balanced reasonable debate whilst keeping to the timetable.
- 5.2 An alternative to a public forum would be to adopt the process for questions by the public used at Council meetings the details of which are already set out within the Council's Constitution. For ease of reference the relevant details are set out below:
- (a) Questions will be asked in the order in which notice of them was received, except that the person presiding may group together similar questions.
 - (b) A question may only be asked if notice has been given by delivering it in writing to the Chief Executive (Democratic Services) no later than midday 7 clear days before the day of the meeting. Each question must given the name and address of the questioner who will speak at the meeting.
 - (c) At any one meeting no person may submit more than one question on behalf of one organisation.
 - (d) A period of 30 minutes will be allowed for questions by members of the public.
 - (e) Any question which cannot be dealt with during public question time because of lack of time will be dealt with by a written answer.

6. Conclusion

Members are asked to consider the suggestions raised in this report which are submitted in an effort to allow greater public involvement at the same time as giving some clarity to members of the public regarding procedures which will be followed at Area Panels in line with the Council's Constitution.

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