

SUBJECT:	PROMOTING CONSTRUCTIVE DEBATE WITHIN MEETINGS
REPORT BY:	DIRECTOR OF RESOURCES
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1. Purpose of Report

1.1 Members exercise a significant proportion of their powers and responsibilities when taking part in public committee meetings. As such, members should consider whether the Council has done all it can to facilitate effective debate and discussion through the training provided to members and the procedure rules in place for formal meetings.

2. Training Opportunities

2.1 On election to the Council, councillors will not always have experience either of taking part in committee meetings or of speaking in public. While a wide variety of a councillor's duties can be carried out without these skills, participation in public meetings remains fundamentally important in seeking to influence outcomes and public perception of the Council's actions.

2.2 With a view to ensuring members are able to play a full part in committee meetings, training has been provided in the past year for members on both contributing towards and chairing meetings. In providing these sessions, there was recognition that councillors have both a responsibility for their own contributions and, with particular regard to a meeting's chair, facilitating the contributions of others. This training was broadly positively received by those who took part in it, although a number of more experienced members noted that training of this kind was unlikely to benefit them.

2.3 Further training in these areas will be provided as and when required, in particular in reaction to any feedback from new or existing councillors. As noted in the update report on member development, newly-elected members will be given guidance on the Council Procedure Rules which is likely to take the form of a mock meeting; this will provide an opportunity to ensure councillors are fully aware of good practice for taking part in committee meetings and are able to identify areas for improvement in a private environment. It should be noted that similar events could be held for existing councillors should they so require.

2.4 The areas which are particularly to be emphasised in any training are considered to be as follows:

- Carrying out all necessary preparative work before attending the meeting.
- Speaking as clearly as possible for the benefit of other members and any members of the public.

- Giving participants sufficient time to express their views without interruption.
- Addressing members and officers with suitable respect and courtesy.
- Ensuring that any points raised are relevant to the business of the meeting.
- Making full use where appropriate of procedural facilities such as motions and the calling of extraordinary meetings to discuss matters of pressing concern.
- Engaging the public and external representatives in helping to reach effective decisions.
- Providing clear guidance on the outcome and resolution of an item.
- Having regard to the need for confidentiality and sensitivity in relation to some items.
- Developing the confidence to play a full part in the meeting and represent residents' views.

Any feedback from the Committee regarding these target areas and the most effective means by which they can be achieved would be welcomed and given priority in tailoring future events.

3. Council Procedure Rules

- 3.1 In common with all local authorities, the Council has agreed its own set of rules governing how members are able to participate in meetings. These are contained within the Council's constitution as the Council Procedure Rules, which are attached as Appendix A. Members should note that the rules do not apply to Executive meetings and that some provisions are specifically excluded for non-Council meetings.
- 3.2 A number of the rules are governed by statutory authority, meaning that the Council is unable to deviate from the requirements of the relevant legislation. Other areas of the rules are often based upon model standing orders which are in place in many other local authorities and offer increased scope for tailoring to the Council's particular requirements.
- 3.3 Of particular note with regard to the promotion of constructive debate are the following sections of the rules:
- Extraordinary meetings
 - Questions by the public
 - Questions by members
 - Motions on notice
 - Rules of debate
 - Members' conduct
- 3.4 Members may be of the view that the present Council Procedure Rules offer an appropriate balance to ensure the effective conduct of meetings. Indeed, having undertaken brief comparisons with the rules in place at a number of other authorities it is notable that there are a number of areas in which the Council is already more open to debate from its members. Of particular note is the relative lack of restrictions on members seeking to put questions to Council and participate in debates. However, it remains good practice to undertake periodic reviews of the relevant articles as a whole in order that any improvements can be recommended

for Council's consideration.

3.5 A number of areas which are addressed in other councils' procedure rules and which may be of interest to members include provisions relating to:

- Setting a maximum length for meetings or prescribed time periods for all items.
- Scope for members to propose topics for debate at Council, potentially allotted by random draw or on the basis of political proportionality
- Increased provision for non-executive members to put forward questions without notice.
- Holding occasional meetings of Council dedicated to a single topic.

3.6 However, it should be stressed that the Council Procedure Rules can only ever set out a framework for general behaviour and often govern exceptional circumstances. Much relies upon the conduct of individual members and the chair of the meeting for setting an appropriate tone and an atmosphere conducive to debate. While meetings of the Council are usually subject to stricter rules and formalities, ordinary committee meetings often have considerable scope for chairs in consort with members to find formats which address issues of concern.

4. Organisational Impacts

4.1 Finance

There are no financial implications to this report. There is scope within the annual member development budget to provide additional training should it be required.

4.2 Legal Implications

There are no legal implications to this report.

5. Recommendation

5.1 That members note the report and offer comments regarding the encouragement of constructive debate within meetings.