

Opening of Council Meetings: Member Discussion

Tuesday 10 April 6pm – 7.20pm
Committee Room 2, Guildhall

Present: Councillors Nimmo-Smith (Chair), Herbert, Marchant-Daisley and Saunders.

Officer support: Glenn Burgess (Committee Manager)

1) Introduction

Councillor Nimmo-Smith opened the meeting and thanked members for attending. It was noted that all members had been invited to submit their views in preparation for this meeting and this information was circulated (see appendix 1).

Councillor Marchant-Daisley gave a brief overview of the issue and her reasons for raising it at the Civic Affairs Committee.

2) Discussion Points

Councillor Marchant-Daisley:

- The city of Cambridge actively celebrates diversity and this is highlighted in the City Council's mission statement. Opening council meetings with a Christian prayer seems inconsistent with that sentiment and may result in the public not feeling comfortable attending meetings.
- A 'Minute of Reflection' may be a more appropriate way to open the meeting.
- A meeting of the Council should be a place where people of all faiths, or none, feel comfortable.
- Councillors entering the Chamber after prayers would be the worst possible scenario as it would cause division.
- The Mayor should retain the option of appointing a Chaplain but they should not form part of formal Council business.
- Giving total discretion to individual Mayors could still allow for people to feel excluded.

Councillor Nimmo-Smith:

- Whilst there is value in each Mayor being given discretion, this needs to be done sensitively to ensure people do not feel excluded.
- Questioned when a prayer is a 'prayer'.
- Will discuss with the current Chaplain the process for the Council meeting on 19 April.
- Has spoken to non-Christian colleagues who are not offended by prayers at Council meetings.

Councillor Herbert:

- Some Councillors may not feel comfortable entering the Chamber after prayers have taken place (as it could be seen as disrespectful and shows a clear statement of their views).
- Supports the idea of a 'Minute of Reflection' but feels that it should be *before* the formal start of the meeting.
- Whilst maintaining the historical and traditional elements, the civic calendar needs to be more diverse and inclusive. The Mayor is involved in a number of Christian events throughout the civic year and the upcoming review of the Mayoralty may need to take this into account.
- Surprised that guidance on this is not included in the Council's Constitution. It would be beneficial to have some guidance written down but this needs to be flexible, open and sensitive.
- Questioned why prayers happen at Council meetings and not at other committees.
- Some firm options need to be given to all 42 councillors to aid any further debate and/or decision. Opening up a further public debate without clear options may not be beneficial.
- Mayors should be encouraged to have an inclusive approach and to meet the expectations of their communities.
- Over the course of the year the Mayor could choose to have 5 different Chaplains/community leaders opening the meetings.

Councillor Saunders:

- Supports the idea of a 'Minute of Reflection' but can see the value in giving discretion to individual Mayors.
- Whilst this did not need to be spelt out in the Constitution, there may be some merit in basic guidance for incoming Mayors.
- The Mayor could still have a Chaplain at the meeting (for spiritual/moral guidance and support) but they could open the meeting with a 'Minute of Reflection'.

3) Suggested ways forward

Survey of options conducted with all 42 Councillors followed by full debate at Civic Affairs and formal decision by Council.

Options could include:

- Drop the prayers element entirely from the meeting.
- Replace prayers with a 'Minute of Reflection', introduced by the Mayor.
- Replace prayers with a 'Minute of Reflection', introduced by the Mayor's Chaplain.
- Continue the current practice of giving discretion to individual Mayors.
- Prayers being held in the Parlour or a committee room prior to the Council meeting.
- Mayor to choose 5 different Chaplains/community leaders to open the Council meetings.

Clear guidance to be developed on the process

Whilst it would not be necessary for this to be included in the Council's Constitution, written guidance should be developed to assist preparation for the incoming Mayor.

This could include:

- Clear guidance on the options available
- Emphasis on the need to be inclusive, open and sensitive.
- Emphasis on the need to fully meet the expectations of their communities.

Review of the Mayoralty

When reviewing the Mayoralty during 2012/13 the following needs to be taken into account:

- The need to maintain historic and traditional elements.
- The need to ensure that the civic calendar is diverse, inclusive and meets the needs of the community.

Appendix 1: Views submitted by Councillors

<p>Cllr Brown</p>	<p>I am concerned that the presence of a religious ceremony at the start of council meetings may feel exclusionary to those who do not share the particular religion, or who have no religion. Personally, I feel uncomfortable with them, but more generally I feel they are not compatible with the desire to make local democracy as open and welcoming to all as possible. I wouldn't myself derive any personal value from replacing them with a minute's reflection (after all, we don't do such before, e.g. planning committee), but I think it would be less problematic if we were to replace a overtly religious ceremony with a non-religious one, for those who find some sort of ceremonial contemplation activity beneficial.</p>
<p>Cllr Cantrill</p>	<p>I support prayers at full council</p>
<p>Cllr Tucker</p>	<p>I am perfectly happy to continue with prayers before the Council Meeting. England is traditionally a christian country with civic functions relating to christian services eg Remembrance Service, to which I have no objection. This does not reflect my own religion/beliefs but the fact that I respect the country's traditions just as I would when visiting other countries.</p> <p>If others feel that they cannot participate directly they could simply use the occasion to "reflect" or make a statement by absenting themselves and not rob those that would use prayers positively of the opportunity to do so.</p>
<p>Cllr Ward</p>	<p>I do find the saying of prayers at council meetings to be a curious anachronistic irrelevance.</p> <p>I was not aware that prayers, and whether or not to appoint a chaplain, were at the discretion of the mayor. Given that that is the case I do find it slightly surprising that we have had a mayor's chaplain, and prayers, every year since I joined the council in 2000. Maybe some mayors didn't</p>

	<p>realise that they had this discretion, or were somehow reluctant to exercise it and break tradition?</p> <p>I would support any mayor who chose not to appoint a chaplain or have prayers said at meetings. I would not object to the abolition of prayers, and would probably vote for abolition if the matter came to Council, although I don't really feel very strongly about it. I do not support the suggestion from Cllr Marchant-Daisley that a "minute of reflection" be substituted, that being neither one thing nor the other - neither flesh nor fowl nor good red herring, and, to my mind, similarly a curious irrelevance.</p>
Cllr Reiner	<p>As a matter of principle, I think we as a council should listen when fellow councillors - albeit a minority of councillors - state that they are uncomfortable with the saying of prayers at council meetings. We should also consider how the saying of prayers is perceived by the wider public. I believe that we should examine our practices and evaluate them in light of our current values as a society.</p>
Cllr Swanson	<p>As a Christian I value the introduction to Council in its present form. I think the short inputs from the Chaplain are often helpful and seem to me to be balanced so that everyone can get something from them whatever they do or do not believe. If that ends with a time of silence for prayer/reflection I think that can only benefit the meeting to come. For me it is an opportunity to cut off from the events of the day and prepare for the discussions ahead. I understand the current position is the result of developments over several years and hope that we can continue with a 'Thought for the Day' slot and period of silence before discussions start.</p>