

Taking forward options for improving Cambridge City Council's democratic, governance, culture, and decision-making arrangements

The Centre for Governance & Scrutiny (CfGS) report and recommendations on 'Culture, Behaviours and Governance' was commissioned by Group Leaders in October 2021 and shared with members in Feb 2022. Additional CfGS analysis about changing governance arrangement in councils like Cambridge was completed in May 2022.

The report highlighted some issues with our democratic culture and decision-making processes, which had previously been highlighted the LGA and others. Governance arrangements in Cambridge may not provide the best democratic return against resources deployed. From best practice in the sector there are potential improvements in transparency, accountability for members and officers, scrutiny, workload, speed and responsiveness of decision making, and community inclusivity.

'Hybrid-hybrid' governance in Cambridge reflects decisions taken over 20 years ago to retain a system close to committees following the 2000 Local Government Act. Hybrid systems were introduced for councils to decide whether Cabinet or Committee governance was most appropriate. It is estimated around 30-40 councils operate a hybrid model, though the approach in Cambridge appears unique. The 2011 Localism Act introduced the option to return to committees. While some councils have chosen to do so, the dominant form in local government is a Leader/Cabinet model with all out elections.

A Governance Reference Group should be established to consider the CfGS and Independent Remuneration Panel (IRP) findings with a view to developing proposals that can be discussed at Civic Affairs Committee and put to full Council. This approach reflects the advice from CfGS and has worked well in other Councils. The process has generally taken a civic year to work through.

Recommendation: establish a **Governance Reference Group (GRG)**, which would include officers; the Association of Democratic Service Officers (ADSO) would be commissioned to provide expert support and capacity for the working group.

Membership

The Governance Reference Group (GRG) should be of appropriate size and expertise to work through the detail and be mindful of members time constraints. Technical and advisory support provided by Association of Democratic Services Officers (ADSO).

- 6 x Labour
- 2 x LibDem
- 1 x Green and Independent
- 2 x Officers
- 1-2 x Independent Governance Advisors (ADSO)
- Monitoring Officer in advisory capacity as the statutory officer for the Constitution and proper officer for access to information.

Governance Reference Group: mandate and workplan

A reference group allows public and private conversations and is not a decision-making body. The GRG could meet informally in April/May to discuss draft ToRs, its workplan and other arrangements. The role of GRG could be formalised via a Civic Affairs meeting.

Some GRG findings and recommendations would most likely need to be discussed by Civic Affairs and adopted at Full Council. Other issues may require decisions by the Leader or other Executive members or by Group Leaders, while some changes in practice may not require formal decisions.

Initial issues to consider, drawing on the CfGS and IRP reports:

1. What are the appropriate forms of scrutiny, accountability, transparency and election cycle for a modern and progressive council like Cambridge City Council, taking into account timely decision-making, democratic engagement and value for money?
2. How can the Council improve and strengthen its engagement with communities, including the role of Area Committees or alternative models, in a context of increasing financial pressures in local government?
3. How should the Council ensure its decision-making arrangements are focused on priority political and policy issues affecting the city and its residents, rather than operational matters?
4. How can Council and scrutiny meetings be run more effectively to make sure member and officer time is focused on issues that make the greatest difference for residents, including considering how to enable greater resident involvement in the decision-making process?
5. How can the accessibility and functionality of the constitution be improved?
6. Are there examples of good practice in other councils on these issues that the City Council could learn from?

Some of these issues will take longer to consider and resolve than others, and other issues and ideas are likely to emerge as the process develops. The GRG could consider beginning with issues where there is already impetus to consider change. For example, local democratic community engagement and the role of Area Committees; meeting length and procedures; the role of scrutiny etc.

Agreeing a workplan is important. Members of the GRG will want the opportunity to schedule discussions on issues arising with their political groups.

Indicative timetable

- **March** – Group Leaders nominate member reps for Governance Reference Group; ADSO commissioned to provide support for the GRG process
- **April/May** - GRG meets to develop and agree draft ToRs and initial workplan, ways of working and frequency/format of subsequent meetings; introduce ADSO
- **May/June** – Civic Affairs meeting to note GRG ToRs and workplan (CfGS and IRP reports annexed),
- **Ongoing** – GRG meets regularly and provides updates as required via all member briefings and reports, and receives feedback; some issues may be progressed more rapidly where implementation is straightforward
- **Autumn 2023** – where possible budget impacts of proposals assessed through BSR 2024/25
- **Spring 2024** – findings of GRG may need to be considered by Civic Affairs, Scrutiny Committees or Council
- **May 2024** - key constitutional change may need to be voted at AGM, following discussion at Civic Affairs
- **Civic Year 2024/25** - new approaches begin, less significant changes could take place prior to this