

COUNCIL – 13 JULY 2016

1. ARRANGEMENTS FOR MEMBER MEETINGS

Submitted by: Chief Executive

Recommendations

1. Disband the following committees:
 - a. Joint Parking Committee - immediately
 - b. Member Development Panel - immediately
 - c. Asset Policy Committee - immediately
 - d. Governance Committee - on completion of its current work programme
2. Merge the Audit and Risk Committee and Standards Committee.
3. Create common membership of the Public Protection Committee and the Licencing Committee with both Committees having 15 Members.
4. Disband the Staffing Committee and Employee Consultative Committee. Create a Joint Negotiating and Consultation Committee to fulfil the functions set out in the Joint Recognition Agreement. That the Joint Negotiating and Consultation Committee be given the remit for adoption and amendment of all employment policies. That a Member Appeal Panel be established to hear employee appeals in accordance with the appropriate policies.
5. Establish the following as Member / officer working groups under the support of the relevant Executive Director or Head of Service:
 - a. Kidsgrove Leisure Centre Working Group
 - b. Newcastle Almshouse Charity
 - c. Parish Councils Forum
6. Retain the Conservation Advisory Working Group in its current form.
7. Retain the Constitution Working Group as a Member / officer working Group comprising a Member from each Group and add to its remit a role to keep under review member support and development. The working group be retitled the Constitution and Member Support Working Group.
8. That the Constitution be amended to reflect these changes.
9. That the Group Leaders with the Chief Executive keep under review the arrangements for scrutiny to ensure that these are efficient and effective in line with the comments made in this report.
10. That the Constitution and Member Support Working Group gives consideration and makes recommendation on the scheduling of meetings to make best use of Member and officer time.

1. Context

- 1.1 In December 2014 the Council invited an LGA Peer Review team to conduct a review of its democratic decision making structures. The review reported in January 2015 and a copy of the report is contained in full at Appendix 1 of this report.
- 1.2 The review was commissioned as part of a wider organisational review of the Council's democratic arrangements which also included consideration of the Council's election cycle and the overall size of the council (i.e. the number of elected Members). It was considered that due to the fact the Council had triggered an electoral review by the Boundary Commission that priority should be given to consideration of the future size of the Council and to the related matter of the cycle of elections. It was agreed therefore to hold over progressing the consideration of committee arrangements until the first two issues had been addressed, but in the meantime to invite all committees to consider the findings of the LGA Peer Review and to ask for their comments.
- 1.3 At meetings of the Council held on 25 November 2015 the Council agreed to adopt a four year cycle of council elections and to ask the Boundary Committee to consider a future size of Council in the range of 42 to 48 members. These changes would be implemented with effect from the local elections in May 2018. These issues having been addressed, it is appropriate for consideration to return to the matter of the council's committee arrangements.

2. Findings of the Peer Review

- 2.1 The LGA Peer Review team noted that the current democratic decision making arrangements demand a lot of time from both Members and officers. This arises from the extensive array of formally constituted committees and panels. The review team noted that the number of committees and committee positions is very large when compared with similar district and borough councils benchmarked by the team. They noted that the number of meetings (well over 100 per year) is amongst the highest of the benchmark authorities. Similarly, the number of committee positions is 3.6 per councillor compared to an average of 2.6 amongst the comparator councils.
- 2.2 The approach taken by the Peer Review Team to dealing with the current demands of the council's committee arrangements is to propose a number of mergers and in some cases to suggest the disbanding of some committees. These proposals have been reviewed by all committees and the feedback is helpful in informing the response made to these recommendations.
- 2.3 Whilst proposing certain changes to the current committee arrangements, the Peer Review Team also recognise the need to address the issue of informing members.
- 2.4 The Peer Review recognised and made recommendations for actions to improve the business practices of committees which included the format of reports and circulation of the agendas. The review recognised the actions which were already in hand in the council and this has been further progressed since the review reported with changes to agenda circulation and ongoing work on agenda formats using modern gov. This will need to continue and will assist the situation but cannot be seen as a total solution without addressing the more fundamental matter of the number of meetings.
- 2.5 The Peer Review also identifies and makes recommendations in respect of the scheme of delegations. A theme which runs through their report and one which is picked up as a recommendation is that there would be scope to extend the

delegations which would bring the council more into line with practice in other councils and that this would of itself lighten the load of decisions which need to be brought through a formal committee process.

3. Peer Review Recommendations

3.1 The Peer Review Report makes recommendations for a number of committees to be merged, combined or disbanded. The specific recommendations are as follows:

- Merge/amalgamate the Public Protection Committee and Licensing Committees
- Merge/amalgamate the Audit and Risk and Standards Committees
- Merge/amalgamate the Active and Cohesive Communities and Health and Well Being Scrutiny Committees
- Review the continued needs for the Staffing Committee
- Review some of the historical / legacy arrangements, such as the Joint Parking Committee and Conservation Advisory Working Party, and whether the Council should continue to service these bodies

3.2 The Finance, Resources and Partnerships Scrutiny Committee (FRAPS) has coordinate responses from each Committee to the recommendations of the Peer Review. FRAPS discussed the comments at its meeting on 4 November 2015. The Committee resolved the following:

- i) That the Audit and Risk and Standards Committees be merged
- ii) That the Staffing Committee be disbanded
- iii) That the Joint Parking Committee be disbanded
- iv) That the Member Development Committee be disbanded

3.3 The Scrutiny Committee did not support the recommendation to make the Constitution Working Group a Committee of Council. The reason for this was that it is considered desirable to maintain the all-party representation through a single member for each Group, creating the Constitution Working Group as a Committee of Council would require it to be politically proportional in its membership which is considered to be at odds with the way the Working Group has and wishes to function.

3.4 The Scrutiny Committee also supported the notion of having 'mirror image' membership of the Licencing Committee and the Public Protection Committee with both Committees being sized at 15 Members.

4. Implications of other governance changes

4.1 The Council has resolved that in future the number of councillors making up the Council should be in the range of 42 to 48. Such a change will be the subject of an electoral review to be undertaken by the Boundary Committee for England. This work will commence in August 2016 and is expected to report in May 2017 with any changes being implemented at the date of the council elections in May 2018.

4.2 It is reasonable to assume based upon the experience of other councils that the Boundary Commission is likely to endorse the Council's own view about the number of councillors making up the Council. This being the case, it would be advisable to plan at an early stage for future committee arrangements which are likely to be sustainable when the number of councillors is considerably less. The LGA Peer Review has confirmed that the council is already at the top of the comparator range in terms of the number of meetings and the number of committee positions which it is

required to service. This situation will become even more extreme when the number of councillors is reduced.

5. The Council's governance arrangements

- 5.1 The Borough Council operates a Leader and Cabinet governance model. This was adopted by the Council in 2000 and has been operating since that time. The Cabinet and Leader model replaced the Committee system which is an alternative governance model. In the Peer Review report it states that Newcastle is "..... operating a de facto committee system alongside a Leader and Cabinet model of executive arrangements with all the additional demands on officer time that this implies. Some of the Overview and Scrutiny Committees appear to operate like services committees and the existence of others, such as the Staffing Committee, are out of kilter with current practice in other authorities and seem focussed on operational matters that are usually in the domain of officers." The report goes on to state that the current arrangements "puts an unnecessary and unsustainable demand on the organisation and its capacity and resources, which due to the financial challenges facing local government are continuing to decrease."

6. The meetings culture

- 6.1 The Peer Review team carried out a detailed survey of councillors to inform their work in addition to the detailed interviews which they undertook whilst on site. They noted that "councillors highly value the principles of all debates and decision making being carried out in formally constituted committee meetings which meet in public and supported by formal agendas and minutes". However, the Peer Review team considered that "given the important role councillors have in the overall relationship between Council and community, lessening the demands of meeting attendance will allow these roles and relationships to develop further and crucially 'free up' reducing officer resources to focus on service delivery."
- 6.2 The Peer Review also noted the impact which the meetings culture has in terms of the resources which these processes consume. "The time and resource required to service and support these mean officers are stretched and are focused on 'feeding the machine' rather than 'doing the day job'."
- 6.3 The Peer Review team summarised the combined impact on both Members and officers of sustaining such a high volume of formal meetings as follows: "The sheer volume may also be compromising the quality of committee servicing and support, evidenced by the high number of supplementary papers and replacement reports correcting errors. This in turn puts additional pressure on those trying to read the reports in advance of meetings, and arguably diminished the quality of discussion and debate."
- 6.4 In the period 2008/9 to 2016/17 the Council's resource base has reduced by 46%. In the comparative period, the number of formal meetings of the Council has increased with an array of panels and working groups being added to the existing formal structures of Council, Cabinet, statutory committees and overview and scrutiny committees. The Peer Review has provided very sound evidence that the current position is unsustainable from both an officer and a Member perspective. In summary, with significantly reduced resources officers are finding it increasingly difficult to service the demands of the current committee arrangements; further this very process is demanding more time from Members. The Peer Review team is of the view that the Council may be substituting quantity of activity for quality.

7. The nature of the problem

- 7.1 The Council has adopted a Leader and Cabinet model of governance. In this model the majority of routine decisions lie in the hands of the Members making up the Cabinet. Whilst this arrangement was put forward in the Local Government Act 2000 as a model which can speed decision making, which indeed it does, most councils have had to address one of the attendant challenges which is how to ensure that other members of the council feel part of the decision making process. It would be argued that this is something which needs to be addressed through the operation of the political groups. However, in most councils other mechanisms have had to be found for dealing with the information needs of members not in the Cabinet.
- 7.2 This issue was picked up by the Peer Review team. They noted that “the current arrangements appear to be seen by non-executive members as a range of opportunities to feel involved and informed, rather than part of a decision-making system.” This is reinforced by their desktop analysis which indicated that 40% of reports on agenda for meetings in the period they considered were ‘for information’. This provides evidence of the fact that in this council’s case the existence of committees is in a number of situations providing routes for members to be informed or to feel involved with the work of the council rather than actually taking decisions. In summary the Peer Review notes that “councillors appear to rely heavily on committee meetings and agendas/reports for their information.”
- 7.3 Although not a specific consideration of the Peer Review, this issue is particularly well illustrated by the meetings of the Council itself. Both in terms of Statute and the Council’s Constitution the decisions which are reserved to the Council itself are relatively small in number. However, a convention has grown up for the Council to receive reports from all of its Committees and also from the Cabinet, although there is no legal or Constitutional requirement for this. The main purpose seems to be to ensure that all Members are informed about the work of all the Council’s committees an evident information rather than decision-making role.
- 7.4 A similar position is replicated by the overview and scrutiny committees where a very high proportion of the work is focused on pre-decision scrutiny of decisions to be taken by the Cabinet and to receive information reports on the work of officers falling within the remit of the particular committee. This would seem to confirm the view of the Peer Review team that “some of the overview and scrutiny committees appear to operate like service committees.” They confirm that the principles of good scrutiny are that they should cover the issues that matter to local people, it should be ‘narrow and deep’ rather than ‘broad and shallow’. It is evident that the current scrutiny arrangements are fulfilling more of an information and involvement role for members rather than the task of scrutiny.
- 7.5 The Council had a separate peer review to consider the future shape of scrutiny in 2011. This review made a recommendation that the council should consider having task and complete scrutiny studies rather than the standing thematic scrutiny committee arrangements. In the most recent peer review the team noted that the council has both standing committees and task and finish groups. They propose that scrutiny arrangements need to be flexible enough to adapt to changing circumstances. They also propose that scrutiny reviews should be properly scoped, task and finish, rather than on-going. The same lead officer served on both of the peer reviews and was highly surprised that the council now operated both thematic scrutiny committees and task and complete groups. This was contrary to what was intended following the recommendation of the earlier review, hence the comments made about scrutiny in the recent report.

- 7.6 The impact which lack of discipline over the work of scrutiny is having on officer time is clearly brought out by the Peer Review Team. They note that “scrutiny committee work-plans should not be agreed without some consideration of the officer resources available to support them.” The Peer Review Report makes recommendation to merge some scrutiny committees but clearly states that “the council may wish to consider being more radical in the reduction of the number of scrutiny committees.”
- 7.7 Whilst on occasion committee, panel or working party arrangements have been set up on a task and complete basis in an attempt to limit the risk of mission creep and drift, there has been a lack of discipline applied to these arrangements and many have sustained a role beyond that of the initial remit. There are a number of examples of where task and complete arrangements have turned into standing arrangements. This is picked up by the Peer Review team and they propose that legacy arrangements should be identified and addressed. Arrangements for areas of work which have been concluded or are no longer relevant should result in the committee being wound up.
- 7.8 In summary there are three key issues which the Peer Review has helped identify:
- The Leader and Cabinet model of governance has created an information and involvement role for councillors which is currently being met by the inappropriate use of committees to fulfil these needs.
 - The scrutiny process has become poorly focussed and ill-disciplined. The scrutiny process is consuming a very significant amount of resources in member but particularly officer time which is diverting resources from delivery at a time when resources have been and will continue to be under pressure. Scrutiny has become another vehicle through which Members receive information and seek to feel involved and this results in the role to provide scrutiny being blunted or non-existent.
 - Committees established on a task and complete basis have in certain cases been allowed to drift and maintain a life beyond their original remit and purpose.
- 7.9 The headline is that the council currently has very cumbersome and resource intensive committee arrangements. Due to the reductions in resources these are now placing a very heavy overhead on officer time which is proving costly to resource and is diverting resources from other priority work. It is anticipated that the number of members will also be reduced in the near future and that work should be set in hand to plan for committee arrangements which will be sustainable in the longer term.

8. Responding to the Peer Review recommendations

- 8.1 The Peer Review proposes committee mergers as a method for reducing the demands of the current arrangements. Whilst mergers are a way of reducing the demands of the current committee arrangements it is not the only option. Reducing the frequency of meetings is an option which the Peer Review did not consider. In relation to scrutiny in particular, there is an option to set a limit on the resources which are allocated to support this function, for example some councils give scrutiny committees an allowance of scrutiny days and there is a requirement for specific pieces of scrutiny work to be commissioned within this finite resource allocation.

- 8.2 The Peer Review also hints at whether all of the committees which are currently serviced by the council need to be operated in this way. They give the example of the former Sports Committee which was previously serviced by the council and now operates as an independent sports coordination body for the Borough without council support. The Peer Review team also suggest that some activities which are currently constituted as formal committees and therefore requiring formal agendas, reports and minutes do not need to operate in this way. Again they hint at the use of less formal arrangements which may serve the same purpose but with less overhead to maintain them.
- 8.3 The analysis in this report has shown that in very large part the council's current committee arrangements are an unintended and unforeseen consequence of the adoption of the Leader and Cabinet model under the Local Government Act 2000. With key decisions in the hands of a relatively small number of councillors there will be a heightened need to ensure that other councillors are informed about the business of the council and to feel involved in its work. The response has therefore been to create a set of committee arrangements which fulfil these needs. It is also known that this is a situation not unique to this council. However, what has been demonstrated by the Peer Review work is that the extent and impact of this is far greater in this council than in others and is at risk of having a detrimental impact on the work of the council, which is also dysfunctional for members. Whilst creating more meetings may have helped members feel more informed it has created additional work for them and may not be the most effective way of keeping councillors well briefed.
- 8.4 The response to the challenge of reducing the number of committees is therefore not only the practical task of having less meetings but also of dealing with the information and involvement role which they are serving for members.

9. Legacy arrangements

- 9.1 In the survey that the review team carried out of councillors, all respondents identified changes to the number of committees as they type of change they would be most likely to support. Indeed, it showed that 81% of respondents strongly supported reducing the number of committees. This contrasts with none being in favour of reducing the size of committees and only 19% who supported changing the times of meetings. This shows therefore that there is universal recognition of and support for the need to reduce the number of formal council committee meetings.
- 9.2 The Peer Review has identified a number of legacy matters which could be progressed immediately and which would start to ease the current demands on the system.
- 9.3 It is suggested that the legacy committees be disbanded. This would include the following:
- Joint Parking Committee
 - Member Development Panel
 - Capital Cabinet Panel
 - Cabinet Panel – Concurrent Funding
 - Revenue Investment and Budget Support Cabinet Panel

- 9.4 The FRAP Scrutiny Committee specifically endorsed the recommendation of the Peer Review report to disband the Joint Parking Committee and the Member Development Panel.
- 9.5 Ensure that current task and finish committees are wound up on completion, this would include:
- Recycling and Waste Strategy Cabinet Panel
 - Asset Policy Committee
 - Governance Committee
- 9.6 It is suggested that the following committees which are constituted as formal groups supported by Democratic Services become Member / officer working groups supported by the relevant Executive Director or Head of Service:
- Kidsgrove Leisure Centre Working Group
 - Newcastle Almshouse Charity
 - Cabinet Panel Community Centres
 - Parish Councils Forum
- 9.7 Members will be aware that Cabinet Panels are established by the Cabinet and it is therefore not within the remit for the Council to determine whether these be disbanded. The recommendations relating to this report therefore contain no reference to Cabinet Panels.

10. Merger of Committees

- 10.1 The matter of Committee mergers is a route to reduce the amount of committee workload. Mergers of committees with overlapping remits is a sensible step but needs to be taken advisedly and in doing so ensure that workload is also rationalised to avoid creating super-committees which have unrealistic workloads. The consultations which have taken place with committees has given some valuable insights which can inform how any changes are taken forward.
- 10.2 Audit and Risk Committee and Standards Committee: The Peer Review report makes the case for the Audit and Risk and the Standards Committees to be merged to create an Audit and Governance Committee. There is a high degree of synergy between the work of the two existing committees and from the feedback from Members serving on the existing committees it is evident that this is a prudent step and that a combined committee would have a realistic and synergistic work programme. This proposal was endorsed by the FRAP Scrutiny Committee.
- 10.3 Public Protection Committee and Licencing Committee: The Peer Review Report proposes that the Public Protection Committee and Licencing Committee be amalgamated. It is noted that a single committee covering all of the functions of those two committees is common practice in other councils. However, it should be noted that these two Committees as responsible for two discrete areas of licencing working under two distinct sets of statutory provisions. The Public Protection Committee under the provisions of the local government Act 1972 and the Licencing Committee under the Licencing Act 2003 and Licencing Act 2005.
- 10.4 Given the semi-judicial nature of these Committees care needs to be taken to ensure that Members serving on them are given adequate training. Members will be aware that to facilitate the participation of businesses and their representatives where this is

required sub-committees of the Licensing Committee have met during the daytime. It should be noted that on occasion, due to other commitments on the part of some Committee Members, it has been challenging for a suitable quorum of Members. It may therefore be prudent in making changes to these committees to enlarge the size of the Public Protection Committee to standardise the number of Members on each Committee at 15 places. In making nominations, Group Leaders should advise their Members of the daytime meeting requirements of these roles.

- 10.5 Whilst the Peer Review recommendation to amalgamate the two committees has merit, some eminent legal authorities maintain that Parliament's intention under the Licencing Act 2003 was to create a standalone licensing committee. This being the case it may be prudent at this time for the Council to retain the separate entities of a Licencing Committee and a Public Protection Committee but that identical nominations be made to the two Committees and that meetings be scheduled so that they run sequentially on the same day. On the basis of the workload of the two committees over the past two years, this is considered to be a practical proposal. This arrangement would give efficiencies since the officer time involved in supporting the meeting would be less where the businesses of the two Committees is conducted on a 'back-to-back' arrangement.
- 10.6 It is proposed therefore that the Peer Review recommendation to bring together the operation of two existing committees be accepted but constitutionally to retain the two distinct Committee roles. In practice this would mean have each Committee sized at 15 members with identical nominations to each. This proposal was endorsed by the FRAP Scrutiny Committee.
- 10.7 Staffing Committee and Employee Consultative Committee: The Peer Review report states that the team was not certain of the role of the Staffing Committee and how it adds value to decision-making. Concerns were expressed that it may add unnecessary delay to the process of getting relatively minor policy updates approved, or escalates issues which might be resolved more quickly and collaboratively at a lower level.
- 10.8 The Staffing Committee has two remits firstly to be responsible for the adoption and amendment of all employment policies and second to make arrangements for Members to determine employee appeals. The Head of Human Resources has been working with the Council's recognised Trade Unions and has drafted a new Joint Recognition Agreement. Within this agreement it is proposed to establish a Joint Negotiating and Consultation Committee. This Committee would take the place of the current Employee Consultative Committee. It is proposed that the Joint Negotiating and Consultation Committee should also take on the role of policy adoption and amendment currently performed by the Staffing Committee. The Joint Negotiating and Consultation Committee would comprise elected Members, local Trade Union representatives, the Head of Paid Service (Chief Executive) or Executive Director Resources and Support Services and Head of Human Resources. The representatives on the Joint Negotiating and Consultation Committee have voting rights.
- 10.9 Regarding the Staffing Committee's remit in respect of employee appeals it is recommended that a Member Appeal Panel be established to perform this function. Members forming the Panel would be provided with the relevant training to support them in this role.
- 10.10 In summary it is suggested that the Staffing Committee and Employee Consultative Committee both be disbanded and replaced by a Joint Negotiating and Consultation

Committee. The Joint Negotiating and Consultation Committee would perform the functions of the current Employee Consultative Committee and the policy formulation and adoption role of the Staffing Committee. That a Member Appeal Panel be established to hear employee appeals under the relevant policy.

11. Other Committees

- 11.1 Constitution Working Group: The Constitution Working Group is an advisory body and comprises a representative of each Group. This body reviews potential changes to the Council's Constitution to ensure that it is in line with current legal requirements, conventions and procedures and best practice. Members have expressed a very clear view that this should be an all-party body and that it should not be subject to the rules of political proportionality but rather each Group be represented by a single member. In order for this to be achieved it should not therefore become a formally constituted committee of the Council or a Cabinet Panel. It is therefore proposed that the Constitution Working Group be retained in its present form and that its role continues to be to advise the Council on amendments to the Constitution on an all-party basis. This proposal is endorsed by the FRAP Scrutiny Committee. The Constitution Working Group oversaw a full review of the Council's Constitution in 2012. There continues to be a need to update the Constitution on a regular basis to reflect changes to legislation and to ensure that the Council's working practice remain in line with best practice. The Constitution Working Group provides a valuable forum for the officers who are responsible for initiating these changes to discuss with Members how they are best reflected in the Council's Constitution. It is therefore recommended that the Constitution Working Group take the form of a Member / officer working group supported by the relevant senior officers. The Working Group will report by making direct recommendations to Council or Cabinet as may be required.
- 11.2 Member Development Panel: It has been recommended that the Member Development Panel be disbanded and this was a proposal which was endorsed by FRAPS. However, the Panel has done some very important work and has a remit to advise on Member support and development. If this element of the work of the Member Development Panel were to be lost there is a risk that there would be no vehicle for Members being able to consider their own support and development needs. It is therefore recommended that Members should consider asking the Constitution Working Group to widen its remit to encompass Member support and development.
- 11.3 Conservation Advisory Working Party: The Conservation Working Group is an advisory Committee which makes comments to the Planning Committee on matters which affect the historic environment and in particular on applications for planning permission, listed building consent, conservation area consent and advertisement consent and to recommend on conservation policy. It is held on a three-weekly cycle in order to facilitate efficient decision-making on applications for permission or consent. Its members are drawn from Borough Councillors and representatives of local organisations and a representative of each Parish Council.
- 11.4 In terms of officer resources it is supported by one specialist member of staff. In view of the importance of achieving good quality design in historically important parts of the Borough it is considered that this group should be retained. However, it is suggested that in light of work which has been undertaken to improve the work scheduling of agendas and the meeting arrangements of the Planning Committee the Constitution Advisory Working Party should consider the frequency with which it meets.

12. Scrutiny

- 12.1 The Peer Review is critical of the current arrangements in respect of scrutiny. It is evident that the Council's current arrangements are highly resource intensive and it is questionable how much scrutiny the current committees have been delivering. It is evident that the current arrangements are providing a great deal of information for members much of which may not be related to any scrutiny activity and going forward it will be important to consider how this need is met in a different way.
- 12.2 The Peer Review report is clear in its recommendation regarding scrutiny. "The principles of good scrutiny are that they should cover the issues that matter to local people, it should be 'narrow and deep' rather than 'broad and shallow' and that all scrutiny reviews should be properly scoped, task and finish, rather than on-going and have realistic timescales. There needs to be a discipline to ensure scrutiny doesn't drift.
- 12.3 In considering an early draft of this report, the Group Leaders have asked the Chief Executive to give further consideration to the potential future operation of the Council's scrutiny arrangements. The Scrutiny Committees have been refreshed following the Borough elections in May 2016. The Chief Executive has met with the Chairs of the scrutiny committees and it has been agreed that it would be useful for there to be a regular programme of meetings with the chairs to ensure that the scrutiny process keeps a focus, area of common interest are coordinated and there is a discipline on the use of resources deployed by the scrutiny committees. In order to support this, the Chairs are developing briefs for the pieces of scrutiny work to be undertaken during the course of the coming year. The Chairs will work closely with the Senior Democratic Services Officer who will support them to deliver their work programme as set out in the agreed briefs. It is incumbent on the Members of the scrutiny committees to ensure that the agreed work programme is delivered and that there are clear outcomes from the work of scrutiny committees.
- 12.4 It is not proposed to make any changes to the arrangements for scrutiny at this time, but the situation will be kept under review by the Group Leaders in light of the comments made by the Peer Review in their report.

13. Cycles of meetings

- 13.1 The Peer Review report did not make comment on the issue of the number of meetings which each committee had in a year, but in the analysis of comparative authorities it did provide information on the average number of meetings which committees have in a year. The average across the comparator group was 5.8 with this council at the upper end of the range with an average of 7 meetings per year for each committee. Whilst reducing the number of meetings can help reduce overheads, particularly those associated with the officer time to prepare agendas, reports and minutes, if not handled sensitively there is a risk that this can result in fewer meetings but those which are held having very long agendas. However, a recent analysis has indicated that it is not uncommon for meetings to be cancelled due to a genuine lack of businesses. It is therefore suggested that it may be advisable to the Constitution Working Group to review their cycle of meetings to see if there was scope to reschedule each committee with one less meeting in the year. Taken in the round this action would bring Newcastle into line with comparator authorities.

14. Information requirements of Members

- 14.1 The Peer Review report very clearly identifies the fact that Members are using the current committee arrangements to service their need for information and also as a way of feeling involved in the council's businesses. The team noted that based on their analysis, councillors "saw being involved in committee meetings as the key role of a councillor at Newcastle." The review report recommends that there "may be a need to consider a re-balancing the role of councillors and the shape and structure of decision-making required to enable an emphasis on local community leadership in communities as well as attending and participating in formal committee meetings."
- 14.2 The peer review team noted that the council used to have a Member Information Bulletin and recommended that it may be timely to "consider reintroducing something that enables councillors to be kept informed on major developments so that they don't feel the need to attend committee meetings and/or request committee agendas as a way of keeping in touch". If other recommendations identified in this report were taken forward and this resulted in time being freed up in the Democratic Services team and in the wider organisation it would be possible to use some of the resource to reinstate a Member Bulletin as the vehicle for providing the information which is provided to members in 'for information' and similar committee reports.
- 14.3 As regards being involved in the work of the council through meetings, it is fair to recognise that formal council meetings are not the only avenue for such involvement and indeed it could be argued that time spent in meetings internal to the council are taking away from time which members can spend in their wards. There are a number of examples of where work in communities would be much enhanced by the active involvement of members in community meetings which includes the work of the Locality Action Partnerships.
- 14.4 There may be a cultural requirement for the Group Leaders to consider the balance of time which members spend on internal council meetings and externally facing community based meetings. The Council is a signatory to the West Midlands Member Development Charter. This recognises explicitly the importance of the local councillor working within the community to solve problems and champion local needs. Further, the LGAs Councillors Handbook which is issued each year gives a detailed explanation of the role of councillors within the council and the community. It may be that insufficient recognition is given to the community aspect of the Member role over that accorded to the role in formal council meetings. This may be about giving more recognition and validity to a council which is externally rather than internally focussed.

15. Timing of meetings

- 15.1 Although not considered as part of the brief of the Peer Review there has been discussion within the Council about the timing of meetings. By convention the majority of the council's formal meetings start at 7pm. As part of wider moves to ensure that the council is efficient in the way it conducts its business it has been suggested that consideration be given by Members about whether this is the most convenient time in view of the other demands on the time of both Members and officers.
- 15.2 As part of recent discussions with the Trades Unions about the removal of the officer evening meeting allowance it has been agreed that efforts should be made by elected Members to seek to be more efficient in the use of officer time attending meetings out of normal office hours.

15.3 It is suggested that the Constitution Working Group be asked to give this matter greater consideration and to make recommendations for whether there are ways in which meetings could be scheduled to be more efficient on the time of Members and officers. In doing this the Working Group would also be asked to make recommendations about other practices which could be adopted by convention which may assist the business management of meetings to promote efficient use of time and also to consider this in relation to meetings where members of the public, consultees or others are present.

16. Conclusion

16.1 This report has been discussed by all of the Group Leaders. They have requested that Council considers proposals to implement those recommendations which are within the remit of Council to determine. For clarity, the authority to establish or cease Cabinet Panels lies with the Cabinet and there are therefore no recommendations concerning these in this report.

16.2 In considering the LGA Peer Review Report the Group Leaders have also given further consideration to the issue of Member training and development. The Group Leaders have asked the Chief Executive to develop some proposals for consideration and these will be taken forward over the coming months. This is also a matter which it is proposed would form part of the remit of the Constitution Working Group.