

## **STANDARDS COMMITTEE**

**27 JUNE 2024**

### **PRESENT**

Councillor D. Western (in the Chair).

Councillors D. Acton, P. Eckersley, W. Frass, E.R. Parker, H. K. Spencer, B.G. Winstanley.

Co-opted Members: Mr. C.E.J. Griffiths, Mr R. Brown, Mr. A. Rudden and Mr M. Whiting.

#### In attendance

Dominique Sykes  
Harry Callaghan

Director of Legal & Governance and Monitoring Officer  
Democratic Officer

### **APOLOGIES**

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors K. Procter, S. Zhi, M. Cordingley and S.J. Gilbert.

#### **14. ATTENDANCES**

The Chair and Vice-Chair were not present at the meeting. The Democratic Officer asked if any Councillors would nominate themselves to take the Chair. Councillor Western nominated herself and this was moved and seconded.

RESOLVED: That Councillor Western chair the meeting.

#### **15. MEMBERSHIP OF THE COMMITTEE 2024/25**

RESOLVED: That the membership be noted.

#### **16. TERMS OF REFERENCE 2024/25**

RESOLVED: That the terms of reference be noted.

#### **17. MINUTES**

RESOLVED: That the minutes of the meeting held on 7<sup>th</sup> March 2024, be approved as an accurate record and signed by the Chair.

#### **18. CONSTITUTIONAL REVIEW 2024**

Councillor Western (in the Chair) introduced the report which had been completed by the Monitoring Officer and the Constitutional Working Group (CWG). The Chair highlighted a set of amendments shared by the Liberal Democrat group in writing which were to be considered in the meeting.

The Monitoring Officer informed the Committee that the CWG was a cross-party group, convening on an ad-hoc basis to look at the Council's Constitution. The

**Standards Committee**  
**27.6.24**

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group convened following the amended Motion 7a – Focus on Trafford – being carried at the Council meeting on the 18<sup>th</sup> March 2024. The objective of the CWG meetings was to look specifically at improving the quality of meetings of the full Council. The CWG had had two meetings and reached out to group leaders to explore the Constitutional changes that groups would like to see. Discussions in the meetings and feedback from Leaders had brought together the report laid out in the agenda.

The Committee had been provided with some written comments submitted by Councillor Frass prior to the meeting. The Monitoring Officer had provided comments and responses to points made by Councillor Frass. The Monitoring Officer proposed that the Committee start by discussing and commenting on the report, then move onto discussing the amendments suggested by Councillor Frass, with any suggested amendments then taken back to the CWG. The CWG did not have to take on the suggestions of the Committee, however, areas suggested by either Standards or Scrutiny, which the CWG did not agree with, would be referenced in the report that went to Council.

Councillor Acton criticised the current process in the Council Chamber and applauded the work done by the CWG to produce the report.

Mr. Griffiths, around moving petitions from full Council to the Executive, asked whether the Executive was as open a forum as full Council with the same exposure. The Monitoring Officer responded that the discussion had around petitions was looking at the experience for the petitioner and how the conversation might be more interactive at an Executive meeting. Mr. Griffiths followed up, asking how many petitions had met the threshold in the past 12 months. The Monitoring Officer did not have the exact figure, but that it was less than six. The Chair added that the general feeling of the CWG was that the Executive provided a less daunting and more informal experience.

Mr. Brown asked if the overriding intention of the report was to improve discussion at Council meetings. The Monitoring Officer responded that it was.

Councillor Spencer enquired what the CWG's feelings and discussions were around questions from Members at Council which were casework related, and whether this was the correct forum for these to be asked. The Monitoring Officer responded that there was a long discussion around how to tackle these questions. The focus of the discussion was to look at improving how casework enquiries were handled to ensure Members were aware of which were the right channels and right people to contact before bringing it to Council. Councillor Spencer agreed with this, recognising the impact casework questions were having.

Councillor Frass asked whether there was an option to offer petitioners the choice to present to either the Executive or full Council. The Monitoring Officer responded that the CWG considered this, however, it was agreed that this was an unfair decision to give someone.

Councillor Frass felt that casework questions were brought by Members to full Council, sometimes as a last resort, knowing that the appropriate channels did not

**Standards Committee**  
**27.06.2024**

provide sufficient or timely response, and as such bringing it to Council provided the opportunity to place the issue on the public record. Councillor Eckersley supported these comments. The Monitoring Officer recognised that the casework process needed to be reviewed and to be worked on outside of Standards.

Councillor Eckersley asked if the report was suggesting that questions which had been answered prior would be brought to the meeting, as had been the case in recent meetings. The Monitoring Officer referred to two points behind this. Members questions were to be taken as read, moving straight through to any supplementary questions, with the agenda item limited to a ten-minute timeframe.

Councillor Acton felt taking petitions to the Executive moving forward was sensible, with the opportunity for relevant Executive Members able to answer and speak to the petitions directly. Councillor Acton also agreed with the new approach to questions.

Councillor Eckersley asked if petitions could be acknowledged at full Council, to ensure that all Members were aware of any ongoing or discussed petitions. The Monitoring Officer responded that in the past work had been done to improve the tracking of petitions on the Council's website. The officer added further it could be considered to bring an annual report of petitions to full Council. Councillor Eckersley felt it important that Councillors were aware of the progress of petitions. The Monitoring Officer stressed that the CWG wanted the current petition process to be copied over to the Executive, which as such would be mean that all parties would be made aware when a petition was going to the Executive to allow Members to attend.

Councillor Spencer pointed to section 5.3 of the report, where reference was made to order of parties and queried what the mechanism was for deciding the order for which parties appear in the political balance. The Monitoring Officer informed the Member that order of party was based on number of seats on the Council. When two or more parties had the same number of seats, it goes to the length of time a party had been on the Council. Councillor Spencer felt that this was not the fairest way to decide this, however, the Monitoring Officer added that a change such as this would need to be raised in a different forum.

The Committee then proceeded to discuss amendments provided to Members prior to the meeting from Councillor Frass. The Monitoring Officer had also provided responses to the amendments made by Councillor Frass which had also been circulated with Members in the meeting.

The Monitoring Officer, in response to the second point made by Councillor Frass on the discretion of the Executive Chair to possibly abandon the principles of the current petition scheme in the future, apologised for any confusion. The intention would be to seek endorsement from the current Chair of the Executive Committee to propose the move of petitions to the Executive forum. Once the decision to move petitions was ratified by Council, it would become permanent protocol and fall outside of the Chair's discretion.

The CWG had agreed that the basis of petitions would be lifted from Council to the Executive.

**Standards Committee**  
**27.6.24**

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Councillor Frass had made a further recommendation to limit the number of questions per member in any given full Council meeting to one. The Monitoring Officer informed the Committee that the CWG had discussed limiting the number of questions from Members, however, this was moved away from. The Monitoring Officer did however provide a possible recommendation on questions, to limit it to two questions per group, rather than by Member. This could have been taken back to the CWG if agreed by the Committee.

Councillor Frass was concerned around the order of questions asked being determined by political balance, putting Liberal Democrat or Green Councillors at risk of not being heard, and as such had suggested alternating. Councillor Frass agreed that limiting the question by party to two would solve this issue.

In response to a question from Councillor Eckersley on the number of questions and political balance, the Monitoring Officer confirmed that it would be a maximum of two questions per group, which would then be put into political balance.

Councillor Spencer asked if any thought had been given about an extra party on the Council. The Chair confirmed that the proposals would be reviewed, but this would be further down the line with the next Local Elections in 2026.

Councillor Frass asked what the scope would be for an independent Member. The Monitoring Officer confirmed that they would be considered a group within their own right.

Councillor Eckersley asked if there had been discussion on the ideal timeframe for questions to be prepped for full Council. The Monitoring Officer confirmed that a secondary piece of work would be required to establish the deadlines of motions and questions, with a requirement for Members to be aware of any changes to the timeline. However, the Monitoring Officer confirmed that the report did suggest that this would be looked at.

Mr. Brown asked whether any of the proposed changes affected the recording or minuting of meetings. The Monitoring Officer confirmed that the Executive was recorded same as Council, with minutes taken in the same way. Questions at Council would also still be published on the website prior to the meeting.

The Monitoring Officer clarified that the Committee had agreed to the overall 10-minute time limit on questions and the limit to two per group.

On motions, Councillor Frass and the Liberal Democrat group raised concern around the limit of five motions in a Council meeting, disincentivising cross-party working, and had suggested provision for a further option to allow one cross-party motion. The Monitoring Officer confirmed that this had been discussed at the CWG, however, it was agreed not to proceed.

Councillor Frass felt not having this option disincentivised groups from working together as it means sacrificing their one slot to be the lead group on the Motion. Councillor Eckersley, in contrary, felt that if a significant cross-party motion was

**Standards Committee**  
**27.06.2024**

being tabled, groups would want to be seen as the lead party. Councillor Winstanley agreed with this point.

Councillor Frass raised the issue of deadlines for amendments and motions for full Council, and asked if all deadlines would move commensurately. The Monitoring Officer understood Councillor Frass and noted that it needed looking at in one piece of work to ensure the process is fair for all Members and Officers.

Councillor Spencer added that when considering this in the future, thought be given to how long Members have to consider motions / amendments, to ensure that Council is as accessible and inclusive environment as possible. The Monitoring Officer stressed that they were doing their utmost to ensure that in terms of decisions and agendas, the programmes behind those were proactive rather than reactive. This work had started with the Executive Forward Plan, with the Executive agenda moving to be set three months in advance, with a hope to move this to six months.

Following discussions, the Committee endorsed the recommendations of the CWG as set out in the report and recommend the CWG add a 10-minute limit and the number of Member questions to two per political group at any given meeting of the full Council.

Mr. Whiting enquired if when the constitution was reviewed, would it be written in plain English. The Monitoring Officer confirmed that this was not currently the case, however, a conscious effort was being made to ensure that Council documents were more easily digested in the future. Mr. Whiting asked whether there was a timescale on this. The Monitoring Officer responded that the current focus was on the website and ensuring that that was customer focused.

Councillor Spencer agreed with this and referred to her point on accessibility earlier. The Monitoring Officer highlighted the difference with what was conveyed to Members being that much of what they are dealt with was statutory; to the public it is important to ensure they are aware that the Council has rules, rather than having to read the rules completely.

**RESOLVED:**

- 1) That the Standards Committee agree the recommended constitutional changes proposed by the Constitutional Working Group as detailed in the report.
- 2) That the Standards Committee recommend to the Constitutional Working Group that in addition to the ten-minute maximum amount of time on the agenda proposed, the number of member questions shall be limited to two per political group in any given meeting of the Full Council.

The meeting commenced at 6.36 pm and finished at 7.31 pm