



# The City Council Meeting

**Role of Full Council**  
**Local Engagement**  
**Debate**  
**Public Questions**  
**Motions**  
**Democracy**  
**Agenda**  
**Participation**

A report from Overview & Scrutiny







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# The City Council Meeting

## Preface

By Cllr Waseem Zaffar

Chair, Corporate Resources O&S Committee



At the start of this municipal year, the Corporate Resources O&S Committee agreed to undertake a review of the arrangements for City Council meetings. This was in response to concerns expressed across the Chamber on the effectiveness of the meetings. We have talked to members and asked members of the public for their views, and this report summarises the key findings.

What came across most strongly is that the City Council meeting must allow more time for discussion of policy matters that affect Birmingham citizens. We are mindful that we cannot go back to the situation prior to 2000: City Council does not have the decision making power it once did and we cannot change that. However, we can bring about substantial change which will better enable members to represent their constituents in the meeting.

Because it is of critical importance that all members of the City Council are able to put forward their views, we have not put forward recommendations in this report but rather proposed suggested actions for debate in the Chamber when the report is presented on 5<sup>th</sup> April. The outcomes from this debate, alongside the evidence in this report, will be fed into the annual review of the Constitution, which will take place in time for the May AGM, where we would expect to see change enacted.

I would like to thank all those who took part and in particular those who shared their ideas for improvement.



# 1 Introduction

## 1.1 “The Premier Debating Chamber”

- 1.1.1 At the City Council meeting on 12<sup>th</sup> January 2016, the Leader was asked by Cllr Paul Tilsley about his plans to bring back items of substance to the City Council meeting. Cllr Tilsley asserted that the current meetings were a pale imitation of what they had been and that more discussion should be brought to give council ownership of important issues.
- 1.1.2 The Leader agreed that there was a need to work cross-party to address the content of full council meetings. He quoted Cllr John Alden, who had said that “this is the premier debating chamber in this country outside Westminster”. The Leader agreed with that and said that there was a need to ensure that City Council meetings have real honest debates and bring items of substance for discussion, such as skills and the economy, and child poverty.
- 1.1.3 This followed earlier comments by the Leader and others, and discussions at Council Business Management Committee (CBM), about how we might improve the effectiveness of the City Council meeting. Indeed, the Corporate Resources O&S Committee had identified the need to review the arrangements for City Council meetings at the start of the municipal year.

## 1.2 Purpose of the Inquiry

- 1.2.1 Therefore, following discussions with the Leader at our January Committee meeting, members of the Committee picked up the challenge laid down at City Council and undertook an inquiry to review the arrangements for City Council meetings, asking “How should the City Council agenda be changed to allow the meeting to play a more effective role in supporting local democracy?”
- 1.2.2 This short inquiry consisted of:
- An evidence gathering session at the committee meeting on 9<sup>th</sup> February;
  - Background research into past practice and Core Cities and West Midlands councils’ practice;
  - Gathering evidence from members, initially via an email invitation to put forward views and then through a survey of all members (17 members responded);
  - A public survey, focusing on public question time (7 members of the public responded).
- 1.2.3 The evidence was reviewed at the Committee meeting on 8<sup>th</sup> March and this report prepared for discussion at City Council on 5<sup>th</sup> April 2016.

### No Recommendations?

- 1.2.4 This report is slightly different to the traditional scrutiny report in that we are not making recommendations, rather a series of suggested actions for consideration by the Leader and CBM.



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- 1.2.5 The reason for this is that the evidence in this report will contribute to the annual review of the Constitution taking place in time for the May AGM. In addition, the intention is that the debate held when this report is discussed at the City Council meeting on the 5<sup>th</sup> April will provide further information for the Leader and CBM to consider.

## 1.3 Context

### A Brief History of the City Council Meeting

- 1.3.1 Prior to 2000, most local authorities delegated functions to committees (although not to individual members) or to officers as it saw fit. The papers for the meetings of many council meetings across the country consisted of the minutes of the various committees. Approval of a committee's minutes by the full council was often the point at which decisions were taken.
- 1.3.2 Following the passing of the Local Government Act 2000, this changed significantly. With powers and duties now vested in the Executive, the majority of decisions are now taken by Cabinet.

### Role of Council

- 1.3.3 Following the 2000 Act, the major decisions falling to full Council relate to approving the constitution, the budget, policy framework plans and bye laws, appointing members to outside bodies and electing the Leader of the Council.
- 1.3.4 The Constitution sets out the role of the City Council meeting. In Part A, Article 10 sets out the responsibilities. In Part B, B1 – Council Standing Orders sets out the procedure at meetings of the City Council meeting.

### Previous Scrutiny Reviews

- 1.3.5 In 2005, the Co-ordinating O&S Committee conducted a review of the Role of Members and the Full Council. The key finding was that the full Council's role needed to be developed so that "full council becomes a key arena for local democracy". It was acknowledged that it was not possible to reinstate the position before 2000, whereby the City Council was the ultimate decision-maker, but that there were ways for members to make more significant contributions on key issues. This could be done by increasing accountability through the full Council, tackling issues that matter and using a set of operating procedures which supports these ends. A number of recommendations were made and implemented. Subsequent changes amended the meeting further, such as the removal of Cabinet Member reports and the addition of public questions.
- 1.3.6 In 2014, the Governance, Resources and Customer Services O&S Committee considered the issue of petitions to the City Council meeting and the agenda was subsequently amended.



## 2 Findings

### 2.1 Key Findings

- 2.1.1 Throughout the evidence received, there was a clear view from members across all political parties that the City Council meeting agenda should be meaningful and allow more time for discussion of policy matters, which in turn should be focused on those policy areas where the City Council has influence.
- 2.1.2 A key proposal made later in the report is that more strategic and policy matters are brought to the City Council meeting, rather than to Cabinet as at present (see section 2.3).
- 2.1.3 In addition, it was felt that backbench members should have more ownership of the meeting agenda, rather than relying wholly on CBM.
- 2.1.4 Detailed findings are set out below.

### 2.2 Existing Items on the Agenda

- 2.2.1 The items already on the City Council agenda were considered, and respondents to the member survey were asked whether these should remain on the agenda, whether they should be modified, or should be removed. The results are set out in Table 1.

#### Lord Mayor's Announcements

- 2.2.2 All members who responded to the questionnaire were in favour of keeping Lord Mayor's Announcements on the agenda. Four of the seventeen respondents, however, thought it should be modified. Suggestions mostly centred on the need to reduce the time spent on this by reconsidering the length of time given to tributes to former councillors. It was acknowledged that "the gesture of a minute's silence and tributes is a lovely one"; however there was a view that it would be sufficiently respectful for "only one/two tributes to members who have passed on". It was suggested that it would be appropriate if someone who knew that person well spoke at the meeting, and that one good quality speech could represent the views of the Chamber.
- 2.2.3 On other announcements, one member suggested that: "It would be nice to congratulate the individual officer in the Chamber for exam and/or a piece of work undertaken to an excellent standard".

#### Suggested Action

- 1. That the approach to Lord Mayor's Announcements be re-considered to ensure that time is kept appropriately short, for example that tributes to former members are kept to one speech on behalf of the Council.



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**Table 1: Existing Agenda Items – Member Survey Results**

	Yes	Yes – with modification	No
Lord Mayor's Announcements	13 (76%)	4 (24%)	0
Petitions	12 (71%)	2 (12%)	3 (18%)
Questions from members of the public to any Cabinet Member or District Committee Chairman	10 (59%)	3 (18%)	4 (24%)
Questions from any Councillor to a Committee Chairman or Lead Member of a Joint Board	12 (71%)	4 (24%)	1 (6%)
Questions from Councillors other than Cabinet Members to a Cabinet Member	14 (82%)	3 (18%)	0
Questions from Councillors other than Cabinet Members to the Leader or Deputy Leader	15 (88%)	2 (12%)	0
Policy Plans or Reports from CBM	11 (65%)	5 (29%)	1 (6%)
Overview & Scrutiny reports	15 (88%)	2 (12%)	0
Motions submitted by individual Councillors rotated equally between the political groups as determined by CBM	13 (76%)	4 (24%)	0

## Petitions

- 2.2.4 Only three members did not agree that petitions should remain on the agenda. Another two thought that petitions should remain with modification. Those who thought it should be removed were in favour of petitions being dealt with outside the chamber and one said that they “add nothing to the value of a full Council Meeting”.
- 2.2.5 Modifications suggested included agreeing petitions *en bloc* (handed in prior to the meeting), and keeping the item short (one suggested that presentation of a petition should not be accompanied by a speech). There was support for the move last year to move petitions to the start of the meeting and a request for a “tracking report in respect of each petition, including reasons for any delays in responding/undertaking the task(s) requested”.

## Questions from Members of the Public

- 2.2.6 Questions from members of the public were introduced in 2012. Between November 2013 and February 2016, 67 questions have been asked by members of the public.
- 2.2.7 In the survey for members of the public, respondents were asked: “Were you aware that members of the public could attend meetings of the full City Council (held in the Council Chamber) to ask questions of the Leader, Deputy Leader, Cabinet Members or District Committee Chairs?” Of the seven respondents, three were aware and four were not. None of those who completed the





questionnaire had asked a question at City Council previously. Nonetheless the facility was felt to be useful by three of the respondents.

2.2.8 Ten of the members who responded to the survey agreed that questions from members of the public to any Cabinet Member or District Committee Chairman should remain without modification; three thought this should be modified, and four that this should not remain on the agenda.

2.2.9 Those in favour of retaining public questions said that having all Councillors hear the concerns of citizens was important “as it puts the public in the room and at the forefront of our minds as we make decisions.” Comments included:

- As it takes place during the day, this limits people from taking part: “Most working people cannot take time off during the working day to come”. One suggestion was that “people should be allowed to send us a short video of them asking question if they can't be there in person”;
- Having the questions vetted in advance and answers prepared is ineffective and “stage managed”;
- Party political points are often made as part of the questions (and there is a suspicion that they are sometime planted).

2.2.10 It was suggested that questions could “be [put] in writing and together with responses circulated to members.”

2.2.11 These findings reflected the discussions of the Committee, where there was some disagreement as to whether they were an important opportunity for citizens to question political leaders and that to remove it would undermine City Council as a means of engagement; or whether they really did represent good engagement.

2.2.12 If public questions were to be removed, the Committee was clear that it should be replaced by more meaningful engagement, and so explored alternative means of engaging with the public. One idea put forward prior to the survey was that the Leader and Cabinet have a special dedicated webcast session (where members of the public can also attend in person), perhaps monthly. Respondents were asked whether they thought this would be a better or less effective way of enabling members of the public to engage with the Cabinet and ask questions. Over half (nine) members said that it would be a better way of enabling members of the public to engage with the Cabinet and ask questions; and two that it would be less effective. Six thought it would make no difference.

2.2.13 The mix of views was reflected in the comments:

“I think the webcast would be adequate.”

“Fine using the Web – what about those without access to it, how do we allow them to engage?”

2.2.14 Other contributors suggested further ideas:



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“A session for members of the public on the lines of Question Time on BBC with the audience being picked from applications to the Lord Mayor's Office, stating any proposed question as well as any Party Political inclination/membership; the panel should contain representation from the Opposition as well.”

“The Executive should hold public Q&A sessions rotated around each of the 10 districts on a monthly basis.”

“Questions from public should be allowed via Skype/social media to open up opportunity, even pre-record.”

2.2.15 If public questions are continued, said one respondent, some thought should be given to stimulating uptake. Another view was that there should still be the opportunity for citizens to come into the Council House and speak to the Cabinet, so that should be an integral part of any move. The webcast sessions could be theme based to encourage interest.

2.2.16 Respondents to the public survey were asked a more general question: “Are there better or other ways [than public questions] in which citizens of Birmingham could engage with, or ask questions of, the Leader, Deputy Leader, Cabinet Members or District Committee Chairs?” The suggestions made were:

- Social media – to enable questions to be submitted or discussions held on specific topics;
- Written questions: i) a formal opportunity for members of the public to ask written questions. There should be a public record; ii) an online question form via the Council's website (desktop and mobile versions) which allows the relevant councillor to email back with a response once the question has been submitted;
- Constituents ask their local councillor to ask on their behalf, similar to parliamentary questions;
- More meetings outside of working hours, evening and weekend roadshows etc, so that people that work can get involved;
- Live Q&A sessions via webcasting / Skype / video conferencing - greater flexibility over timings, therefore could potentially engage more citizens;
- Local Q&A sessions;
- An online Q&A monthly where public can log in and ask questions;
- Question time style sessions held in public venues throughout the city; these can be set up as a ticketed event, with pre-submitted and live questions asked / or with live Twitter feed and online questions via webinar in live time;
- Public questions should also be part of the agenda of Scrutiny and District Committees.

2.2.17 Again, the point was made that, whatever option was chosen, it should be well publicised.



“Birmingham Council seem to not really want public involvement, and seem to think they know best.”

“The importance and seniority of the City Council meeting has to be rightly recognised and acknowledged, but not to the detriment of being accessible. If citizens don't feel their input is welcome or encouraged, then they will simply stay away.”

- 2.2.18 Members of the Committee cautioned as to how we evaluate the usefulness of webcasting, querying whether hits on the website really represented the number of people watching the proceedings. In the public survey, all except one respondent was aware that City Council meetings are livestreamed via the internet for live and subsequent viewing; three had previously watched the meeting on-line.

“It's good it's live streamed but I don't know when they take place and the council web site is useless.”

- 2.2.19 This feeling was echoed in the public survey as well as in member views:

“The meeting has to of course discuss matters of strategic importance to the city and its residents, but equally, citizens have to feel a sense of ownership about it, and see that the decisions being made make a positive difference to their lives and that their voice is being heard and respected.”

### **Suggested Action**

2. That alternatives to public questions are considered – in particular regular webcasts whereby people can come into the Council House or participate on-line. If these are to replace public questions, then they should be held monthly.
3. Any option chosen should be publicised more widely to encourage participation.

### **Questions from Councillors**

- 2.2.20 Members were also asked about Questions from any Councillor to a Committee Chairman or Lead Member of a Joint Board, Questions from Councillors other than Cabinet Members to a Cabinet Member, and Questions from Councillors other than Cabinet Members to the Leader or Deputy Leader.
- 2.2.21 The majority of members responding to the survey were in favour of keeping each of these, though a small number thought they should be modified. There was support for supplementary questions to be allowed for all questions (not just to Cabinet Members) and for more time to be allowed for this item. A number asked that a time limit on answers is considered, to keep them to the point. Other comments were:



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“All questions must be submitted as a written question with an answer in writing to the councillor from chair, cabinet member, etc. The Councillor submitting the question then has the opportunity to ask a supplementary to the written question”.

“Too often this becomes an abuse of the procedure whereby statements are read out, rather than using the correct procedures for doing this”.

“Councillors have many opportunities to ask each other questions already”

“In order to utilise the full expertise of City Councillors, the time given to Question Time needs to be adjusted, with an increase in especially B and C: any Councillor to a Committee Chairman or Lead Member of a Joint Board and Councillors other than Cabinet Members to a Cabinet Member.”

- 2.2.22 The timings associated with questions from councillors was the main issue; when members were asked if more or less time should be allowed for this item, the majority were content with the amount of time available (Table 2). However this time should be used fully.

**Table 2: Time Available for Questions from Councillors**

	<b>More time</b>	<b>Less time</b>	<b>Same</b>	<b>Not Answered</b>
Questions from Councillors	3 (18%)	2 (12%)	9 (53%)	3 (18%)

- 2.2.23 Those that did want more time clearly linked this to getting more policy debate with Cabinet Members:

“Less time [for motions] – better to get real responses from the Executive about Policy issues from Councillors in 'Questions'”

“More time for members to question Cabinet members/the Executive. More time for important items to be brought up by Cabinet members: eg Better Care Fund.”

- 2.2.24 There were also suggestions that the length of answers should be restricted, to enable more questions to be asked.

## **Suggested Action**

4. That standing orders are reviewed to consider restricting times for answers during question time.



## Policy Plans and CBM reports

2.2.25 Eleven respondents to the member survey (65%) thought that Policy Plans and CBM reports should remain without modification. Five thought this item should be modified, and one that it should be removed from the agenda. Suggestions made were:

“More policy issues should be brought to the council from the Executive.”

“CBM reports should be kept to a brief overview with a maximum allotted two minute time limit.”

“Policy Plans should be debated along with any amendments on any major decision currently made by cabinet later in the meeting.”

“Debate more things with meaning and resonance to Birmingham, at an earlier stage not always at sign off.”

“More emphasis on these, including more time for debate.”

“Important policy changes often skipped over on sent to cabinet. Some of these should come to full council.”

“Major cabinet decisions brought to Full Council.”

2.2.26 There was some cross over with the comments made here and more general comments about the need for more substantive policy discussions, which is picked up again in section 2.3. The Policy Plans brought under this item are the Policy Framework Plans listed in the Constitution.

2.2.27 However, these are brought for approval, usually at the end of a long process of consultation and re-drafting. At this stage, Council is to ratify the document but has no opportunity to make any meaningful contribution (unless about implementation of the plan). The Committee therefore suggests that these plans – as appropriate – are brought to the City Council meeting at a much earlier stage for debate, for example before going out to public consultation.

2.2.28 This should also extend to plans that are owned by major partnerships where the City Council is a partner – for example the Combined Authority. Members rarely get to hear about what these bodies are doing, and should have the opportunity to do so, especially as they are not wholly separate from the City Council.

2.2.29 When asked whether more or less time should be available, nearly half (47%) thought more time should be allowed.

**Table 3: Time Available for CBM Reports**

	<b>More time</b>	<b>Less time</b>	<b>Same</b>	<b>Not Answered</b>
CBM reports	8 (47%)	1 (6%)	4 (24%)	4 (24%)



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## Suggested Action

5. That Policy Framework Plans and other policy documents are brought to City Council at a draft stage for debate.
6. That – where possible – policy plans (or similar) of partnerships of which the City Council is a member (e.g. the Combined Authority; Health and Wellbeing Board) are brought to City Council for debate.

## Scrutiny Reports

2.2.30 There was unanimous agreement from the members responding to the survey that scrutiny reports should continue to come to the City Council meeting, with 15 (88%) in favour of retaining the item without modification.

2.2.31 There was support for a full discussion of scrutiny reports:

“This should not be time constrained as at present, to allow full detailed discussions on the whole report, nor should it become a platform for popularity stakes.”

“A good use of time.”

2.2.32 However, there were dissenting voices:

“I am not sure of the value of bringing Scrutiny reports to Full Council. It often looks like a tick box exercise. The important thing is for the relevant Scrutiny to agree their report and then monitor progress made against the recommendations.”

“They usually turn into a love in between those on the committee whilst everyone else switches off. There's no time for anyone who wasn't on the committee to actually comment on the issues, it just turns in to the same points being reiterated a hundred times with no one listening.”

2.2.33 To combat this, there were a number of suggestions to use the time at the City Council meeting more efficiently: namely by reducing the proposing and seconding times (or not having the seconder speak other than to second the motion) and to give those members not on the Committee priority when it comes to speaking in the chamber:

“Essentially the report by scrutiny chair repeats what is in the report, and therefore much is duplicated. Proposing and seconding time to be restricted further, and more time within slot available given to questions.”



“Reduce the time for introduction by lead member, we can all read. This would give more time to debate for members.”

“People talking on scrutiny reports should be confined to scrutinising chair over recommendations, not giving their opinions/background/personal experience. That should be contributed at evidence gathering. It is irrelevant once the report has been written, they missed their chance.”

2.2.34 One member suggested that there should be opportunity for the public to have 10 minutes 'open forum' on each Scrutiny Report.

2.2.35 In terms of time spent on scrutiny report, almost half (47%) thought the right amount of time was allocated.

**Table 4: Time Available for Scrutiny Reports**

	<b>More time</b>	<b>Less time</b>	<b>Same</b>	<b>Not Answered</b>
Scrutiny Reports	5 (29%)	3 (18%)	8 (47%)	1 (6%)

2.2.36 With regards to the reports presented, one member made the point that the flow of scrutiny reports to City Council is not even throughout the year, with most coming at the end of the municipal year:

“Scrutiny reports should be no more than one per meeting and evenly spread across the whole municipal year, rather than from Christmas to April meetings.”

2.2.37 To some extent this uneven flow is the inevitable result of the annual cycle of council business; O&S Committees and Chairs are appointed in May, set their work programmes in June and then start the work. It should also be noted that, with the reduction of scrutiny committees and scrutiny support, the expectation of a scrutiny report or two per council meeting will not be met – unless new modes of reports are adopted. However, two new proposals (in addition to the existing inquiry reports), discussed by Scrutiny Chairs with the Leader, could widen the scrutiny offer to City Council:

1. Debate reports: short reports summarising work undertaken in Committee (or on visits); not necessarily with recommendations but with a motion or suggested actions; this could include more contentious issues, or where policy is not yet resolved, and act as a way of prompting wider policy debate in the chamber;
2. Proposal: short reports introducing potential inquiry work for scrutiny to get early member input into direction, key questions and potential witnesses; the debate would inform the terms of reference and form part of the evidence base for the inquiry, rather than getting that wider member input at the end of the process.



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## Suggested Action

7. That alternative types of scrutiny reports, alongside the inquiry report, are considered to widen the scrutiny offer to City Council.
8. That standing orders are reviewed to reconsider the proposer, seconder and response times for scrutiny reports, to give more time to other speakers. Priority should be given to those not on the Scrutiny Committee proposing the report.

## Motions

2.2.38 Whilst there was unanimous agreement on retaining motions for debate, there were a number of comments which focused on the time available for this item, the content of motions and the style of debate.

2.2.39 With regards to the time available, respondents to the survey were evenly split on whether more, less or the same amount of time should be spent on this:

**Table 5: Time Available for Motions**

	<b>More time</b>	<b>Less time</b>	<b>Same</b>	<b>Not Answered</b>
Motions	5 (29%)	4 (24%)	5 (29%)	3 (18%)

2.2.40 The following comments were made:

“Time for individual motions should have an equal share of the total allotted time.”

“There should be no more than two motions for debate and a detailed rota of who will be doing what and when published after the council AGM each year.”

“Reduce the number of motions – one per meeting? so as to allow for a more proper debate or alternatively increase the time allocated.”

“The time available doesn't fit the time needed.”

“Less time on 'motions': unless they are designed to be constructive, and not just for political mud-slinging!”

“Restricting debates to one motion, giving more time. Ensuring that subjects for debate relate purely to matters that actually are relevant directly to Birmingham, and which can be affected by BCC.”

2.2.41 Committee members were concerned that either there should be two motions in the time available or that more time should be given to allow three. It was also suggested that the time for motions should be equally split, so as to allow each topic to be debated fully. Again, there were





suggestions around proposing and seconding: reducing time for seconders or not allowing the seconder of an amendment to speak – again, to give more members chance to participate.

- 2.2.42 The second issue was the content and focus of the motions, primarily that they should be relevant to the business of the Council. Members said:

“Many are completely pointless and time wasting, relating to matters over which Birmingham City Council have no control at all. They end up as political set piece arguments with predictable results. Because members have to indicate in advance speeches are not reactions to arguments, but pre-written read out statements.”

“Motions should be relevant to Birmingham residents and not a back slapping exercise for national Government or opposition.”

“That said, 45 minutes at the end of a long meeting in a bear pit is a ridiculous way to make policy and councillors should have that in mind when putting forward motions. Too often they are merely political point scoring rather than matters of substance.”

“Motions should only be kept if they’re a genuine debate and voting is not whipped – otherwise a waste of time”

- 2.2.43 Finally, it was suggested that procedures should be reconsidered so that a real debate can be held, rather than a succession of speeches:

“The rules of debate should be more like Parliamentary procedure, allowing 'giving way', back and forth, etc.”

### **Suggested Action**

9. That standing orders are reviewed to ensure the relevancy of motions to City Council business; and to ensure a better fit of time to the number of motions so as to allow for more in-depth debate.
10. That consideration is given to allowing a more debating style for motions (i.e. more like Parliamentary procedure);

## **2.3 Additional Suggestions**

- 2.3.1 There were a number of suggestions for additional items for the meeting, primarily aimed at getting more substantive policy debate on the agenda.



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- 2.3.2 One member suggested that “too much has been hoovered up by the Cabinet system, leaving the Council meetings thin, and leaving many councillors uninformed about the overall direction of policy”. Therefore it was suggested reports that currently go to Cabinet should be reclassified either as 'strategic policy and information', which should go to the City Council meeting for debate and decision, and 'Executive decision' reports, which would be for Cabinet.
- 2.3.3 An example was given of the 8th December Cabinet meeting, where two items (Item 3: Audit Letter, and item 11: Direct Payments Consultation Findings) would be considered strategic for the Council and should be discussed at the City Council meeting; whereas the remaining reports flow from existing decision/policy so would sit with the Cabinet.
- 2.3.4 This would mean that matters of strategic significance would be debated at full Council and implementation reports considered by the Executive. This would “reset the balance between Executive and Council.”
- 2.3.5 This idea was tested in the survey; two-thirds of respondents supported the idea of taking strategic policy and information reports to full Council instead of Cabinet (see Table 6).
- 2.3.6 Other ideas that had previously been employed at City Council were suggested, one of which was the proposal that monthly reports from committees be reinstated (as happened before 2000). There was little support for the return to monthly committee reports, with only a third agreeing (Table 5). However, one member noted the practice in another council, where copies of all the minutes of committees were presented and members were able to speak on each; this was thought to be constructive.

**Table 6: Additional Items**

	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Neither</b>	<b>Not Answered</b>
Monthly reports from Chairs of Committees	6 (35%)	11 (65%)	1 (6%)	0
Strategic policy & information reports (such as that currently go to Cabinet; leaving Executive decision reports and implementation reports for Cabinet)	11 (65%)	5 (29%)	1 (6%)	0

- 2.3.7 Other suggestions to revive past practice included having Cabinet Member annual reports; whilst some were in favour of this, as a way of keeping Cabinet Members “on their toes”; there were also many who had not found these reports a positive experience, with Cabinet Members spending time setting out information that could have been contained in an annual report.
- 2.3.8 There was support for debates on matters relating to key partnerships (e.g. Combined Authority, Health and Wellbeing Board) and also to invite key partners (e.g. the Police and Crime Commissioner).
- 2.3.9 Another suggestion was that there should be regular updates on key issues – such as the Future Council or Children's Services progress.



- 2.3.10 Finally, there was one suggestion that there should be a facility for public petition for a debate as in Westminster e.g. if 5,000 e-signatories received online.

### **Suggested Action**

11. That the City Council meeting agenda should allow time for fuller discussion of policy matters, including:
- Those policy/strategic matters that are currently reported to Cabinet;
  - Updates on key issues (e.g. Kerslake or Children's Services progress).
12. That reports from external bodies / partners are considered – particularly those that have a direct influence on the City Council (Combined Authority, Police and Crime Commissioner).

## **2.4 The Order of the Agenda**

- 2.4.1 Members were asked about the order of the agenda. Five respondents commented:

“I don't think you should keep Questions from members of the public, but if this item is to be kept it should be put at the end when working people have a chance to attend as it will be evening. The other questions should remain at the start.”

“The order seems to work well. In particular, bringing petitions to the fore makes sense.”

“Questions from members of the public should be at the end to enable working and studying participants to attend more easily”

“The order is fine”

“Motions first so people are still able to concentrate”

## **2.5 Timings**

### **The Length of the Meeting**

- 2.5.1 The survey asked Members whether the full Council meeting was too long, too short or about right. A third thought it about right (35%) and over 40% that it was a little bit too short (Table 7).



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**Table 7: Length of City Council Meetings**

Option	Total	Percent
Far too long	2	12%
A little bit too long	0	0%
Mostly about right	6	35%
A little bit too short	7	41%
Far too short	2	12%

2.5.2 Those in favour of a shorter time said:

“A shorter meeting would achieve all that the current meetings do”

“Please don't make it any longer, though many hark back to the good old days when budget meetings could go on to the wee hours this is incompatible with modern councillor responsibilities. I find it practically impossible to sit and concentrate in a hot, loud environment for 5+ hrs”

2.5.3 Those who thought the meeting was a little too short said:

“A later finish would require an adjournment to allow members to take refreshments and possibly a meal, which they could then claim the cost later.”

“I think it should start at 2.00pm, have a proper meal break ... and finish about 8.00pm”

“Finishing later would give everyone an opportunity to take part in any debate or discussion during the meeting.”

“Could be extended further eg to 8.30pm but 11pm definitely too late!”

“Pros – more available to the public; Cons – a potentially long day for Members and Officers”

“People that work have to leave work early to get to chamber by 2pm anyway. Doing a full, day's work then trying to focus on meeting 6–11 would be nightmare. Again, if one has young children we frequently don't get home from group meeting till gone 10, if we don't get home till gone 11 next day it's a long time for little ones not to see you.”

“Requires nearly a full day anyway so why not treat it as such.”



## The Start Time of the Meeting

- 2.5.4 Members were also asked about the time of day the meeting should start. Over half said that it should start in the afternoon, as at present. One was in favour of a morning meeting, and three thought it should move to the evening.

**Table 8: Start Times of Council Meetings**

Option	Total	Percent
Morning (10am)	1	8%
Afternoon (as present)	8	67%
Evening (6pm)	3	25%
Not Answered	0	0%

“Afternoon allows those with jobs to at least get some other work in; a late finish doesn't allow for any discussion to be had post meeting.”

“The pros of starting at 6pm: More Cllrs who have day jobs will be able to attend without taking a day's leave or losing time.”

“We have to find ways to make the councillor role attractive to more people, and that means accommodating working hours much more. Meetings should be held in the evening whenever possible.”

- 2.5.5 In the public survey, when respondents were asked if they “would be more likely to attend a full City Council meeting to ask a question if these meetings were held in the evening?”, three said yes, two no and two that they were not interested in asking questions at a meeting of the full City Council. There was one comment on this:

“Evenings are useless if you have childcare responsibilities. Day times are useless if you work. Therefore you should offer alternative ways.”

- 2.5.6 The Committee looked at the times other Council meetings are held (Table 9).



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**Table 9: Core City and West Midlands local authority start times**

Local Authority	Start Time	End Time
<b>Core Cities:</b>		
Bristol	6.00pm	
Leeds	1.30pm	7.00-7.30pm
Liverpool	6.00pm	
Manchester	10.00am	12.00-1.00pm
Newcastle	6.00pm	7.00-9.00pm
Nottingham	2.00pm	4.00-5.30pm
Sheffield	2.00pm	
<b>West Midlands:</b>		
Coventry	2.00pm	5.00-6.00pm
Dudley	6.00pm	7.00-8.00pm
Sandwell	6.00pm	6.30-7.30pm
Solihull	6.00pm	7.00-8.30pm
Walsall	6.00pm	8.00-10.00pm
Wolverhampton	5.45pm	

## 2.6 Standing Orders

2.6.1 Members were asked for any comments on standing orders and responses indicated that whilst some members were content with the current set of orders, others were concerned that “points of orders” should be properly used and that the agenda is kept to time:

“When a councillor stands and refers to “Standing Orders”, The Lord Mayor should ask as to which one they are referring to, if the member can't state which one directly, then they should be told to sit down and Council resumes business.”

“I agree members should have to quote the number of the standing order they wish to raise a point under.

“No, they cover the essential rules of the meeting.”

“As long as they appear in a timely fashion”

“Once the agenda is set, standing orders cannot be waived”

“I was a Cllr for 18 months before anyone told me that such a thing existed or how I could find it. “

“It is really stressful when the agenda doesn't run to time, be realistic, don't change standing orders, then still run 30m–1hr over new time, it is a nightmare trying to organise babysitters, especially when we've had group meeting night



before, parents literally don't see young children for two days. This is partly why we don't have more women in chamber, it's still run like an old boys club where no-one has to worry about anyone else”

## 2.7 Annual General Meeting/Budget Meeting

2.7.1 Members were asked if they had any comments to make on the AGM (usually held in May) or annual budget meeting (held in March).

2.7.2 Two commented on the AGM:

“There could be a small amount of business added into the Annual meeting.”

“The AGM should not be so focused on the ceremonial. This element should be curtailed, and business conducted in its place.”

2.7.3 Six commented on the Budget meeting:

“There should be a question session as normal before the budget (can't remember whether there currently is or not but there should be)”

“Should be a special meeting just for the Budget with a greater time allowance”

“The budget meeting should revert to unlimited time with a 10 min time limit for back benchers”

“Why are there no questions allowed at the budget meeting?”

“The budget meeting should be longer and perhaps more clearly divided up into directorates – giving more clarity to anyone watching.”

“Budget meeting needs longer so start earlier”

## 2.8 Other Comments

2.9 Other comments made were:

“Operate a visible live twitter stream for public comments on the proceedings as you get in many conferences now”

“Biscuits would be nice!!”

“The chairs are horrendously uncomfortable and harsh on the back if you're under 5 ft 6.”



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“The volume of the speakers next to your ears makes you feel like you're being shouted at for four and a half hours.”

“Whilst I think public scrutiny is very important and I'm pleased to see web streaming and webcasts, I feel that the meeting is just irrelevant, decisions already taken, old boys club. I honestly feel my time would be better spent on the doorstep. I dread the meeting, a trial to be gotten through.”

“I am NOT asking for a free meal, but I think the meeting would run better if we had a proper meal break in the middle. Otherwise some people leave early and it gets to the stage where everyone just wants to go home as they are hungry. Also the meal break was useful for networking with Cllrs who you wanted to raise something with. Now we are all crammed in a small room – Cllrs of all parties and the press all in together, and it's hard to have a private conversation. I suggest therefore there should be the opportunity to buy a meal in the banqueting suite and that those who choose not to partake can either go out to a cafe or bring sandwiches.”

“My experience of council meetings is that they are long, dull, and not worth my time attending (though I do). All decisions have been made, lots of jargon, impenetrable reports, long speeches that are not focused, (mostly) men shouting at each other, chair doesn't seem to know what is happening, timed agenda which is not stuck too making childcare and caring responsibilities impossible, technology not fit for purpose.”





## 3 Summary of Suggested Actions

### 3.1 Conclusions

- 3.1.1 Members of the Corporate Resources O&S Committee have served for many years on the Council reflected in our March session on past City Council meetings and the changes over the last twenty to thirty years. Whilst the very late meetings (going on to 11pm or beyond midnight) were not remembered fondly, they did remember feeling more satisfied that they had contributed to the governance of the city following the City Council meeting. Of course, prior to 2000, City Council meetings were the main forum for decision-making. Whilst it is not possible to go back to that position, nonetheless it was felt that there are routes by which the City Council agenda can be changed to allow the meeting to play a more effective role in supporting local democracy, through more engagement with members on key policy issues and tackling issues that matter.
- 3.1.2 There was a clear view from members across all political parties that the City Council meeting agenda should be meaningful and allow time for fuller discussion of policy matters, which in turn should be focused on those policy areas where the City Council has influence.
- 3.1.3 One idea stood out: that more strategic and policy matters are brought to the City Council meeting, rather than Cabinet as at present. (Suggested action 11)
- 3.1.4 In addition, key policy documents should be brought at an early stage, rather than just for ratification once agreed. This would enable all members to engage and contribute to the development of that policy document. Partner organisations should be included in this, to widen the policy debate to all those areas where the City Council is involved or has some influence. Motions could also be better focused on City Council business. (Suggested actions 5, 6, 9, 12)
- 3.1.5 Scrutiny is another way in which policy debate can be widened. If inquiry reports are supplemented by short reports to stimulate debate on other work undertaken in Committee (or on visits) this would capture better the range of work considered by Scrutiny Committees. (Suggested action 7)
- 3.1.6 Engaging with the public was another clear theme: there were mixed views on whether the current format of public questions was the best way of achieving this, and there was a clear message that not enough people know about this option. The option to move to monthly Cabinet webcasts was welcomed by some, though it was also noted that not all people have access to the internet and so the option to come into the Council House should be maintained. (Suggested actions 2 and 3)
- 3.1.7 There were also a number of ideas on how to make better use of the time in the chamber. Curtailing Lord Mayor's Announcements when appropriate, limiting the amount of time Cabinet Members and Committee chairs have to answer a question, refocusing scrutiny debates to enable



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members not on the Committee to contribute and improving the time allocation for motions. (Suggested actions 1, 4, 8 and 9)

## 3.2 Suggested Actions

1. That the approach to Lord Mayor's Announcements be re-considered to ensure that time is kept appropriately short , for example that tributes to former members are kept to one speech on behalf of the Council;
2. That alternatives to public questions are considered – in particular regular webcasts whereby people can come into the council house or participate on-line. If these are to replace public questions, then they should be held monthly.
3. Any option chosen should be publicised more widely to encourage participation.
4. That standing orders are reviewed to consider restricting times for answers during question time
5. That Policy Framework Plans and other policy documents are brought to City Council at a draft stage for debate.
6. That – where possible – policy plans (or similar) of partnerships of which the City Council is a member (e.g. the Combined Authority; Health and Wellbeing Board) are brought to City Council for debate.
7. That alternative types of scrutiny reports, alongside the inquiry report, are considered to widen the scrutiny offer to City Council.
8. That standing orders are reviewed to reconsider the proposer, seconder and response times for scrutiny reports, to give more time to other speakers. Priority should be given to those not on the Scrutiny Committee proposing the report.
9. That standing orders are reviewed to ensure the relevancy of motions to City Council business; and to ensure a better fit of time to the number of motions so as to allow for more in-depth debate.
10. That consideration is given to allowing a more debating style for motions (i.e. more like Parliamentary procedure);
11. That the City Council meeting agenda should allow time for fuller discussion of policy matters, including:
  - Those policy/strategic matters that are currently reported to Cabinet;
  - Updates on key issues (e.g. Kerslake or Children's Services progress).



12. That reports from external bodies / partners are considered – particularly those that have a direct influence on the City Council (Combined Authority, Police and Crime Commissioner).

### **Motion**

That the suggested actions above be approved and forwarded to the Leader for inclusion in the annual review of the Constitution.