



City Council Meeting – Survey Results

Inquiry of the Corporate Resources O&S Committee

1 Background

- 1.1 Following the Leader's appearance at your Committee in January, and following discussions held by the Committee at the start of the municipal year, the Committee agreed to review the arrangements for City Council meetings.
- 1.2 A short inquiry is therefore underway, including:
- An evidence gathering session at the committee meeting on 9th February;
 - Background research into past practice and Core Cities and West Midlands councils' practice (presented to Committee on the 9th February);
 - Gathering evidence from members, initially via an email invitation to put forward views and then through a survey of all members (survey results in section 3);
 - A public survey, focusing on public question time.
- 1.3 This report summarises the findings of the surveys.

2 For Decision

- 2.1 Members are asked:
- To note the results of the survey as attached;
 - To consider the evidence presented today along with that presented at the last meeting and:
 - To agree to take a report to City Council on 5th April (which will be circulated for agreement following the meeting) to stimulate further discussion and to feed into the annual review of the Constitution; and
 - To agree a set of suggestions/principles for the Leader to consider in the annual review of the Constitution (to be finalised outside the meeting).



3 Survey Results

Response

- 3.1 Two surveys were published, one for elected members (on all aspects of the City Council meeting) and one for members of the public (on public question time).
- 3.2 Seventeen responses were received from elected members and seven from members of the public.

Overall

- 3.3 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.

Items on the Agenda

- 3.4 Respondee were asked about each of the existing items on the City Council agenda and whether these should remain on the agenda, whether they should remain with modification, or be removed.
- 3.5 The full results are set out in the table below:

	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	11 (65%)	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



- 3.6 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 spent on 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 and appropriate for "only one/two tributes to members who have passed on". It was suggested that it would be quite appropriate if someone who knew that person well spoke, but one good quality speech could represent the views of the Chamber. 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".
- 3.7 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". 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".
- 3.8 Eleven 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.
- 3.9 Those in favour of retaining public questions said that having the whole council 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." Problems identified with the item 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).
- 3.10 It was suggested that questions could "be [put] in writing and together with responses circulated to members."



City Council Meeting – Survey Results

- 3.11 The Committee was interested in exploring 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.
- 3.12 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?”
- “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.”
- 3.13 If public questions are continued, said one respondent, some thought should be given to stimulating uptake.
- 3.14 The public survey also addressed the matter of public questions and the responses are set out in the box overleaf.



Public Survey

The public survey first asked some questions about awareness of public questions: "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.

Respondents were then asked "Are there better or other ways 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 and A monthly where public can log in and ask questions;
- Question time style sessions held in public venues throughout the city - 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.

It was also noted that any options should be well publicised if adopted.



City Council Meeting – Survey Results

When 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.

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.

Final comments received were:

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

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.

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.

its good its live streamed but I don't know when they take place and the council web site is useless.

I would say that there needs to be far more open and transparent social media engagement with councillors and the senior leadership team of the Council. The senior management led by Mark Rogers need to be far more visible and accountable.

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

They are becoming more, and more, alienated from real people of this City.



3.15 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.**

3.16 The majority 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:

“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”

3.17 Eleven respondents (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.”



City Council Meeting – Survey Results

- 3.18 There was unanimous agreement that **scrutiny reports** should continue to come to the City Council meeting, with 15 (88%) in favour of retaining the item without modification. In the comments, the following points were made:
- 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. 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.”

“A good use of time.”
 - Questioning the value of discussing scrutiny reports at council:

“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.”
 - Suggestions that the time at council is used more efficiently:

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



3.20 There was also unanimous agreement on retaining **motions for debate**, although again four members thought that these should be modified. The comments focused on two issues: the time for motions, and the content of motions. With regards to the time spent on this item, 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.”

3.21 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”

3.22 It was also suggested that procedures should be reconsidered so that a debate can be held: than

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



Potential Additional Items

3.23 Two ideas were put forward in the early stages of the inquiry and tested in the survey. One was that monthly reports from committees be reinstated (as happened before 2000); the second was that strategic policy and information reports, which currently go to Cabinet, should go to Full Council for debate and decision, leaving the Cabinet to make Executive decisions reports. This would mean that matters of strategic significance would be debated at full Council and implementation left to the Executive.

3.24 Whilst there was little support for the return to monthly committee reports, two-thirds of respondents supported the idea of taking strategic policy and information reports to full Council.

	Agree	Disagree	Neither	Not Answered
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

3.25 Respondents were asked for other suggestions for agenda items and the following were suggested:

- Reports on the different portfolios, reports on various Council plans – debates about things the Council is actually running and how things could be improved;
- Cabinet members/regulatory and scrutiny committee chairs to report to Council once a year/on a regular basis;
- Regular reports from the new Combined Authority and other similar bodies;
- Annual Report from the Chief Constable/Police and Crime Commissioner;
- Updates on key issues – such as Kerslake or Children's Services progress.
- Reports from committee chairs should be made available, maybe quarterly, in time for questions to be asked during question time, same with strategic reports
- Public petition for a debate as in Westminster eg if 5000 e-signatories received online

Order of Agenda

3.26 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”

Timings

3.27 Members were asked 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.

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%

3.28 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

3.29 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 11 pm definitely too late!”



City Council Meeting – Survey Results

“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.”

- 3.30 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.

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.”

- 3.31 With regards to the relative times allowed for each item, respondents indicated the following:

	More time	Less time	Same	Not Answered
Questions from Councillors	3 (18%)	2 (12%)	9 (53%)	3 (18%)
CBM reports	8 (47%)	1 (6%)	4 (24%)	4 (24%)
Scrutiny Reports	5 (29%)	3 (18%)	8 (47%)	1 (6%)
Motions	5 (29%)	4 (24%)	5 (29%)	3 (18%)

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



“ More time to be allotted for Scrutiny reports / This seems to work well / There isn't enough time to debate them properly.”

“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 . 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. Public questions to be in writing only. Bring all major decisions to council for debate and approval by WHOLE Council, not just cabinet.”

“Axe the guillotine”

Standing Orders

3.32 Members were asked for any comments on standing orders:

“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”



Annual General Meeting/Budget Meeting

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

3.34 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.

3.35 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

Other Comments

3.36 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.

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.