

Report on Committee Structure and Frequency
Policy and Resources Committee
5th February 2024

1. Background

The Town Council has a responsibility to ensure that decision making is as effective as it can be. Councillors should focus on strategic decision-making and have a key role in performance management and financial monitoring, whilst delegating operational decisions to officers.

Committees with duly delegated powers can make the council's decision-making process more efficient. Without them, the whole council must meet whenever it needs to make any decision about council business, responsibility for which has not been formally delegated to staff.

Committees, sub-committees or working groups, can harness the special interests, skills and knowledge of its members.

The council can appoint a committee at any time and does not have to wait until the annual meeting in May.

The members of a committee are not independent of the council. Their collective decision-making responsibilities in the committee are limited by the terms of references of that committee.

A councillor, who is not a member of a committee, has the same rights to attend a meeting of the committee as a member of the public. They can participate in the meeting if the public can.

There should be no less than three members appointed to a committee, the quorum being three.

Definition on structure of committees:

Standing Committee – delegated powers

Sub-Committee – continuous work

Working Party – transient, for a one-off project

See proposed committee structure below at the end of the report.

2. Proposal

Since May 2023 the Community, Active Travel and Environment Committees have met on a bi-monthly basis. In my opinion this has seen the project work output decrease across all committees. The solution is either to return to monthly meetings

or to strengthen delegated powers for officers. The latter is difficult until the strategic and annual action plans are in place, so we are clear in the direction the council wishes to take.

Following attendance by the Mayor and Town Clerk to Swale's Local Council Liaison Forum (24th January 2024), the CEO has invited parish/town councils to open discussions on taking over services, such as parks, public conveniences; grounds maintenance; money advice services; community safety/domestic abuse; cctv and car parks. They have effectively given us a year to review and make decisions before setting the 2025/26 budget.

It is not only Swale Borough Council facing budgetary decisions, but also Kent County Council. We have witnessed this more recently with the proposed closure of Faversham's HWRC, the closure of St Mary's Children Centre, reduction of funding to youth services and the potential threat to our library. Our ensuing campaign to fight the closure of the HWRC has been successful in the short term, helped by the speed in which we proceeded. This has set a format, which we may need to follow again in the future.

For consideration:

- a) All committees to resume monthly meetings, with the proviso that Chairs/Vice Chairs can choose, if there are no items for decision, to cancel a meeting in liaison with the Town Clerk, at short notice.
- b) The Creek Working Group and Heritage and Buildings Working Group combine to form a committee with delegated powers and meet on a monthly basis. A separate working group is formed specific to T S Hazard building, that will report direct to the newly formed committee.
- c) The previous informal Strategy/Budget working group becomes a formal Strategy Working Group to work on the following: strategic plan; annual action plan; community engagement/residents' survey; medium term financial plan; loss of services; change strategy policy; devolution/localism; solutions when services are lost; Local Council Award Scheme. This group should meet regularly, in order to progress the work in a timely manner. It should report direct to the Policy and Resources Committee for recommendations to be made to Full Council.
- d) The format of the HWRC Working Group should be replicated into a general campaign working group. This group should have delegated powers to meet at short notice and agree urgent items such as setting up of petitions, public meetings and demonstrations, without having to wait until the formal agreement of Full Council. The working group should consider items when

there is reasonable concern that services are at risk. It should not become a political instrument, working on rumours, but for the Town Council to work together for the benefit of residents.

e) The draft meeting calendar for 2024/2025 is attached for discussion.

Recommendations

To consider the proposal (a) to (e) and make recommendations to Full Council.

Louise Bareham
Town Clerk
26th January 2024

Proposed Committee Structure

