

AUDIT COMMITTEE

Length of Meetings 20 January 2010

Report of the Head of Democratic Services

PURPOSE OF REPORT

To advise the Committee of a Member request that consideration be given to introducing limits on the length of meetings held without breaks for Members or officers.

This report is public

RECOMMENDATIONS

That the Committee consider whether it wishes to make any amendments to the Procedure Rules within the Constitution, regarding the length of meetings or the imposition of breaks where meetings extend beyond a set number of hours.

1.0 Report

- 1.1 The Committee will be aware that during the past year there have been a number of instances where important decision making meetings have lasted for an extended period of time. Concern has been expressed by a Member over the pressure this places on both those Members present and the officers supporting the meeting.
- 1.2 At the present time the Constitution contains just one Procedural Rule relating to the length of time without a break which is utilised mainly at full Council. Even this provides only for a break after a period of 4 hours as follows:

Council Procedure Rule 10

10.1 Interruption of the Meeting

The meeting shall adjourn after a period of 4 hours (normally at 6.00pm in the case of full Council) for a break of 30 minutes, save that the Chairman, at his/her discretion, may waive the adjournment if it is likely that the business can be finished shortly.

- 1.3 On reaching 6pm, officer advice is normally provided on whether any items can be deferred to a later date to enable the meeting to be closed rather than adjourned, although as evidenced at the Council meeting of 4th March 2009, this is not always possible.
- 1.4 At other meetings breaks are taken by agreement of those present at suitable moments in the agenda.

- 1.5 It is generally accepted that powers of concentration diminish after a period of 2 hours and Members may wish to consider introducing additional procedure rules into the Constitution which would ensure that more regular breaks are taken both for the comfort of those present and to improve concentration levels and the ability to deal with often complex issues and make good quality decisions.

2.0 Options

- 2.1 Option 1 – to agree that restrictions on the length of meetings without breaks should be included in the Constitution and recommend that the necessary amendments be made. If Members wish to pursue this option the decision will need to include the point at which a break should be introduced, eg. after 2 hours, how long any adjournment should be, eg. 15 minutes after 2 hours, 30 minutes after 4 hours, and also which meetings this should apply to.

- 2.2 Option 2 – to take no action regarding any restriction on the length of meetings.

3.0 Officer Preferred Option

- 3.1 The Officer preference is option 1 in order to ensure that regular breaks are taken, reducing the pressure on officers supporting meetings and improving decision making.

CONCLUSION OF IMPACT ASSESSMENT

(including Diversity, Human Rights, Community Safety, Sustainability and Rural Proofing)

Providing for breaks in long meetings may improve decision making capacity and will improve working practices for officers supporting meetings.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

There are no direct financial implications to the introduction of compulsory breaks in long meetings.

SECTION 151 OFFICER'S COMMENTS

The S 151 Officer has been consulted and has no further comments

LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

Any changes to the Constitution can only be approved after hearing recommendations from the Monitoring Officer or the Audit Committee. Amendments to Council and Cabinet Procedure Rules are delegated to the Council Business Committee.

MONITORING OFFICER'S COMMENTS

The Monitoring Officer has been consulted and has no further comments.

BACKGROUND PAPERS

None

Contact Officer: Gillian Noall

Telephone: 01524 582060

E-mail: gnoall@lancaster.gov.uk