

Meeting of: AUDIT COMMITTEE

Date: 19TH OCTOBER 2005

Report of: HEAD OF ADMINISTRATION SERVICES

Reference: GMN

Title: DEMOCRATIC RENEWAL OF FULL COUNCIL: THE WAY FORWARD

PUBLIC/EXEMPT ITEM

This item is for consideration in the public part of the meeting.

PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

To consider the options open to the Council to revise and improve the operation of full Council meetings.

RECOMMENDATIONS

That Members consider the future operation of full Council meetings and determine which if any of the options set out in paragraph 8 be further developed to enable a full report and recommended amendments to the Constitution to be submitted to Council for implementation.

REPORT

1. Introduction

- 1.1 The Audit Commission report in 2003 on Lancaster City Council's Democratic Renewal said of the role of full Council:

"Full Council has continued to operate in a traditional manner with a full agenda and formalised meetings, whilst the new arrangements introduced by the Local Government Act 2000 envisage a much different role for full Council encouraging more debate on policy issues and more public participation. Full Council meetings are extremely long, with a lot of debate focused on processes and procedures rather than outcomes. The standing agenda item for consideration of Cabinet minutes tends to lead to a large proportion of meetings being devoted to the scrutiny of cabinet decisions, something which should be occurring through overview and scrutiny committees and the use of consultation mechanisms for the forward plan of key decisions. We have recommended that the approach to council meetings should be completely revised and have outlined a number of options to achieve greater debate on policy, outcomes for the community and greater public participation."

- 1.2 One of the criticisms of the Council in general was that the current democratic arrangements do not assist the Council in developing its community leadership role. In particular it states *"successful public participation is not yet evident within the decision making structures and the authority should review the way its 'decision making processes' interact with all the community."*

1.3 The Corporate Plan for 2005/06 has acknowledged this requirement and includes the following:

“Lancaster City Council’s role is:

- *to provide community leadership to help the district address the major issues it faces;*
- *to provide the services that we are responsible for and that contribute to meeting people’s needs.*

We aim to ensure all our activities fit with this role and to that end, each of our policies, spending decisions and work programmes, as well as every course of action we take, should clearly contribute to at least one of the following:

1. *Representing our communities’ interests within the district, regionally, nationally and in Europe.*
2. *Bringing communities and agencies together to work in partnership to address the major issues affecting the district.*
3. *Providing a range of customer focused services, within the City Council’s remit, that meet the needs of people who live, work and visit the district.*
4. *Improving, on a continuing basis, the services that the Council provides.*
5. *Putting our citizens, residents and users of our services at the heart of everything we do.”*

1.4 A commitment to public inclusiveness should see the Council providing opportunities for the public to influence executive decisions but this can be through several ways - a user friendly operation of the forward plan, public involvement in scrutiny meetings and an opportunity for public question time at meetings.

1.5 Amongst the issues for action is listed:

- Ensure that community interaction with all Lancaster City Council’s decision making processes is reviewed
- Improve and fulfil the key role that full Council meetings should play as part of the new political management arrangements. The Council should change the format of full Council meetings from its current traditional style.

2. Recommendations for change

2.1 ODPM guidance encourages authorities to think about how the role of full Council could be changed, in particular with regard to:

- allowing more debate on the policy framework
- enabling more open and informed debate on reports from overview and scrutiny, and
- encouraging public participation in the Council meeting.

2.2 Current developments relating to full Council within authorities include:

- public question time
- a 'state of the borough, district or county' debate
- single issue council meetings and the 'council in committee' to enable deliberative debates of a policy problem or proposal,
- a form of parliamentary procedure for policy development involving first, second and third reading for reports or proposals
- regular sessions for members to question portfolio holders.
- individual members given the power to initiate a council debate on a particular subject, and
- invited guest speakers.

2.3 Guidance to authorities also states that greater attention should be given to how meetings can be less controlled by standing orders and more inclusive and deliberative. Likewise consideration should be given to exploring how full council can play a part in supporting the community leadership role of the authority and thereby strengthening local democracy.

2.4 The specific recommendations for Lancaster City Council contained in the Audit Commission report include changing the format of Full Council meetings from its current traditional style. The new approach should be instead of the current arrangements, not additional to them. Options may include:

- that the agenda includes a standing item at the beginning of every Council meeting for the Leader to present a corporate progress report, on behalf of the Cabinet, to inform all Members of progress made since the last Council meeting and to present issues to be dealt with before the next Council meeting
- having themed Council meetings around particular corporate issues
- encouraging relevant Cabinet Members to present relevant reports in a seminar style
- holding the Council meetings, and other meetings, in less traditional locations than Council Chamber and at different times of the day
- establish a programme of seminars for Members on particular issues tied in with other meeting dates, to improve understanding, knowledge and attendance
- revising the frequency and formality of Full Council meetings
- consideration of Reports from Members appointed to outside bodies and partnerships.

3. Council Response to date

3.1 The District Auditor's report was considered by the Audit Committee and by full Council in October 2003. Changes in relation to the operation of full Council are set out in the following extracts of the resultant decision at that meeting:

"That the following amendments be approved with immediate effect and the Monitoring Officer undertake any consequential updates of the Constitution:

- (2) (viii) The inclusion on each Council agenda of reports from the Cabinet Leader.*
- (ix) The inclusion on a particular Council agenda of an item requested by a Committee Chairman or the Chair of the Review Board Business Panel.*
- (3) (vi) A process for the public to ask questions on reports in (2)(viii) and (ix) above.*
- (vii) Measures to be considered to change full council in the manner suggested by the Audit Committee.*
- (viii) Research other opportunities that could be developed for full Council to further engage with the general public on strategic and policy matters.*
- (6) That it be accepted in principle that representatives on the major partnerships should report into Council on a regular basis and refer to the Constitutional Review Task Group as in (3) above the mechanism for presenting such reports and the annual reports of Cabinet Members and Review Board Chairs to Council."*

3.2 A further amendment has since been agreed to the Council Agenda in October 2004. The Cabinet Leader's report now appears as a separate item from the Cabinet Minutes and is included, together with questions on the report, at Item 7 on the Agenda. The Cabinet Minutes remain on the agenda but have been moved to the final item when questions may be asked on those items. It also became noticeable that a number of questions to the Leader were replicating questions received on notice and although no amendment has been made to the Constitution in this respect the Mayor has changed the order of the agenda at recent meetings to take the questions on notice prior to the Leader's report.

3.3 Over the past few months further discussions have been held between the Corporate Director (Central Services), the Head of Administration Services and the District Auditor's office on ways to improve the operation of full Council and examples of best practice from other Councils. The Head of Administration Services has also attended an INLOGOV seminar on the subject and carried out further research looking at various initiatives and experiments at different Councils across the country all of which has informed the list and analysis of potential changes set out in this report for Members' consideration.

4. The Role of Full Council and its Current Operation

4.1 Before considering the options for change in detail it is necessary to think first about the role of full Council and what this Council wants to achieve from its meetings.

4.2 Although the Local Government Act 2000 did not prescribe a new form of full council meetings the modernisation agenda has created a new set of relationships between

full Council, the Executive and the Overview and Scrutiny function which results in four separate roles for full Council:

1. Setting the political management structure
2. Considering and deciding upon policies of the authority and the budget and capital programme
3. Playing a part in the accountability of the executive
4. Supporting the role of the authority as community leader.

4.2.1 *Setting the Political Management Structure*

This is probably the most straightforward aspect of the Council's role and as well as setting the governance framework (via the Constitution) includes the appointment of the Leader and Cabinet, the Overview and Scrutiny and members of other committees as well as representatives on outside bodies and partnerships. This must be done on an annual basis and there is the potential built into the Constitution to make amendments as required throughout the year.

4.2.2 *Setting the Budget and Policy Framework*

Full Council is responsible for agreeing the Council's overall community strategies including key development plans and determining each year's revenue and capital budget. Full Council also takes those decisions which would represent a departure from the strategies and budgets which have previously been agreed.

A programme for setting the budget and policy framework has been developed over the past two years which has seen an improvement each year with the Cabinet recommending a budget and policy framework to Council over 2 meetings in February/March. This year as part of the development/consultation process the Leader presented his plans to the Budget and Performance Panel to which all Members were invited.

4.2.3 *Accountability of the Executive*

Although the one of the roles of Overview and Scrutiny is to hold the Executive to account, there is a role also for Council to play in this respect but in a much more general sense than Overview and Scrutiny's picking up of specific decisions in the call in process.

The taking of any decisions outside the budget and policy framework set by Council is a check and balance on the Executive, but a more rigorous holding to account is carried out by means of requiring the Leader to submit a report to every Council meeting on which he and his Cabinet can be questioned. Further questions on recent Cabinet minutes may also be asked and questions on notice may be submitted on any subject.

The City Council's Constitution also allows for questions on notice from members of the public and for the Chairman of Overview and Scrutiny or any other Committee to request that an item be placed on the Agenda.

4.2.4 *Community Leadership*

Full council provides a forum for debate on issues of interest to the community as a whole. The Council held a state of the authority debate in 2002 but has since

removed this requirement from the constitution as it was not felt to have served a useful purpose.

The Constitution currently provides for Notices of Motion to be included on Council agenda which stimulate debate on a variety of topics and result in the Council formulating an agreed policy or position on issues of relevance to the district over which it has no direct control but would seek to exert some influence.

5. Rethinking Full Council and the Options for Change

5.1 Setting the Political Management Structure

5.1.1 Whilst it is not suggested that Council make any changes to the current method of making appointments it would be possible to establish a "Council Business Committee" which could take on the role of formally approving nominations put forward by political groups and making committee membership amendments throughout the year. This would take away the need, other than at Annual Council, for full Council to consider such matters as:

- Appointments to committees
- Appointments to outside bodies and partnerships
- Timetable arrangements.
- Formally approving minor amendments to the Constitution which do not fall within the remit of the Monitoring Officer to approve.

These are items which for the most part are passed at Council without debate or, in the case of timetabling issues, for example, are inappropriate for debate in such a large forum and would be more effectively settled by a small Committee.

5.1.2 Appointments to Cabinet and Overview and Scrutiny would continue to be made at an Annual Business Meeting but the opportunity could be taken to link these appointments to the presentation of annual reports from the previous year, thereby justifying individual re-appointments.

5.1.3 The Council Business Committee might also be the ideal forum for dealing with Council responses to consultation papers. At the present time, the Leader and Chairman and Vice Chairman of Overview and Scrutiny are consulted on whether a response should be made and the content is agreed by a variety of processes, most often being approved by the relevant Cabinet Member.

5.2 Setting the Budget and Policy Framework

5.2.1 Council's role is to agree the budget and policy framework, which implies the end of the process, with proposals being prepared elsewhere, i.e. by Cabinet.

5.2.2 On the face of it this may appear to be a reduced role for full Council, but there is an opportunity for all Members to be involved both with budget setting and with policy making – the role of full Council being to question and explore the budget and policy documents giving approval and carrying out a final scrutiny role. One way of increasing the number of Councillors involved in the development of the budget and corporate plan would be to hold a full Council briefing session at which Cabinet can present its proposals and be questioned by all councillors and/or other invitees. This could for example replace the LSP/Economic stakeholders' consultation and the briefing to Budget and Performance Panel arranged this year.

5.2.3 There are also other ways for all Members to be involved in the ongoing development of policy through debate at Council, for example, using the process established by central government to develop policy. Once the need for a specific policy has been identified, perhaps by reference to the Forward Plan the following stages could be introduced:

- i. 1st Reading: announcement of intention to look as issue – this could be in the form of a request from a Member or an agreed number of Members and approved by Council as a suitable topic for future debate.
- ii. 2nd Reading: debate on principles/issues – reports from officers would be presented if appropriate, or outside speakers requested to attend. Councillors would be able to ask questions and debate the issues without necessarily taking any decisions.
- iii. Committee Stage: referral to Overview and Scrutiny – a Task Group could be set up to look at the issues in depth and submit recommendations to a future Council meeting.
- iv. Final Report: recommendations from the Overview and Scrutiny/consultation process debated and a decision voted upon setting the policy of the Council, within which the Cabinet is required to work.

5.2.4 This is very similar to the process of debating a Notice of Motion under the current procedures but where the issue relates to an area of Council responsibility on which decisions will at some point have to be taken could have the following advantages:

- A requirement for more than the mover and seconder to agree that a debate on a particular topic should be held would ensure a greater interest in the topic concerned than is always the case currently.
- Announcing the topic in advance allows for more informed debate.
- Formalising the potential to refer the matter to Overview and Scrutiny and/or requesting officer reports or outside speakers on a topic enables more detailed consideration of the facts.
- Forthcoming topics included in the Forward Plan can be debated at a strategic level, setting an agreed Council policy prior to consideration of a Key Decision by Cabinet, ensuring that in most cases relevant issues will all have been addressed and call-in of the decision is less likely.

5.3 *Accountability of the Executive*

5.3.1 Council is the forum in which Members of Cabinet should be giving an account of their performance and be accountable for their actions.

5.3.2 Giving an account is currently done by means of the Leader's report included on each Agenda. This has been developed from the original inclusion of Cabinet minutes without any additional narrative and provides an opportunity for cabinet to report on issues being progressed outside Cabinet meetings in addition to those items on which formal decisions have been taken.

5.3.4 On an annual basis, the Constitution provides for each Cabinet Member to produce an 'end of year' report and this year these were published in Annual Report style in addition to the requirement that they be presented at Council with the opportunity for non-executive Members to question the executive Members. With the cancellation of the April meeting of Council these reports were submitted to the Annual Business meeting when the Cabinet the election of a Cabinet for 2005/06 also took place and Members may consider that this is a useful tool in judging the Cabinet's performance and justifying the re-appointment of each individual.

5.3.5 As far as holding the executive to account is concerned, this is done specifically by Overview and Scrutiny, but full Council can provide an opportunity for all Members to scrutinise the performance of the Cabinet in a more general way. The best way to perform this task is to ask questions of Cabinet Members but there are several alternative formats that this can take and Members need to consider how best to undertake this role to make it effective. The Council agenda currently provides the following opportunities for questions from the public and Members:

- Public questions on notice – must be received 3 days before the meeting. A prepared answer is given and one supplementary question is allowed.
- Member questions on notice – must be received 3 days before the meeting. A prepared answer is given and one supplementary question is allowed.
- Member questions on the Leader's report – unlimited.
- Member questions on Cabinet Minutes.

5.3.6 Improvements have been made to this process since the commencement of the new structure, for example the format of the Leader's report now allows for questions on a wider range of topics than those contained in the Cabinet Minutes, which now appear at the end of the Agenda and rarely elicit more than a handful of questions. The order of the Agenda has been informally changed so that questions on notice are not duplicated by the general questioning of Cabinet under the Leader's report. Nevertheless the questions on notice from both Councillors and the public have a stilted feel and there is evidence that members of the public in particular gain little satisfaction from the process.

5.3.7 A number of Councils have introduced a more informal public question time at the start of Council meetings where members of the public may ask questions of Cabinet Members or Chairmen of Committees related to any area of Council responsibility without notice. A similar arrangement can also be introduced for questioning of specific Members by other Members. If such sessions were introduced they would need to be time-limited and it would need to be understood that without the protection of the notice having been given of the questions there will be times when a Cabinet Member or Chairman is unable to answer a particular question and a written answer will have to be provided. On the other hand Members may consider that Lancaster's approach of having a formal question on notice but allowing a supplementary question gives sufficient flexibility, offering a degree of protection to the Cabinet Member but allowing the questioner scope to challenge.

5.3.8 Members may also wish to consider extending this role to areas of responsibility other than the Executive, e.g. Partnership Boards, Chairmen of Committees, Councillor representatives on outside bodies. This allows Councillors an opportunity to appraise or make comment on other spheres of Council involvement and goes some way towards making partnerships accountable for their actions.

5.4 *Community Leadership*

5.4.1 An important role of Council is to take a lead in public life. This does not necessarily mean that the public have to attend Council meetings. With the exception of a small number of contentious debates, large numbers of the general public have never attended council meetings. Involving the public does not have to mean getting the crowds into the Council Chamber, rather it is about ensuring that the elected councillors debate the issues that matter to the public and giving the opportunity to those that do wish to attend to get their views heard.

5.4.2 There are a number of ways in which full Council can support the authority's role as community leader and become the place where issues of local importance are debated and Members need to consider introducing a new style of meeting more akin to an event to give expression to the community leadership role. Below are a number of ways in which this could be done. Not all of these may be considered suitable and it may be possible to combine some of the ideas into a single event. There is no reason why every council meeting during the Municipal Year has to follow the same format and it may be more appropriate to plan a year of meetings incorporating different styles – some meetings involving the wider community, some debates between councillors, and others the more traditional decision-making meetings:

- (i) *Public question time* – see 5.3.7 above. This also contributes to community involvement.
- (ii) *A state of the district debate* – involving Councillors and also the public, other stakeholders and the media. This Council did hold such a debate in 2002 but in the first review of the Constitution it was not felt that it had been a success and it was dispensed with. Several other Councils who had done the same are now having second thoughts and experimenting with different formats. It can take the form of the Leader reporting on what has happened and what is about to happen, stimulating debate on a particular facet of the District, or it can be an integral part of the community planning process, inviting members of the public to join in debates on a series of topics on which representatives of outside organisations could be asked to make an introductory presentation, e.g. on local transport or health issues. This could also be combined with a session where the public can raise questions on other topics. Alternatively the event could be used to stage a “visioning”, “blue sky thinking” community forum style debate on what the area should be like in 5 or 10 years time. This would entail an open debate, without an agenda, allowing general consultation and engagement, with no decision at the end but a series of views which could inform future decisions.
- (iii) *Outside Speakers* – These can range from inviting speakers such as the Police, Health Board, PCT, a large private sector company such as BNFL, etc to give a presentation and answer questions or they can be invited to take part in a session of debate and exchange of views. This can form part of a ‘normal’ decision making meeting, be held as a separate session before or after a meeting, or be part of ‘an event’ as in (ii) above. They can be purely fact-finding missions or outside organisations can be invited to explore issues with the Council. Local MPs could be invited to share with the Council their views on local issues. Alternatively briefing sessions on issues of interest can be held either at the start of the meeting or as a separate morning session as has been the case for example for Data Protection, Members Interests, Overview and Scrutiny, etc.
- (iv) *Single Issue meetings* - Council can be used as a forum for debate and deliberation on single issues – community safety, environmental sustainability, economic development, the activities and effectiveness of other public agencies for example. This has been done in the past by means of holding an extraordinary meeting, as was the case for example last year to debate the M6 link road issue. It can also be seen as an extension of the current provision for motions on notice to be debated but could be improved by planning further ahead and advertising the issues to be debated allowing a greater opportunity for research and fact finding prior to the debate. Such

debate could as now involve only councillors or it could provide a forum for the community and other agencies to debate important local issues alongside members. They can be used to make a decision on a particularly important issue or they can be used to formulate a council view to put pressure on another body. Involving external bodies or the general public can be a useful mechanism in raising public awareness but on the other hand councillors have a legitimate role as an elected body to debate different views and speak on behalf of the community.

- (v) *Motions on Notice* – the current system allows for 2 members to call for a debate on any issue, usually at the next meeting with just 7 days notice. Amendments to this system could see the introduction of a threshold of a greater number of members required to trigger a debate, Groups could take it in turns to choose topics for debate and/or a programme of debates could be agreed at the start of the Municipal Year for the year ahead. As stated in (iv) above although not normally resulting in a resolution for particular action by the Council, these debates are an important method of signalling the Council's views to a wider audience and make the Council the authoritative voice on issues of importance to local people.
- (vi) *Celebration of Success* - Certificates of achievement could be presented by the Mayor, for example to young people nominated by schools or to members of the community nominated by the voluntary sector. This could be combined for example with a 'State of the District' or Council assembly style event.

6. Other Issues

6.1 *Frequency of Meetings*

It has generally been agreed across the country that the old traditional 8-week cycle of meetings is no longer sufficient. This Council has changed to a 5 weekly cycle and with the Annual and Budget Council there are now 10 meetings per year. There have also been some extraordinary meetings called to deal with single issues over the past few years. It not proposed that they be any more frequent than this but it may be advantageous to set a programme of meetings, which do not necessarily follow a 5 week cycle. Some meetings over the past few years have not had a huge amount of decision-making business and it could be that those should be targeted for a change in style to the Council meeting as an Assembly for debate or questions for example.

6.2 *Public Participation*

Whilst public participation is to be encouraged, making Council meaningful to the public does not necessarily mean that all meetings have to actively involve large numbers of the general public. By their nature Council meetings are only likely to attract big audiences where the topic to be debated is controversial and/or affects a large number of people. Taking the meetings out into different parts of the district, targeting the local community with issues of particular interest to that area would attract more people if that is what Members feel a Council meeting should be. Feedback from people who have attended Council to present a petition, to address Council or to ask a question indicates a level of disappointment that the issue is not debated there and then but merely referred on, or in the case of a question the answer has been pre-prepared. It is understandable that Councillors are more comfortable with the certainty of an agenda but more open fluid deliberative meetings

could be considered at least on some occasions. This may add risk but also adds to community engagement.

6.3 *Times and Venues*

Council meetings are currently timetabled to commence at 2pm and continue into the evening if necessary with a break at 6pm. Meetings do not always have to commence at the same time and this could change according to content of the meeting. The layout and conduct of the meeting could also vary according to content and issue.

Where it is decided to make an event out of Council, holding an 'Assembly' style meeting for example, this may be best held in an evening. Training or briefing sessions have sometimes been held on the morning of Council and outside speakers can be invited to speak, making a Council meeting last all day or an afternoon and evening but split into separate 'blocks'.

6.4 *Chairman/Mayor*

There is the potential to separate the role of a civic/ceremonial Mayor from the role of a Chairman of the council. At Lancaster, as at many other councils the Mayor is chosen by virtue of seniority and is expected to carry out a full programme of ceremonial, civic and fundraising duties. The Mayor is not chosen for their experience in chairing meetings and yet is expected to control a meeting of 60 councillors often with differing political views and make this a credible forum for the setting of council policy and community leadership.

On many occasions the Deputy Mayor is expected to take on this role for a single meeting in their 12 months without any previous experience.

It may be that a separate Chairman entitled "Council Chairman" or 'Speaker" should be appointed separating the role of council chairman from the civic and ceremonial mayoral role in the same way as the role is separated at councils where there is an elected Mayor. This Chairman would be elected by Council at the start of each year, to lead the full Council alongside the Leader (of Cabinet and Council) and Chairman of Overview and Scrutiny.

In combination with the suggestion in paragraph 5.1 to set up a Council Business Committee this person would chair that committee and be responsible for setting a work programme for the year and discussing the agenda for each meeting with the Chief Executive. They would also act as spokesman to the Press on Council issues.

Particularly where Council meetings become less formal with periods of questioning and debate involving non-Councillors a Chairman is required who has the skills to control any situations which may arise without the protection of a formal agenda and a script.

6.5 *Press*

Members will recall that at the end of last year the Media Guidelines Protocol was revised. At the time consideration was given to allowing filming and/or recording of Council meetings which has been resisted in the past in order to avoid disruption. Members were minded to consider allowing filming and recording at Council meetings but requested some further analysis of the risks involved and how they would be overcome. This further report has been held pending to be looked at

alongside consideration of the future operation of full Council. Should changes be made which result in increased public participation and increased interest in Council meetings this will inevitably lead to more requests from the media to capture the interaction between the public and members.

Newspaper reporters are currently able to record any exchanges in writing but are not permitted to record on tape.

Options for allowing filming and recording are as follows:

OPTION	IMPLICATIONS AND RISK ANALYSIS
<p>1. Filming/recording be permitted where there is pre-arranged public participation at meetings of full Council. This will be permitted with the prior agreement from the Chief Executive and should be arranged through the Communications Officer.</p>	<p>This will provide television crews/radio stations with the same access to report public participation as their print colleagues.</p> <p>The arena is already a public one but also a controlled one in that there are rules which set out who can speak, for how long and that prior notification will be given.</p> <p>The very fact that there is public participation will mean that the meeting will be less cohesive than other meetings so any disruption film crews/radio stations cause may not be as visible as would normally be the case.</p> <p>To minimise disruption any items due to be filmed would be moved to the start of the Agenda and Members would need to be advised of this. For this reason film crews would need to inform the Council of their wish to do so at least 2 working days in advance of the meeting.</p> <p>All TV or radio crews would need to be managed. Neither Communications nor Administration currently have the resources to provide this service.</p> <p>It would be necessary for any companies filming to provide the Council with a copy of the entire film to ensure that there are no inconsistencies between their recording and the published minutes.</p> <p>Rules provided to members of the public intending to speak at the meetings will also inform potential speakers that there is a possibility they will be filmed/record by television/radio.</p>
<p>2. Filming/recording be allowed at any meeting of full Council held in public so long as notice is given, via the Communications Officer, in advance.</p>	<p>In addition to the above points this may mean that even where there is no public participation meetings could be open to a fair amount of disruption.</p>

It should be borne in mind that a number of Councils have now introduced webcasting of Council meetings on the internet – however there is an element of control in this respect which is not present with external film crews.

7. Examples

Generally speaking Councils have been slow to react to the modernisation agenda in respect of full Council meetings and for some time there was little evidence of a radical re-think of the nature of full Council as a political event. This is slowly changing however and examples can now be found of successful experiments with new ways of working.

As can be seen from the previous paragraphs the options are many and varied and can be combined in a number of ways. Changes have been made in small ways along the way with the Council agenda in Lancaster City Council and it is not suggested that current practices should be swept away, rather that some additional ideas are worthy of experimentation to improve the experience of Councillors at full Council meetings. In considering which of those options set out above are worth exploring further or should be recommended to Council for implementation, Members may be interested in the following experiments which have been judged successful:

- 7.1.1 *Members Question time* – Blackburn with Darwen have included on each agenda an opportunity to question any Cabinet Member following their report on any key items of business in the area. This can take up to two-thirds of the time of a Council meeting and puts real but legitimate pressure on cabinet members to justify their actions. Recent changes at Lancaster City Council to introduce the Leaders report and questions replicate this. Many Councils are now removing the requirement that the Cabinet Minutes be attached to the agenda as it is seen as duplication (both in terms of questions being asked and the cost of the paper and printing). By adding a list of Key Decisions to the Leader's report this would enable Members to ask questions on those issues without the need for the minutes themselves to be included. Alternatively a general question time would allow questions to be asked on any topic – this is currently the case for questions on notice and could be extended. West Sussex has a 90 minute period for questions at the start of all Council meetings which allows all members to question cabinet members – there is an unlimited number of supplementary questions, which has to be managed by the Chairman.
- 7.2 *Public Question Time/Debate* – West Lancashire have held an Evening Assembly on topics which have been sent in by the public. This comprised external speakers on 2 topics followed by a general debate and also included the presentation of a number of community awards.
- 7.3 *State of the District Debate* – this practice is now being adopted more widely, following early unsuccessful attempts. In Arun, Salisbury and West Sussex, for example they have provided an opportunity for the Council Leader to review the past year's work and set out priorities and plans for the forthcoming year, providing an important platform for wider public debate. This could be utilised as a budget and policy consultation session as suggested in paragraph 5.2.2. North Tyneside held a similar event divided into 4 workshops split firstly on a geographical basis and secondly based on the council's key priorities.
- 7.4 *Single Issue Meetings* – Councils such as Carrick, Daventry, Thanet and Kirklees have held single-issue meetings to debate a major policy problem or proposal. Some Councils have also invited representatives from a range of agencies, organisations and partnership bodies to contribute making a public forum rather than a decision-

making body. Harrogate has held informal single-issue sessions prior to formal meetings of full Council, which avoids the need for complex changes to Council Procedure Rules. Barnsley has been holding 'Council in Seminar' style meetings once a month. These are open to the public and each meeting is dedicated to one topic which is part of the Council's policy framework and has been requested by non-executive Councillors. Blackpool have been holding fortnightly council meetings lasting just an hour with a presentation at the end of each agenda allowing members to stay for those that they are interested in.

- 7.5 *Notice of Motion Debates* – Fylde are introducing a 'Member's Choice Debate', i.e. a member selected at random gets to choose a topic for debate at each Council meeting. The debate is in the form of a proposition drawn up by the Member concerned and is subject to a time limit of 30 minutes following which a vote is taken on whether it should or should be adopted by the Council.
- 7.6 *Meeting structure* – Kirklees have introduced a new time limited 'Block 1' session which incorporates member-led workshops open to the public and partners and is used for consideration of new policies, debates on issues affecting Kirklees where the Council is not in a position to make decisions but is seeking to influence others, and debates on issues referred by overview and scrutiny. Presentations can be included in this part of the meeting to aid debate or to provide factual information. A 'Block 2' session follows which includes items for decision.
- 7.7 *Use of Business Committee/Speaker* – there are numerous examples of a Council Business Committee working at various levels but the most successful appear to be those who have an input in the 'management' of Council business and have a say in scheduling meetings for the year ahead. In researching this report there is plenty of theory to be found on the use of a 'Speaker' or 'Council Manager' to chair Council meetings rather than the civic Mayor. The main examples, which have been tracked down, however of this being put into practice are where there are elected Mayors although Telford has appointed a 'Speaker' to chair Council. There are also some examples, Kirklees being one, of a 'Member champion' chairing a business committee and working with officers to develop a schedule of meetings and also acting as the Council spokesman in respect of full Council although not then acting as Chairman at Council meetings.

8. Conclusion and summary of options for change

In order to decide whether any changes are required and what those changes should be Members need to consider what they want full Council meetings to achieve. Clearly there are times when decisions of full Council are required. But there are also times when full Council should be a key political event where the elected representatives of the local community deliberate on significant local and national issues reconnecting local government with the public it represents.

Changes have been made since the commencement of the new democratic structure, which have started the process of transforming the ritualistic set-piece style council meetings of the past. Members need now to decide how much further they wish these changes to go and in what direction. The following options should be considered and where members are keen to make changes a method of implementation and the necessary changes to the Constitution will be developed for recommendation to full Council:

- Appointment of a 'Speaker' as Chairman of Council
- Establishment of a Council Business Committee

- Introduction of more flexible question times for members and/or public
- Removal of Cabinet minutes from the agenda (but retaining a list of key decision in the Leader's Report on which questions could be asked)
- State of the District Debate
- Council meeting as an Assembly
- Single Issue meetings with the public and/or other agencies invited to contribute to debate
- Outside speakers invited to make presentations and answer questions
- Increased use of motions on notice – planned in advance
- Celebrations of success – awards ceremonies
- Changes of venue and/or times

It may be that Council will wish to experiment with some of these options – changes to the Constitution will be kept to a minimum to allow the flexibility to try new things, which can then be refined or dispensed with if unsuccessful. Small changes can be made immediately; others may require more investigation and development. It should in considering the future be remembered that Full Council meetings are the only opportunity that Councillors have to all meet together and they should provide a positive experience and an opportunity for debate and questions.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

There are no specific financial implications at this stage. Some of the options may require additional costs, such as the hiring costs of additional accommodation. Any recommendations would be costed for inclusion in a report to Council.

The greatest impact is likely to be on staff resources required to support more proactive Council arrangements.

LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

All the suggested changes can be introduced within the powers of the Local Government Act 2000, but may necessitate amendment to the Constitution which will require Council approval.

COMMUNITY SAFETY IMPLICATIONS

None.

HUMAN RIGHTS ACT IMPLICATIONS

None.

RACIAL EQUALITY AND EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES IMPLICATIONS

All Council meetings must be held in a manner which allows equal access to all sectors of the community.

SUSTAINABILITY IMPLICATIONS

None.

MONITORING OFFICER'S COMMENTS

This report sets out options for change in respect of the future role of Full Council. The issues considered in this report complete the final outstanding recommendation from the Democratic Renewal exercise undertaken by the Audit Commission in 2003. The options set out in the report aim to improve the operation of full council to improve its accessibility, accountability and community leadership roles. Any changes to the operation of full council will require a council decision and subsequent amendments to the Constitution.

SECTION 151 OFFICER'S COMMENTS

The Section 151 Officer has been consulted and has no comments to add.

BACKGROUND PAPERS

A Role for All Members – The Council Meeting - LGA – June 2000.

Strengthening Local Democracy – Making the Most of the Constitution – ODPM – July 2003

Lancaster City Council – Democratic Renewal – Audit Commission – September 2003.

Local Government Improvement Programme – Reframed Benchmark of the Ideal Local Authority – I&DeA – February 2004

Modernising Full Council: New Political Management Arrangements and the Changing Role of Full Council – INLOGOV Seminar – December 2004