

Audit & Governance Committee

13 November 2023

Review of Timing of committee meetings

For Recommendation to Council

Portfolio Holder: Cllr S Flower, Leader of the Council

Local Councillor(s): All

Executive Director: J Mair, Director of Legal & Democratic

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Report Status: Public

Brief Summary:

At its meeting on 14 February 2023, Full Council adopted the 2023/24 Calendar of Meetings. As part of the resolution, the Leader of the Council agreed to discuss with the Chairman of the Audit and Governance Committee, the setting up of a Task and Finish Group to review the timing of committee meetings in preparation for the 2024/2025 Calendar of Meetings.

A Task and Finish Group was duly established to review the time of committee meetings at Dorset Council and to consider whether holding some of the council's committee meetings in the evenings would enable more councillors to attend meetings, attract more people to stand for election and whether it would enable more members of the public to participate at committees.

Recommendations:

That committee considers the recommendations of the Task & Finish Group, taking into account the results of the members survey, and makes recommendations to Full Council in respect of the following timings in preparation for the Calendar of Meetings 2024/25:

- (a) During the period of British Summer Time, Full Council meetings will be held at 6.30pm. (April, May, July & October)

- (b) During the period of Greenwich Mean Time, Full Council meetings will be held at 2pm. (December & February)
- (c) During the period of British Summer Time, Cabinet will be held at 6.30pm. (April, May, June, July, September, October)
- (d) During the period of Greenwich Mean Time Cabinet will be held at 2pm. (November, December, January, March)
- (e) That all meetings of Audit & Governance Committee will be held at 6.30pm.

Reason for Recommendation:

To respond to a request to review the timing of meetings prior to the Dorset Council elections in May 2024 and to put into place proper arrangements for council committee meetings.

1. Report

- 1.1 The calendar of meetings is approved by Full Council each year to establish the date and time of each committee for the following municipal year.
- 1.2 Since the establishment of Dorset Council in 2019, most committee meetings are held at 10am at County Hall, Dorchester, except for Full Council which starts at 6.30pm.
- 1.3 At Full Council on 14 February 2023, councillors agreed to welcome a review and discussed the impact to the public and councillors when there were limited options to attend or take part at a committee meeting if they were working during the day. Equally, there were also concerns expressed at the meeting, that many councillors already had other commitments in the evenings, such as attendance at town and parish council meetings.
- 1.4 An informal Task and Finish Group was created with the following councillors:

Cllr Richard Biggs (Chairman of Audit and Governance Committee)
Cllr Belinda Bawden (member of Audit and Governance Committee)
Cllr Simon Christopher (member of Audit and Governance Committee)
Cllr Barry Goringe (member of Audit and Governance Committee)
Cllr Ryan Hope (member of Place and Resources Overview Committee)
Cllr Robin Legg (member of Audit and Governance Committee)
Cllr Valerie Potheary (Chairman of the Council)
Cllr Spencer Flower (Leader of the Council)
Cllr William Trite (Vice-Chairman of the Council)

- 1.5 The Task and Finish Group met on 16 June 2023 and asked for a wide range of data to be collated to conduct and inform their review. This included information on the average attendance at meetings and the average duration of committee meetings, data from other “shire councils” and the results of the 2022/23 councillor survey on this topic.
- 1.6 At the second meeting on 4 August 2023, the Group reviewed and discussed the data put before them; concluding that there was no clear preference indicated by councillors for morning, afternoon, or evening meetings. The current timings for most committees met the majority of councillor needs and views. It was acknowledged that as part of their role, councillors had a range of commitments and responsibilities, which made it difficult to devise a calendar of meetings that would suit everyone’s requirements and views.
- 1.7 However, the Group felt that it was important to address some of the concerns raised within the Councillors’ Survey and try to reach a balance in tackling some of those issues for the 2024/25 calendar.

This included:

- To consider holding more meetings in the evening which may encourage more people to stand for election, to allow people who work in the daytime to be able to sit on a committee and to enable the public to have in-person access to committees to participate in public speaking or observe the decision-making process.
- To address concerns around Full Council being held in the evening during the winter months. This had a negative impact on certain councillors due to the distance they needed to travel at the conclusion of a meeting of Full Council.

- 1.8 The rationale for each of the recommendations is set out below:

(a) During the period of British Summer Time (BST) Full Council meetings will be held at 6.30pm and (b) during the period of Greenwich Mean Time (GMT) Full Council meetings will be held at 2pm. Holding Full Council in the evening during the summer and in the afternoon during the winter months was viewed by the Group as a suitable compromise. This would allow some accessibility to all and addresses current councillor concerns around travelling after late night finishing times in the winter months. So as not to overcomplicate the calendar it was proposed to use BST and GMT to calculate when Full Council would meet in the day or evening.

(c) During the period of British Summer Time (BST) Cabinet will be held at 6.30pm and (d) during Greenwich Mean Time (GMT) Cabinet will be held at 2pm. Similarly, it was proposed to hold Cabinet in the evening and daytime using the same BST and GMT method. The Group considered concerns raised about the public and non-executive members having in-person access to meetings of Cabinet and they believed that by holding Cabinet in the evening in the summer months will offer a compromise in terms of accessibility.

(e) That all meetings of the Audit and Governance Committee will be held at 6.30pm. The Group acknowledged that as most meetings were held in the morning this could be seen as a barrier to those wishing to stand as a councillor or current working councillors to sit on a main committee. The Task and Finish Group wished to see a 'mixed economy' of meeting times and by moving Audit and Governance Committee to the evenings would provide an option for working councillors. The results of the 2023 Councillors' Survey had also indicated that the meeting of Audit and Governance Committee may be most receptive to meet in the evenings.

1.9 The Task and Finish Group was mindful not to make too many changes to the calendar of meetings as the data presented to them, including the councillors' survey, had not indicated a clear path of direction. However, the Group acknowledged that there were valid areas of concern which they have tried to address as set out in the recommendations above. The Group also felt that it was important for the new Council post May 2024 to keep this issue under review and make any changes necessary to meet the needs of the new Council post elections. It was therefore decided, at this time, not to propose any changes to the meetings times of the other committees.

1.10 Prior to putting forward the recommendations of the Task & Finish Group to this committee the Chairman of the Audit & Governance Committee, Cllr R Biggs and the Leader of Council, Cllr S Flower agreed to seek member views on the recommendations via a survey. The survey was sent to all members of council at the end of September and was open for a 2-week period. In total 44 councillors responded to the survey and the results of which are appended to this report and summarised as follows:-

95% of respondents voted in favour of Full Council meetings starting at 6.30pm during the summer months;

57% of respondents voted in favour of Full Council meetings starting at 2.00pm during the winter months;

70% of respondents voted in favour of Cabinet meetings starting at

6.30pm during the summer months;

52% of respondents voted in favour of Cabinet meetings starting at 2.00pm in the winter months;

70% of respondents voted in favour of Audit & Governance Meetings starting at 6.30pm all year round.

- 1.11 Members of the Task & Finish Group met on Monday 23 October to consider the results of the member survey. The number of councillors responding to the survey, 44 out of 82, was disappointing and therefore inconclusive in respect of how all members felt about the timing of meetings, however it was agreed that the recommendations of the Task & Finish Group should go forward to this committee for consideration so that the views of the 44 members who responded to the survey could be taken into account.

2. **Financial Implications**

No additional financial implications.

3. **Natural Environment, Climate & Ecology Implications**

Not required.

4. **Well-being and Health Implications**

See comment in paragraph below re: travelling at night.

5. **Other Implications**

Holding committees in addition to Full Council in the evenings may encourage working people to stand to become a Dorset Councillor, as they may view daytime meetings as a barrier to being a councillor. Conversely, it was noted that daytime meetings were considered preferable to some councillors, especially in the winter months, who preferred not to travel for up to one hour at night after attending a long meeting.

Risk Assessment

- 6.1 HAVING CONSIDERED: the risks associated with this decision; the level of risk has been identified as:

Current Risk: Low

Residual Risk: Low

7. Equalities Impact Assessment

An equalities impact assessment was not required as there were no significant changes proposed to the Calendar of Meetings. However, in their deliberations, the Group did take reflect on the key equality strands.

8. Appendices

Appendix – Results of the Member Survey

9. Background Papers

9.1 [Calendar of Meetings Report to 14 February 2023 including the "Councillors' Survey"](#)

9.2 [Minutes of Full Council - 14 February 2023](#)

Appendix

1. Do you agree that Full Council meetings should continue be held at 6.30pm during the summer months in line with British Summer Time?

[More Details](#)



2. Do you agree that Full Council meetings should be held at 2.00pm during the winter months in line with Greenwich Mean Time?

[More Details](#)

[Insights](#)



3. Do you agree that Cabinet meetings should be held at 6.30pm during the summer months in line with British Summer Time?

[More Details](#)

 Insights

 Yes	31
 No	13



4. Do you agree that Cabinet meetings should be held at 2.00pm during the winter months in line with Greenwich Meant Time?

[More Details](#)

 Insights

 Yes	23
 No	21



5. Do you agree that Audit & Governance Committee meetings should be all held at 6.30pm?

[More Details](#)

 Insights

 Yes	31
 No	13

