

Corporate Governance and Audit Committee

Note of Working Group

Friday 26th June 2020

Annual Decision Making Assurance Report

The Committee received the report of the City Solicitor concerning the Council's decision making arrangements and providing assurances that the Council's arrangements are up to date, fit for purpose, effectively communicated and routinely complied with. .

The Committee's attention was drawn to

- Work undertaken to communicate and embed the new decision making thresholds approved by Council with effect from 1st July 2019;
- The performance target relating to the inclusion of key decisions in the List of Forthcoming Key Decisions; and
- Arrangements for decision making during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Members received assurance that communication work in relation to the new thresholds went well and that no issues were being noted with officers using the historic thresholds.

Members received a recommendation that the target for inclusion on the List of Forthcoming Key Decisions be raised to 95% as a target to aim for. However, the Covid-19 pandemic has meant that a lot of decisions have been taken at pace for good and cogent reasons, and it is therefore likely that the target will not be achieved this year.

The Committee received updated information in relation to decision making by officers since the onset of the pandemic noting that between 16th March and 19th June 2020:

- 63 key decisions have been taken by officers.
- 12 of these key decisions were taken as a direct result of the emergency response. Of these, 11 decisions were treated as special urgency, and 1 as general exception. All 12 were exempted from call in. 9 used the short form decision record.
- The remaining 51 key decisions taken by officers have all been included in the List of Forthcoming Key Decisions, however 3 were exempted from call in. 2 used the short form decision record.
- 288 significant operational decisions have been taken by officers, 48 as a direct result of the emergency response. 95 decisions have been published using a shortened form of reporting.

The Head of Democratic Services had provided information for the Committee that Licensing Sub Committees will be recommencing in August and discussions are taking place between Leaders and Whips on the feasibility of holding a meaningful Full Council meeting & Scrutiny Board meetings are now operating as normal with meetings scheduled until the end of the municipal year.

Group Whips are directly engaged in the road map for development of the Public-I platform (with the provider and DIS) including the introduction of recorded voting functionality, improvements to the presentation of Members/Officer names when speaking, the introduction of a lobby function to facilitate engagement by the public and, subject to the ability to integrate technology in the Civic Hall, by the end of the summer, the ability to host hybrid/blended meetings where Members can participate seamlessly from home or the council chamber.

Finally the committee were advised that the Deputy Head of Democratic Services' role had moved into the Internal Audit Team, and that actions ascribed to the Head of Democratic Services would now fall to the Head of Audit.

Members of the Committee asked questions and received responses as follows:

Q: Paragraph 3.10 suggests that there is still some way to go. How are we picking up on examples where perhaps better practice could have been applied?

A: Work is ongoing to strengthen the network of professional support including colleagues from legal, finance, and governance support managers located in the directorates to strengthen relationship and encourage officers to seek advice early . In addition the proposed new corporate report template will be introduced with supporting guidance, and relevant communications will further embed this message. Finally full exploitation of the functionality in the Modern.gov application, currently used to publish reports, agendas and minutes, will enable an end to end development of reports and automate professional checking procedures. Recent reminders to officers have underlined the need to ensure that decision making framework is important, that we should comply with legislative requirements to ensure that Members are appropriately engaged with decision making and that we are open and transparent as an authority.

Q: If we agree the 95% target can we review it to ensure we continue to strive to be as open as possible?

A: It would not be appropriate to review in one year as next year's report will include decisions taken at pace in response to and as a result of the impact of the pandemic, but it is agreed that we should continually strive to make our practice better.

Q: Can the Modern.gov application provide automatic publication of reports and notices?

A: There is capacity within Modern.gov to set alerts when an item has been added to the List of Forthcoming Key Decisions. However the system is dependent on officers adding the work item initially. The only way to really solve the problem is training, communication, advice and guidance and robust support within the directorates. Governance support within the directorates is good and there is a lot of horizon scanning. It is important that training continues. One to one induction sessions are offered to all new starters at chief officer and above and to other officers identified with a governance role – for example Head of Audit. While face to face training sessions are not possible officers will be seeking to develop a curriculum of e-learning.

Q: Public engagement with Committee meetings has increased because people don't have to go to the Civic and everything is webcast. But the number of website clicks is quite a few. Is there a way to streamline that to make it just a couple of clicks to navigate to committee agendas.

A: Officers will feed Members views to Webmaster.

Q: Can Public I functionality provide links to the relevant committee papers alongside the webcast?

A: The Clerk to the committee will take this issue forward.

With reference to paragraph 3.33 and 3.34 of the report, the Committee were supportive of the proposal to raise the performance target for inclusion of key decisions on the List of Forthcoming Key Decisions to 95%. In agreeing this, the Committee recognised that the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic has increased the number of urgent decisions taken and that as a result it is likely that the Council will not achieve this target in the 2020/21 reporting period.

The Chair commented on the adaptability of the Council's decision making processes over the past three months and thanked governance officers.