

STROUD DISTRICT COUNCIL
STRATEGY AND RESOURCES COMMITTEE

**AGENDA
ITEM NO**

13 OCTOBER 2016

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Report Title	FIFTH REPORT OF THE CONSTITUTION WORKING GROUP
Purpose of Report	To set out the recommendations to Committee on the questions raised of the Working Group, namely: (1) Whether to extend the terms of reference of Housing Committee to include all housing issues rather than simply Council housing stock and management of the social housing development fund programme; and (2) Whether to amalgamate the Community Services & Licensing Committee and the Environment Committee.
Decision(s)	1. That the Committee RECOMMENDS TO COUNCIL: Relevant amendments be made to the Council's Constitution to ensure that as from 1 st December 2016 the Housing Committee's terms of reference comprise "public and private housing issues affecting the Council's housing authority role and housing policy." AND 2. That the Committee RESOLVES: The workloads of the Community Services & Licensing Committee and the Environment Committee be kept under review in 2016/17 as outlined in paragraph 6(b) of the report.
Consultation and Feedback	Members of the Constitution Working Group were tasked with consulting their political groups. Officers who deal with the Housing, Community Services & Licensing and Environment Committees were also consulted.
Report Author	Karen Trickey on behalf of the Constitution Working Group (current members: Cllrs Cornell (Chair), Robinson, Studdert-Kennedy, Kay, Butcher, Cooper and Young).

Background

1. The Working Group met on three occasions to examine the two issues referred to it at the AGM (see Purpose of the Report above). The following information was considered in detail (this report providing a resume of the key points):
 - Terms of reference of the committees since May 2013;
 - Cost of the committees and workload in 2015 to 2016;
 - Allocation of committee responsibilities within other councils;
 - Views of officers who regularly report to the Housing, Environment and Community Services & Licensing Committees; and
 - Views of members (via their political groups and other individuals in particular relevant committee chairs).

2. Terms of Reference

- 2.1 It was noted that at times there was an overlap of responsibilities between some areas of work of the Community Services & Licensing Committee (CS&L), Environment Committee (EC) and Housing Committee (HC). For example, 'housing' was currently split between private and public sector housing despite there being shared interests in both markets; and 'health' issues were split between CS&L and EC in so far as CS&L's terms of reference include 'health and wellbeing issues' but environmental health issues which potentially fell within the former, were dealt with by EC.
- 2.2 It was considered that the splitting of council housing from private housing between two committees was unhelpful in practice and restricted the ambition of committees to take a more strategic approach to housing across the district, irrespective of which sector was involved. In contrast, it was not considered that the overlap in health and wellbeing for CS&L and EC had presented any difficulties in practice, the relevant work being split between environmental health and other wellbeing issues (leisure and community safety) and dealt with by EC and CS&L respectively.

3. Costs and workload

- 3.1 In support of a possible reduction in the number of committees, it was noted that in 2015, the administration of member meetings cost in the region of £2000 per meeting. In 2015, the EC held four of its five meetings; the CS&L met on all five of its scheduled meetings; and the HC held an additional committee, meeting on six occasions. Generally, meetings were shorter for CS&L and EC than any of the other service committees and fewer decisions were made. As with all committees, more decisions were referred to committee for consideration than necessary. In the case of CS&L and HC as a consequence two meetings could have been cancelled and the costs of the meetings saved. Nevertheless, given the limited administration costs of each meeting, this was not considered a significant concern.
- 3.2 The Working Group expressed the view that it was important for the Council to be seen to be making decisions in public committee meetings. It considered that there was a need for enough seats on committees to

provide the opportunity for every member to sit on at least one committee as opposed to just being part of a working group to which they might be invited to participate by a committee. It was noted that currently 70 seats are available on committees for 51 members. No support was expressed via the member consultation for reducing the number of committees. Indeed, the member consultation indicated that there was sufficient work to warrant retention of the current committees. It considered that a reduction in the number of committees would adversely affect the quality of decisions by lessening the opportunity to use members' expertise within their particular committee areas.

4. Comparisons with other councils

- 4.1 Research revealed that only 25% of 64 councils across the country which had retained their housing stock had a member decision making structure which separated council housing from private housing issues. Most authorities had a single decision maker (i.e. committee or housing portfolio holder) which was responsible for all strategic housing matters.
- 4.2 Generally, other authorities' committees dealt with a wider range of issues than either EC or CS&L, there being no obvious comparable committee set up in other authorities.

5. Consultees' views

- 5.1 Views were sought of senior officers who currently report to HC, EC and CS&L. The general consensus was that it seemed sensible to keep public and private sector housing within one committee. It was noted that market housing issues which concern the development of strategic local plan policies and the like should remain within the responsibility of EC. With regards to EC and CS&L officers identified an overlap of responsibilities between the two committees consistent with the points in paragraph 2 above.
- 5.2 The views expressed of political groups following consultation by their Working Group representative, did not support an amalgamation of CS&L and the EC. Feedback did indicate support for an extension of HC to cover private housing stock issues which currently lay within the responsibility of CS&L, along with homeless and affordable housing issues (albeit recognising that local plan market issues should remain within the realms of EC's strategic planning work).
- 5.3 Consultation with Finance Services did not raise any concern from a budgetary management perspective on a possible change in the committee structure.

Working Group's Findings

6. Taking account of the information considered, the Working Group has concluded:
 - (a) Whatever changes are made to the committees, there will inevitably still be potential for overlap between the various committees. Nevertheless in order to encourage a more strategic approach to management of housing services across the district, housing matters should be dealt with by HC rather than split according to whether the

housing was within the private or public sector. Homelessness and housing advice issues should be transferred from CS&L to the HC. For the avoidance of doubt, market housing issues relevant to local plan should remain within the primary responsibility of EC. In the case of areas of overlap between committees, it was noted that there was no reason why a committee could not seek a report on a particular issue which fell within the responsibility of another committee if it was relevant to their terms of reference (e.g. HC could seek information on revenue and benefit issues affecting housing payments which in general terms would still fall within CS&L's responsibility).

- (b) It was apparent that there was extremely limited, if any, political support for the amalgamation of CS&L and EC's responsibilities into one committee. It was considered that whilst the workload of the two committees in comparison to the committees had to date been limited, there was still potentially a significant amount of work which could be undertaken by the two committees. For example during the rest of 2016 / 2017, EC would be looking to review the outcomes from the multi services contract recently entered into with UBICO (such work highlighting the review and scrutiny role all committees have); and CS&L had recently been examining the Council's Youth Strategy and it was proposed that the committee expand its work with the community on health and wellbeing generally. The Working Group considered that the workload of the two committees should be kept under review in 2016/17 by the Monitoring Officer. She will report to the Working Group on the possibility of it reviewing the terms of reference of the committees or the committee structure in 2017 if, for example, it might be considered that workload worthy of two committees hadn't materialised in 2016/17 as anticipated. In this scenario, the Working Group will reconvene to reconsider the matter and report back to the Strategy & Resources Committee on possible changes to the committees' terms of reference in 2017/18.