

Notice of Motion

Full Council

19th September 2019

Proposed By: Councillor Sir Ron Watson CBE

Seconded By: Councillor Tony Brough

Democratic Changes to Council Procedures and Constitution

Council Procedures Public Involvement

Many Members of the Council are becoming increasingly concerned at what they consider to be a Democratic Deficit in the workings of the Council and believe that now is the appropriate time to bring forward suggestions as to how this can be addressed.

The Council Meetings

There is a significant gap between Council Meetings where this year there was a Full Council Meeting on 25 April with the Council not meeting again until 18 July.

There was an Adjourned Council Meeting reconvened for 16 May to agree the administration for the year but no questions or no Notice of Motion was allowed.

The latter two issues should be incorporated in the future into this meeting and recommendations brought forward as to how such a long gap can be avoided in the future.

Questions at the Full Council Meetings

Sefton should now adopt the policy that applies in many Councils whereby Councillors can ask questions of the Leader and Cabinet Members without notice at Full Council Meetings.

The period for this section should not exceed 30 minutes.

The Cabinet System

The experience of Members indicates that these meetings are very perfunctory and on average last between 5 and 10 minutes.

Members of the Council have confirmed however that Cabinet Members meet in private for up to 3 hours and take the decisions at this time.

A system that allows 10 minutes for Elected Members, the public and the press and media to attend when set against 3 hours for the same agenda discussed in private is clearly not Democratic.

The Membership of the Cabinet should include on an Ex Officio basis the Leaders of any Political Party with a Membership of more than 5 Councillors and they should be entitled to all the papers.

These Ex Officio Members would have the right to speak at the Cabinet but would not have a vote.

Overview and Scrutiny Committees

The policy of the current administration only to allow Members of their Party to act as Chair is clearly against the spirit of the O and S function.

Sefton should therefore follow the example of many other majority-controlled Councils and ensure that to bring about an enhanced and more independent role of O and S, the Chairmanship should be allocated on a proportionate basis to Members of the other Parties.

The Overview and Scrutiny Committee Members as a matter of course should have access to 'Exempt' reports on which Cabinet Members have subsequently made a decision.

Elected Member Database

Sefton has many Members with a wide range of experience in all areas.

Councils should maintain a database of this valuable experience and use it as one of the criteria when appointing Members to Non-Political Outside Bodies who ask for the Council to be represented on their Boards and Committees.

Commercial Confidentiality

There remains very great concern over many aspects of certain decisions that are taken in secret using the above as the reason.

The Council should seek Legal advice to set up a Special Body based on the criteria adopted on a National Basis by the Privy Council in order that all Leading Members from all Parties are aware of the background to any decision made.

This should stress that the information given is to be held confidential and some consideration as to sanctions for those who deliberately break this criteria should be involved.

Training

The complex nature of some of the commercial transactions being entered into does mean that there is a need for training of Elected Members in an area that they will not

be particularly familiar with and there are currently few Member who have a financial background that would enable them to claim to be in a position to make valued judgements on financial commitments that may be controversial.

As a consequence, the Council will embark upon a Structed Training Programme starting with Cabinet to enhance their knowledge in this critical area.

Press and Media

There should be no public announcements on policy issues taken in advance of Elected Members being informed except in most extreme cases.

The Council now acknowledges that issuing press statements when Elected Members are subsequently asked to comment by the Press/Media but on which they have no knowledge is counter-productive.

Public Involvement and Consultation

The decision by the Council to introduce 'Community Chats' has clearly proved not to be a success.

The Council should, therefore, have the maturity to admit that a serious mistake was made in abolishing the Southport Area Committee which provided a well understood Forum enabling the public to raise matters both individually and collectively, receive updates from other bodies such as the Police, benefit from presentations by other organisations and be able to see directly the Decision-Making Process involving Councillors at the Meeting.

Southport Town Council

The decision not to allow a very preliminary start on a Consultation process to ascertain whether or not there was a public support for the formation in due course of a Town Council has not been well received.

The Leader of the Council has conceded that Parish and Town Councils work well throughout the rest of Sefton but will offer no explanation as to why he has had his Members vote against what is no more than a preliminary investigation with no commitment.

The decision needs to be reversed and Sefton should now prepare the appropriate administrative process to start the consultation process with the public.