

28 AUGUST 1998

NEW FOREST DISTRICT COUNCIL

COUNCIL MEETING WORKING PARTY

Minutes of a meeting of the Council Meeting Working Party held at Appletree Court, Lyndhurst on Friday, 28 August 1998.

Councillors:

p R C H Hale
p J A G Hutchins JP
p R F Orton
p Mrs M J Robinson

Councillors:

p S A Shepherd
p G Spikins
p Mrs J K Vernon-Jackson MBE JP DL

Officers Attending:

D A Gurney, Mrs R Rutins and T R Simpson.

1. ELECTION OF CHAIRMAN.

RESOLVED:

That Cllr Robinson be elected Chairman of the Working Party for the ensuing year.

2. OPEN DEBATES AT COUNCIL MEETINGS (REPORT A).

Members reviewed the way in which business at Council meetings was conducted with a view to facilitating debate, in which members of the public would be invited to participate, on major or topical issues. The initiative had arisen from consideration of measures to involve the public to a greater extent in the work of the Council. It was the Council's wish to promote the Council meeting as a debating forum, where Councillors' and the public's views on major issues could be expressed. Changes in the way the Council conducted its business would have to be made to make time for the open debates.

It was noted that to facilitate this change the officers had suggested that, instead of submitting the minutes of committees to the Council for discussion, reports on business conducted by each committee be included in the Council agenda. Each committee's report would include any recommended items in respect of which the committee had no delegated authority, and could include contentious items or items of more general interest.

The Working Party supported the principle of minutes no longer being submitted to Council and the preparation of reports instead. An example of the format of a report and what might be included was circulated. It was agreed that, as a general principle, there should be a presumption against resolved items appearing in reports but that resolved items be included at:

1. The discretion of the Chairman of the Committee; or
2. The request of the spokesperson on the committee of the opposition groups, endorsed by that group's leader within three working days of the Committee meeting.

The Working Party considered that minutes of committees should be circulated to all members of the Council, bound into a single volume, as soon as possible following the last committee meeting in that cycle, but not later than 5 working days prior to the meeting of the Council. Any minutes which could not be included by that time should be circulated separately.

Members considered that if minutes of committees were not submitted to the Council, more information needed to be provided on committee agenda as to the nature of items to be discussed to ensure that, in particular, they were aware of local issues. This would mean the tightening of internal deadlines for committee reports.

With regard to the selection of items for debate, the Working Party supported the principles recommended but considered that selection of items should be by the Chairman of the Council, and not the Leader, in consultation with the political group leaders.

With regard to the conduct of the debates and involvement of the public, it was considered important to obtain a cross-section of views. For any items selected attempts should be made to notify groups on both sides of the argument. If a member of the public suggested a particular item, they should be asked to identify a group or spokesperson holding an opposite view so that they could be invited to participate. Members supported the proposal that the public should have a maximum of three minutes in which to speak but that, if there were "expert witnesses", they should be entitled to speak for longer. It was important to ensure a proper outcome of the debates and a member of the Council should propose a particular course of action at the conclusion. Councillors' involvement in the debates would be subject to the rules in Standing Orders but it was considered important for Councillors' contributions to be interspersed with those of the public and not to have all of the public speaking before Councillors expressed their views. This would need strong and impartial control on the part of the Chairman. Care would need to be taken that any one organisation or person did not make use of the open debates to raise the same issue repeatedly. Participation by organisations should be limited to one or two members of that organisation on each occasion.

With regard to publicity, the Working Party agreed that a leaflet be produced and made available at all of the Council's offices. Additional publicity could be given via the Area Forums, District News, Press Releases, Parish and Town Councils and promotion by District Councillors.

It was noted that a number of practical issues such as where participants should sit in the Council Chamber, from which point they should address the Council and use of the sound enhancement systems would need to be resolved. Officers would pursue these.

RECOMMENDED:

- (a) That the open debate sessions be introduced with effect from the January 1999 meeting of the Council;**
- (b) That, to provide time for the open debate sessions and to strengthen the Committee process, the practice of including the minutes of Committees in the Council agenda for discussion be discontinued, and that instead each Committee submit a report to the Council giving an overview of the business it has undertaken during that cycle;**
- (c) That each Committee's report contain recommended items on which the Committee does not have delegated authority to take decisions; that there be a presumption against the inclusion of resolved items but that such items be included for the information of the Council -**

 - (1) at the discretion of the Chairman of the Committee;**
 - (2) at the request of a group spokesperson on the Committee, with the request being endorsed by the leader of that group within 3 working days of the meeting of the Committee;**
- (d) That copies of the minutes of all programme committees be circulated to all members of the Council in bound form as soon as possible following the last Committee meeting in that cycle, but not later than 5 working days prior to the meeting of the Council. Any minutes not available at that time will be circulated separately later;**
- (e) That fuller descriptions of matters to be discussed be included in Committee agenda;**
- (f) That, with regard to the selection of items for discussion and the conduct of the open debate sessions, the following principles apply -**

 - (1) That it be open to Councillors, officers and members of the public to submit items for debate. Items must be suggested to the Director of Finance and Administration at least 21 days before the date of the Council meeting;**
 - (2) That items for debate be selected by the Chairman of the Council in consultation with the political group leaders and the officers at least 14 days prior to a Council meeting;**
 - (3) That items for debate should normally be of general interest to the inhabitants of the District as a whole, or to a majority of them, and need not be confined to matters over which the Council has direct control;**
 - (4) That a minimum of one and a maximum of three items be selected for debate at each meeting of the Council;**

- (5) *That once items for debate have been selected, attempts be made to ensure that individuals/organisations on both sides of the argument are informed of the coming debate and be given an opportunity to participate. If a member of the public or an organisation suggests an item for debate, they be asked to identify a spokesperson who could be invited to provide an opposite view;*
 - (6) *That the normal rules of debate as set out in Standing Orders apply to Councillor participation;*
 - (7) *That members of the public be allowed to speak once only, for a maximum of three minutes, during each debate. Any "expert witnesses" invited to participate may, at the discretion of the Chairman, be permitted to speak for longer than three minutes and to reply to debate. Any member of the public who is the originator of an item and who has proposed a particular course of action will also be allowed the right to reply to the debate;*
 - (8) *That the right to address the Council during the open debate sessions be at the absolute discretion of the Chairman. Any one member of the public will be discouraged from speaking at successive meetings;*
 - (9) *That not more than 10 members of the public be permitted to speak during each debate. Not more than two representatives from the same organisation may speak on the same subject. If more than 10 members of the public notify their wish to speak, the first 10 who will ensure a balanced debate to notify the Director of Finance and Administration will be permitted to speak;*
 - (10) *That members of the public wishing to participate in debates be requested to notify the Director of Finance and Administration by the close of the working day prior to the meeting of the Council (this will normally be 4.45 p.m. on the Friday before the Council meeting);*
 - (11) *That the open debate sessions take place prior to the consideration of reports of committees;*
 - (12) *That each debate should conclude with an agreed outcome. It will be for a Councillor (not a member of the public, although a member of the public could suggest a way forward) formally to move a particular course of action. The relevant Standing Order relating to seconding of motions and voting will apply.*
- (g) *That Standing Orders be amended where necessary to provide for the above and where a Standing Order is not required, the principles set out above be regarded as the guidelines under which the open debate sessions shall be held;*

- (h) That publicity to the scheme be given by:-**
- (1) production of a leaflet;**
 - (2) advance publicity where items can be selected early in the year;**
 - (3) District News,**
 - (4) the Area Forums;**
 - (5) press releases;**
 - (6) town and parish councils;**
 - (7) promotion by District Councillors.**
- (i) That the scheme be reviewed after three meetings at which open debate sessions have been held.**

CHAIRMAN