

## **DEMOCRATIC ENGAGEMENT**

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

- 1.1 Members will be aware that this Council has operated a Cabinet, or Executive, system of decision-making since 2001, as required then by the Local Government Act 2000. At that time, the Council's decision-making and scrutiny arrangements were considered in depth, with a cross-party working group reviewing, over a considerable period, a number of options for the revised democratic structure.
- 1.2 Since then, the Council has made changes in some areas, such as the number and terms of reference of the Scrutiny Panels, but there has been no fundamental examination or assessment of the overall decision-making structure. Members might therefore wish to undertake a review to test whether the decision-making structure remains appropriate and is providing meaningful engagement with residents to inform decision-making.
- 1.3 This report seeks the Panel's views on whether there is scope for improvement in the way the Council engages with communities and the extent to which residents are able to influence decisions. If so, the Panel is asked to consider whether to establish a Task & Finish Group to assess options for the way forward.

### **2. BACKGROUND**

- 2.1 At the time the Cabinet system of decision-making was introduced by this Council, it was compulsory for Councils with populations above 85,000 to operate Executive arrangements. This requirement was, however, repealed by the Localism Act 2011.

### **3. DEMOCRATIC/COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT**

- 3.1 While the terms democratic and community engagement are probably self-explanatory, it is a fundamental principle of democracy that communities directly, or through meaningful representation, are involved in decisions that affect their lives. The Council has a number of measures in place through various consultation arrangements and, importantly, through opportunities for public participation at meetings, but it might be opportune to consider whether additional or revised practices could better inform decision-making.
- 3.2 It is suggested that improved arrangements should be aimed at making the decision-making process more accessible to local people, and have the effect of local communities feeling that their voices have been heard before decisions affecting them are taken.
- 3.3 As the Panel will know, an existing Electoral Review Task & Finish Group has been examining a possible reduction in the number of members on the Council. Work on that particular issue has been deferred until the preparation of the revised local plan is more advanced, to enable better projection of likely growth areas on which to base elector:member ratios. The work envisaged by the Task & Finish Group proposed in this report need not impinge on that of the Electoral Review Task & Finish Group.

#### **4. POSSIBLE TASK & FINISH GROUP – TERMS OF REFERENCE**

- 4.1 If the Panel wishes to establish a Task & Finish Group, the following terms of reference are suggested:

*To review the current decision-making arrangements (insofar as is permissible by law) to seek to improve community access to and involvement in the democratic process.*

#### **5. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

- 5.1 No direct financial implications, other than travel by members, are foreseen in establishing a Task & Finish Group. Those costs will be met from within existing budgets.

#### **6. CRIME & DISORDER, ENVIRONMENTAL AND EQUALITY & DIVERSITY IMPLICATIONS**

- 6.1 There are none.

#### **7. RECOMMENDATIONS**

- 7.1 That the Panel considers establishing a Task & Finish Group to examine possible revised democratic arrangements, with the terms of reference set out in paragraph 4.

#### **For further information contact:**

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#### **Background Papers:**

**None**