

County Council Meeting – 19 July 2011

REPORT OF THE COUNCIL OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

- * Denise Le Gal (Chairman)
Mel Few (Vice-Chairman)
- * Mark Brett-Warburton
- * Stephen Cooksey
- * Steve Cosser
- * John Furey
- * David Harmer
- * Eber Kington
- * Steve Renshaw
Dorothy Ross-Tomlin
- * Tony Samuels
- * Nick Skellett
- * Chris Townsend
Richard Walsh
- * Hazel Watson

Ex Officio Members

- Mrs Lavinia Sealy (Chairman of the Council)
- * Mr David Munro (Vice-Chairman of the Council)

Substitutes

- * Mr David Ivison
- * Mrs Denise Turner-Stewart
- * Mrs M A Hicks

- * Present

A REVIEW OF THE COUNCIL'S PETITION SCHEME

- 1 The Local Democracy, Economic Development and Construction Act 2009 required all principal councils to provide a facility for electronic petitions (e-petitions) and to adopt a scheme for any e-petitions or paper petitions it receives. The paper-based scheme had to be operational by 15 June 2010 with the e-petition facility in place by 15 December 2010.
- 2 The County Council adopted a formal petition scheme, meeting the requirements of the Act, on 15 June 2010 and implemented an e-petition facility at the same time. In approving the petition scheme, it was recognised that there were a number of unknowns and that therefore the scheme should be reviewed after a year of operation to ensure that it remained effective.
- 3 The Council Overview & Scrutiny Committee considered the attached report at its meeting on 6 July 2011 and discussed possible changes to the discretionary areas of the scheme, in particular the number of signatures

required to enable a petition to be presented at Council and the time allowed for debate at the meeting. It was noted that the current threshold of 20,000 signatures represented less than 2% of the population, which was lower than the 5% allowed under the Act. The Committee felt that the existing threshold of 20,000 signatures was appropriate, as any significant reduction could lead to local issues, rather than County-wide or strategic matters, being debated at Council. It was also felt that if an issue had achieved the required number of signatures, it was then reasonable for the lead petitioner to continue to be allowed five minutes to present the petition to Council.

4 The Committee recognised that on occasions it might be more appropriate for the Leader to respond to a petition at Council rather than a Cabinet Member, and agreed with a suggested amendment to paragraph 22 of the scheme to allow this. The Committee also considered the proposal to include the sentence '*Surrey County Council is committed to localism and ensuring the Council is as open and transparent as possible in all that it does*' in paragraph 1 of the scheme but, whilst supporting the sentiment, did not feel there was any particular benefit from making this amendment.

5 The Committee therefore **RECOMMENDS:**

(a) That the number of signatures needed to require a debate at Council remain at 20,000.

(b) That the lead petitioner continue to be allowed to speak for five minutes when presenting a petition to Council.

(c) That the time allowed for debate on a petition at meetings of the Council be increased from 30 minutes to one hour.

(d) That paragraph 22 of the scheme be amended as follows:

'The petition organiser will be given five minutes to present the petition at the meeting. The Leader or relevant Cabinet Member will then be given five minutes for a right of reply before Members have an opportunity to debate the petition for no more than 30 minutes with each Member allowed to speak for a maximum of 3 minutes.'

(If recommendation (c) above is approved, this paragraph will need to be further amended in relation to the time allowed for debate at a Council meeting.)

(e) That the number of signatures needed to require an officer to be held to account by a Select Committee remain at 10,000.