



OFFICER REPORT TO LOCAL COMMITTEE (MOLE VALLEY)

LOCAL PROTOCOLS ON PUBLIC QUESTIONS

23 SEPTEMBER 2009

KEY ISSUE

The County Council has agreed that Local Committees can make its own arrangements for handling matters related to public engagement, provided that these arrangements are set out in an approved protocol that is, in effect, a local addition to standing orders.

SUMMARY

This report proposes a protocol to deal with informal public questions to the Local Committee in 2009-2013 through the introduction of "open forum" before the start of each Mole Valley Local Committee.

OFFICER RECOMMENDATIONS

The Local Committee (Mole Valley) is asked to agree that :

Public Questions

- (i) The committee will offer an opportunity for public engagement and informal questions before the beginning of each formal Local Committee meeting. This session will be called the 'open forum' and will last up to 30 minutes at the discretion of the chairman. Members of the public may ask one supplementary question at the discretion of the chairman.
- (ii) Written public questions, dealt with as part of the formal agenda, may be accepted up to 12.00 noon four working days before the day of the meeting, but fourteen days before the committee if a written response is required at the meeting. Members of the public may ask one brief supplementary question relevant to the subject of the original, at the discretion of the chairman.

1 INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

- 1.1 In the County Council's Constitution, Standing Orders 40.1 and 40.2 state that:

“Local Committees shall comply fully with these Standing Orders (parts 2 and 3) except where they draw up local protocols allowing them discretion to make minor variations to working practices which may only relate to arrangements for public engagement, including arrangements for the presentation of petitions, public question time etc. and monitoring service performance locally.

Any local protocols shall be drawn up by the Area Director in consultation with the Democratic Services Lead Manager, and approved by the Local Committee”.

1.2 Public Questions

Standing Order 66.2 states that the notice for written public questions is 7 days. The Committee has agreed previously that the notice should be four days, in line with the notice period for member questions.

It is also recommended that, at the discretion of the chairman, members of the public may ask one supplementary question relevant to the subject of the original.

For written public questions copies of any questions received in writing will be circulated to Members of the local committee in advance providing the question was received 14 days in advance of the meeting. Otherwise, a response will be provided after the meeting.

For unwritten public questions it is recommended that the committee offer an opportunity for public engagement and informal questions before the beginning of each formal Local Committee meeting. This session will be called the ‘open forum’ and will last up to 20 minutes at the discretion of the chairman. Members of the public may ask one supplementary question at the discretion of the chairman.

There will be no limit to the amount of oral questions which may be asked, although the time available to ask questions is limited to twenty minutes at the chairman’s discretion.

2 CONSULTATIONS

- 2.1 Consultation took place at the Informal Local Committee (Mole Valley) in July 2009. Members were asked to comment on the current protocols and suggest changes, amendments or best practice regarding public questions.

3 OPTIONS

- 3.1 Option 1, adopted the suggested local protocols

3.2 Options 2, do not adopt the recommended changes.

4 FINANCIAL AND VALUE FOR MONEY IMPLICATIONS

4.1 There should be no financial implications in adopting the recommendations.

5 EQUALITIES AND DIVERSITY IMPLICATIONS

5.1 By making the local committee more accessible to the public and relaxing the standing protocols, more residents will have the ability to effect local decision making.

5.2 All Local Committee venues are subject to an equalities and disability assessment before being booked.

6 CRIME AND DISORDER IMPLICATIONS

6.1 There are no crime and disorder implications

7 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

7.1 The Council has amended Standing Orders to allow Local Committees to vary procedural rules to make their proceedings more accessible and to promote engagement with the public. Within the limited scope afforded by this relaxation, the report proposes that the current practice of the Local Committee (Mole Valley) is continued.

The Local Committee (Mole Valley) is asked to agree that:

Public Questions

- I. the committee will offer an opportunity for public engagement and informal questions before the beginning of each formal Local Committee meeting. This session will be called the 'open forum' and will last up to 30 minutes at the discretion of the chairman. Members of the public may ask one supplementary question at the discretion of the chairman.
- II. written public questions, dealt with as part of the formal agenda, may be accepted up to 12.00 noon four working days before the day of the meeting, but fourteen days before the committee if a written response is required at the meeting. Members of the public may ask one brief supplementary question relevant to the subject of the original, at the discretion of the chairman.

8 REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATIONS

8.1 Officer's recommendation uses the amended standing orders to allow the Local Committees more accessible to the local residents, promote local responsibility and give residents the ability to affect local decision-making.

9 WHAT HAPPENS NEXT

- 9.1 If the new local protocols are agreed, the Local Committee (Mole Valley) will work within them for the coming year.

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BACKGROUND PAPERS: Surrey County Council's Constitution