

WEST OXFORDSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

COUNCIL: WEDNESDAY 21 OCTOBER 2015

START TIMES OF MEETINGS

REPORT OF THE LEADER OF THE COUNCIL

(Contact: Sir Barry Norton, - Tel (01993) 861617)

1. PURPOSE

Further to the meeting of the Council held 2 September, to enable the Council to give further consideration to the start time of meetings.

2. RECOMMENDATION

That, having regard to the responses summarised in [Appendix B](#), no change be made to the current arrangements, including the continuation of the practice whereby each Overview and Scrutiny Committee reviews its start time at the beginning of each civic year.

3. BACKGROUND

- 3.1. At the meeting of the Council held 2 September 2015, a question relating to the start times of meetings was submitted by Council A M Graham. The question and my answer are included in [Appendix A](#) (page 2).
- 3.2. Further to that, I arranged for the circulation of a brief questionnaire to all members. The 37 responses to the questionnaire are summarised in [Appendix B](#), (page 3).
- 3.3. Council is reminded that although Cabinet meetings have always been included in the programme of meetings report and calendar for ease of reference, it is entirely a matter for the Leader as to the dates, timings and frequency of its meetings.

4. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 4.1. This report makes no recommendations for change and therefore has no financial implications.
- 4.2. A change such that more meetings took place in the evening would have small financial implications in terms of heating, lighting and caretaking, and would potentially have some associated staffing implications in terms either of time off in lieu or overtime payments.

5. REASONS

This report has been brought forward as a consequence of my reply to the question posed at the last meeting.

Sir Barry Norton
Leader of the Council

(Tel: (01993) 861617; EMail: barry.norton@westoxon.gov.uk)

Date: 12 October 2015

Background Papers:

None

**EXTRACT FROM (DRAFT) MINUTES OF COUNCIL MEETING HELD
2 SEPTEMBER 2015**

28. QUESTION BY A COUNCILLOR

In accordance with Standing Order No. 10(b) a written question for the Leader of the Council had been received from Councillor A M Graham, namely:

'In light of the circumstances which led to the recent by election in which a councillor resigned due to meetings largely taking place in day time hours and in order to serve the community better, will he consider a review, (in time for next May elections) of more balanced timings of meetings of council and committees to reflect the needs of working people to attend meetings so as not to put people off from standing for election due to too many meetings held in day time hours; and if a review is not possible, can he explain why not?'

Mr Norton gave the following response:

"Mr Chairman, I would like to thank Mr Graham for his question, as it is obviously important that aspects of how the Council conducts its business are kept under review.

The current timings of meetings reflect the wishes of the majority of Council members, and it is of course not likely that there will be a schedule which suits each of our 49 members – clearly some working people may find it easier to attend late afternoon or evening meetings, but others may have shift patterns or family responsibilities which cause difficulties plus, of course, many members are also members of, or otherwise regularly attend, meetings of town and parish councils.

Every year, the three Overview & Scrutiny Committees agree their start time for the ensuing year, and the decision taken reflects the membership of each of the committees at that time, rather than being based on the previous year's membership.

Additionally, when the programme of meetings is considered and approved by Council, it is open to any member at that time to propose (i) a different start time for one or more specified meetings; or (ii) that each meeting considers its start time in the following civic year, as is the case with the Scrutiny Committees; or (iii) another alternative, such as rotating the start times.

Whilst not agreeing to a full review I will look in to the matter further with officers with a view to obtaining opinions prior to the Council next considering a future programme of meetings. I anticipate that the programme of meetings for 2016/17 will be put before the Council meeting in January, in which case the outcome will be known well ahead of the May elections".

SUMMARY OF RESPONSES TO QUESTIONNAIRE

A total of 37 responses had been received as of 12 October.

Q1: Preferred Start Time

20 respondents gave the afternoon as their preferred start time for meetings. Of those, one preferred 3 pm, and one stated that although the afternoon was their preference, that should not be the basis for a decision.

Of the remaining 17: five expressed a preference for evenings; one for mornings; four gave no preference and the remainder either stated afternoons or evenings (i.e. not mornings) or another alternative, including two suggestions for a 4 pm start time to be considered.

Q2: Do you consider the current balance of start times of meetings to be appropriate?

30 of the 37 respondents answered “yes” to this question, six said “no”, and one “yes and no”.

Q5: If meetings are held in the evening, what is your preferred start time?

16 respondents either did not state a time or said that evenings would not be convenient. Of the remaining 21, 10 preferred 6 pm, six preferred 6:30 pm; two 7 pm; with the remaining three saying either 6 or 6:30 pm

Q6: Are there any particular meetings where you feel the start time should be different from currently?

32 of the 37 respondents either answered no, or did not give an answer, or stated that it was irrelevant as would not be able to attend. The remaining five gave a variety of options including council; or council and scrutiny meetings being in the evening; 4 pm for Planning and 6 pm for other meetings; and 4 or 6 pm start times being preferred.

Questions 3, 4 and 7

Each of these invited further comments or suggestions.

A variety of comments were received. The main particular aspects mentioned were:

- Being content with the current arrangements
- No particular time or practice would be likely to be suitable for all
- The need to consider the public and working/younger councillors
- Working councillors with a preference for the existing arrangements
- The fact that times can be reviewed when a programme is agreed
- The number of evening commitments which already exist, including membership of and/or attendance to town and parish council meetings
- The length of planning meetings; but also that other meetings do not tend to be too lengthy
- Impact on staff
- The reduced availability of public transport during the evenings
- The perceived need for a greater range of councillors in terms of age