
Governance Committee: Merger of Planning and Rights of Way Committees

Background and Context

- 1** In December 2019, the Council agreed to the establishment of a new Fire & Rescue Service Scrutiny Committee. To better manage the budgetary implications for democratic services options for savings were explored including the merger of the Planning and Rights of Way Committees. Their roles are distinct, but they share a similar quasi-judicial process and approach to decision-making.

Proposals

- 2** It is proposed that the Planning and Rights of Way Committees be merged. Member support for decision-making can be managed through member training and officer advice. There would be a saving in the chairmanship allowance of one committee and in the member time and expenses of attendance at two or three meetings per year. There would be a small saving in costs in servicing the same number of meetings in terms of minuting and attendance.
- 3** Arrangements for planning applications will not be adversely affected as they will continue to be presented to the next scheduled meeting when they are ready. There will be a benefit to rights of way matters as these could potentially come to more frequent meetings.
- 4** These functions are delivered by a single committee in most nearby county councils including East Sussex, Hampshire and Surrey. Of the 24 two-tier county councils remaining, 16 have a single committee to perform these functions. Merger would release £9,552 through the deletion of one special responsibility allowance to accommodate the new allowance for the new scrutiny committee.
- 5** Site visits are different for the two functions and so the proposed constitutional changes allow for the different types of visit to continue.
- 6** The Governance Committee asked the Director of Law and Assurance to prepare the changes to the Constitution to give effect to the merger. **Appendix 1** contains the proposed changes to Parts 2, 3 and 4 of the Constitution. **Appendix 2** contains the proposed changes to Part 5 of the Constitution. Appendix 2 is to be considered by the Standards Committee on 2 November 2020, so any comments from the Committee will be reported to Council.

Resource Implications

- 7** Merger would release £9,552 as the cost of one special responsibility allowance to accommodate the allowance required for the new scrutiny committee.
- 8** Rights of Way Committee meets about twice a year and the Committee is supported by the same Democratic Services Officer who supports the Planning Committee, which can meet up to 10 times. A merger is unlikely to affect the overall number of meetings as all business would still be taken through officer process at a similar rate. There are no expected officer saving to be realised, while a small reduction in member travel expenses claims may be achieved if business can be combined but these small savings are more than offset by the additional costs of servicing the new scrutiny committee.

Consultation

- 9** The Chairmen of the Planning and Rights of Way Committees addressed the Governance Committee on this matter on 20 January 2020. The Chairman of the Planning Committee felt that combining the roles might create a difficult workload.
- 10** The Cabinet Member for Environment addressed the Governance Committee on 7 September 2020 as the committees' remits are related to her portfolio area. She was supportive of the proposed merger.
- 11** Neighbouring County Councils with merged committee functions were consulted. Hampshire County Council state that their committee usually considers planning matters in the morning, followed by rights of way matters. Site visits can take in both planning and rights of way matters as necessary and combined training sessions are given with input from appropriate officers in both services.
- 12** Officers from the Planning, Rights of Way and Legal Services were consulted. This suggested that a single committee meeting up to 10 times a year would bring a customer benefit on rights of way matters as any item which is ready for determination can be considered more quickly than at present and any item deferred could return sooner than is currently possible.
- 13** No public consultation was carried out as applicants and other stakeholders would not see any change in the service other than shorter waiting times for formal consideration of rights of way matters.

Recommended

- (1) That the merger of the Planning and Rights of Way Committees be approved; and
- (2) That the proposed changes to the Constitution set out in Appendices 1 and 2 be approved to give effect to the merger.

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Chairman of Governance Committee

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Appendices

- Appendix 1: Proposed changes to Parts 2, 3 and 4 of the Constitution
- Appendix 2: Proposed changes to Part 5 of the Constitution

Background papers

None.