

Report to Governance Committee

13 September 2023

County Council February Budget Meeting Options

Report by Director of Law and Assurance

Electoral division(s): Not applicable

Summary

Each February, the County Council considers its overarching strategy document (The Council Plan) and its budget for the forthcoming year. This agenda item is a major and lengthy annual debate. At its last meeting the Committee asked officers to set out options for managing the length of time of these annual debates.

Recommendation

That the Committee:

- (1) Recommends to the County Council that Standing Orders be amended to limit other business at the annual budget meeting, as set out in Appendix 1; and
 - (2) Considers whether it wishes to recommend any other changes to Standing Orders to help manage the timings of the February budget meeting.
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Proposal

1 Background and context

- 1.1 Each February, the County Council considers its overarching strategy document (Our Council Plan) and its budget for the forthcoming year. This agenda item is a major debate each year and all members have the opportunity to speak, untimed. This is the only full County Council meeting debate with no time limits on speeches.
- 1.2 It is recognised within the Constitution that the budget will be a major debate and that there will be little time for other business. Standing Order 2.49 states that there is a presumption that notices of motion will not be considered at the February budget meeting. Question Time has not taken place at the last two February budget meetings due to a lack of time.
- 1.3 It is recognised that the Council budget will generate a thorough and lengthy debate. The annual budget meeting typically lasts from 10.30 am to 4.30 pm (based on the average length of meetings held between 2017 and 2022). However, in February 2023, the meeting was unusually long, not finishing until 5.23 pm. The Committee therefore agreed to review how well the rules for this debate serve the interests of the Council and those with an interest in following

the Council's business and asked officers to set out options for managing the length of time of this meeting.

- 1.4 It is important for the Committee to consider what should be the objective for any changes to current arrangements, identifying what may be the impediments to ensuring the optimum arrangements for ensuring a full and fair democratic debate on the most important matter for the Council and its residents.

2 Proposal details

- 2.1 Given the importance of the annual budget debate and the need to ensure there is opportunity for as many members as possible to participate, it is proposed that Standing Orders be changed to remove the requirement for other non-urgent business to be on the agenda. This will include Question Time, petitions, annual reports and scrutiny committee debates. Appendix 1 sets out the proposed amendments to Standing Orders.

- 2.2 Other options for managing timings at the February budget meeting are set out below for the Committee's consideration:

- a) **Set an overall time limit for the budget debate or a particular end time.** In practice, the Chairman would need to close the list of those who have requested to speak in time to allow seconders to speak, the movers to sum up and the Cabinet Member to have the final word before the vote is taken.
- b) **Set individual time limits on speeches.** Standing Order 2.58 sets a five-minute time limit on speeches for all other County Council debates. It would be possible to have a longer time limit for all members for this item of business or just for the movers of the Plan and Budget and the proposers of amendments, with a shorter time limit for all other speakers.
- c) **Maintain current arrangements.** Support the Chairman to manage the meeting through using his discretion to direct speakers to avoid overly lengthy, repetitive speeches and lines of questioning that are not relevant to the debate.

- 2.3 Other councils have adopted a range of practices. Appendix 2 sets out a selection that includes the options shown above.

3 Other options considered (and reasons for not proposing)

- 3.1 None.

4 Consultation, engagement and advice

- 4.1 Not applicable.

5 Finance

- 5.1 There are no financial implications from considering options to manage the timings of the budget meeting.

6 Risk implications and mitigations

Risk	Mitigating Action (in place or planned)
Introducing time limits may reduce the opportunity for some councillors to speak on this major item, which could serve to weaken democratic arrangements.	The Chairman can ensure that a wide range of speakers are called from across the chamber, to enable a broad debate to take place in the interests of democracy.
Having no limit on speech length may reduce the number of members able to speak and reduce engagement by the public.	The Chairman can exercise discretion to enable speakers with important points to make to speak for longer and for those making amendments or proposing the reports to speak for longer.

7 Policy alignment and compliance

- 7.1 There are no policy or compliance implications arising from considering options to manage the timings of budget meetings.

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Appendices

Appendix 1 – Proposed amendments to Standing Orders

Appendix 2 – Analysis of approaches to Budget meetings by other county councils

Background papers

None