

Committee(s):	Date(s):
Epping Forest & Commons - For decision	6 July 2015
Subject: Epping Forest & Commons Committee Reporting	Public
Report of: Director of Open Spaces	For Decision

Summary

There is currently an unusually large number of reports coming to Epping Forest & Commons Committee compared to other Committees, many of which are for information rather than decision. As a result, officers are concerned that the Committee's time is being spent on low level operational matters which are distracting from items of strategic significance.

Following a discussion between Town Clerks and Open Spaces, a small number of changes are now proposed to improve communication with Members between Committees and to ensure that Members' attention is focused on key strategic items.

Recommendations

It is recommended that:

- The Committee note that in future the Superintendents will be submitting a written update to Committee and updating this report by exception
- The Committee note that the Superintendents Committee updates will be supplemented by newsletters and other forms of communication in between Committee meetings
- Members reaffirm that reports should be submitted to Committee in the following circumstances:-
 - Matters which fall outside those matters delegated to the Director of Open Spaces
 - Where approval from Committee is required by Standing Orders, Procurement Regulations, Financial Regulations, the Project Procedure or statutory requirement
 - In cases where there is a proposed new policy or a change to an existing policy
 - Where the Committee has asked to be kept informed and the use of the Superintendent's update is not appropriate
 - Where the matter is of a nature such that the involvement of elected Members is prudent (i.e. political, media, sensitivity)

Main Report

Background

1. The Town Clerk and Director of Open Spaces have noted that there has been over a number of years a slow proliferation of additional reports to the Epping Forest & Commons Committee, many of which are for information rather than decision. The Town Clerk and Director of Open Spaces are concerned that this is making poor use of Committee time, and is secondly generating significant additional work for officers not just within Open Spaces, but also across the service departments – Town Clerks, Chamberlains, Comptrollers and City Surveyors.
2. It is also noted that there has come to be an over reliance on Committee reports for communicating with Members, and this has led to an underutilisation of alternative methods of communication including newsletters, briefings, single issue emails etc. This leads to a heavy burden for Members in preparing for Committee and also means that some issues are not communicated in as timely a way as they could be.
3. As a result the Committee is spending much of its time on operational matters, reducing its focus its attention on matters of strategic significance where Members' input is especially valuable.

Current Position

4. Following a number of discussions between the two departments, it is now proposed that a series of small changes be made in order to refocus the Committee on matters of strategic importance.
5. Similar measures have recently been introduced at the Children and Community Services Committee where they have led to a significant improvement in the operation of the Committee.

Proposals

6. In line with new guidance from the Town Clerk, it is proposed that the Superintendents issue written updates to Committee. This update can be used to briefly cover the various issues which are brought to the Committee for information – for example litter, fly tipping, licenses, recent events and planning. It is intended that Superintendents would then update verbally on any urgent matters which have occurred between finalisation of the papers and the Committee meeting.
7. To ensure that Members are kept up to date in between Committee meetings, it is proposed that the Superintendents circulate a newsletter to Members. The Superintendent of Epping Forest could combine this with his regular “news burst”, whereas the Superintendent of Burnham Beeches & City Commons may choose to expand or refocus his existing newsletter.
8. It is proposed that the Epping Forest & Commons Committee reaffirms the position that reports are brought to Committee in the following circumstances:

- a. Matters which fall outside those matters delegated to the Director of Open Spaces
- b. Where approval from Committee is required by Standing Orders, Procurement Regulations, Financial Regulations, the Project Procedure or statutory requirement
- c. In cases where there is a proposed new policy or a change to an existing policy
- d. Where the Committee has asked to be kept informed and the use of the Superintendent's update is not appropriate
- e. Where the matter is of a nature such that the involvement of elected Members is prudent (i.e. political, media, sensitivity)

Implications

9. The changes proposed in this report should result in better use of Member and officer time which will enable the Epping Forest, Burnham Beeches and various City Commons charities to operate more effectively.

Conclusion

10. It is anticipated that these small changes in the presentation of information to the Committee should substantially enhance the amount of time that Members are able to devote to considering key strategic matters. It is also anticipated that more regular communication outside of the Committee process will ensure that Members are kept better informed of activities and issues.

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