

Report to: City of London

From: Becky Shaw, Chief Executive, East Sussex County Council

Date: 21 April 2017

Subject: Diversity in the Court of Common Council: timing of meetings

### Summary

The City of London is a historic and highly professional organisation with a reputation of international significance. The nature, scale, traditions and business of the City Corporation attracts people to stand for election as demonstrated by the extent to which most seats are contested. The dilemma is that the same characteristics that attract candidates also have the potential to act as barriers, especially when combined with the tradition of no political parties, which in other local authorities provide a natural access point for candidates.

The importance of the City of London's strong reputation being maintained and enhanced is clear and at its core is having and being seen to have, transparent and accessible democratic arrangements that are well understood. This needs to embrace not only elections but also decision making, engagement work and how the organisation operates on a day to day basis. Significant work is underway to maintain and develop this core element of business. This work has been reflected in a change in the make-up of the Common Councilman. There is a strong commitment to continual improvement, but my discussions suggest there is not yet clarity about the priorities or consensus about the nature of any problem that needs addressing.

This report provides an overview of some particular areas that have been identified through discussions and suggests some areas for renewed focus as the work continues. An agreement about whether action is needed (including the risks of not acting) and if so, about priority areas, related action and commitment to future reviews would potentially provide greater organisational confidence in the arrangements.

The recent election provides an invaluable opportunity to do qualitative research with people who stood down after one or two terms and those who expressed interest but didn't stand, to understand their insights into the choices they made. Six months after the election would also provide a good opportunity to review the induction arrangements and to check with new Common Councilmen whether they have the information and guidance they need to undertake their roles.

### Background

Following discussions at the Policy and Resources Committee and the informal Members' Diversity Group about a range of issues I was asked by John Barradell the Town Clerk, in June 2016, to undertake some discussions with interested Members about the extent to which the timing of meetings was a barrier to potential candidates to be Common Councilmen. I met a range of officers and Members during my two day visits. I met with the informal Members' Diversity Group, attended the public session of the Court of Common Council and part of a Standards Committee meeting. I have also reviewed a range of the City Corporation's information and resources aimed at encouraging and informing potential candidates. The Members involved in direct discussions are listed at the end of this report. I have subsequently also had telephone discussions with all

those who expressed an interest in doing so. Although envisaged to focus on timings of meetings the nature of the discussions were much broader including:

- Recruitment, retention and length of service
- Diversity issues
- Engagement with stakeholders
- The organisation's role and reputation
- Civic engagement
- Appropriateness of current reward arrangements for Common Councilmen
- Whether current ways of working make the most of the talents and experience available.

It was not possible in the time available to explore all these issues but I have sought to capture them so the City Corporation is aware of them and can consider if further action is needed.

Because of pressure of business it was not possible to finalise this report before the elections in March 2017 so when considering the report it would be sensible to consider any lessons learnt, insights obtained and new points of emphasis before finalising action.

## **Findings**

### **a) Existing work**

The City Corporation has taken significant recent action to improve the information available on line, through briefings and in response to individual enquiries. The strategy of supporting this targeted democratic services work with a wider campaign to improve engagement and understanding of the City Corporation's activities, therefore making it more accessible, is sensible. The City Corporation will want to ensure a comprehensive programme continues to be rolled out and is supported actively by leading Members and senior officers. The two documents created to assist with this – an electronic introduction to the organisation and an abbreviated electronic version of the guide to Becoming a Common Councilman are attached Annexes 1 and 2.

With County Council and Mayoral elections across the country in May 2017 there are a lot of resources being developed and used by other authorities that can be drawn on to develop the current approach. Annex 3 is a screenshot of the East Sussex CC opening page of the “Be a councillor” resources developed in conjunction with the LGA.

I have not seen any evaluation of the measures already in hand, but the City Corporation will want to consider what success will look like in terms of audiences reached and engagement achieved. The effectiveness of communication can be difficult to assess so qualitative research and feedback from the target groups needs to be sought and used to inform future roll out. The election in March 2017 provides a valuable baseline from which to assess progress and also set targets for the next cycle.

### *Recommendations:*

*That the resources developed by Councils, LGA and the Government for the Mayorial elections be reviewed to inform future updates of the City Corporation's approach.*

*That a clear evaluation framework is agreed to assess the accessibility and quality of information provided on line and through briefings.*

## **b) Future options to ensure transparent and accessible democratic arrangements**

In my discussions there were a rich range of views about what influenced potential candidates and the extent to which current working arrangements enabled existing Members to undertake their work effectively.

**i) Timings of meetings:** there was an even balance of views about whether meetings during the day were appropriate; some felt that they were helpful as they could be integrated into a working day, others feeling that they were not, created a significant barrier and advocated a move to evening meetings. Strong views were expressed about already over committed evening diaries not being able to accommodate additional meetings. The nature of work being undertaken clearly influenced views as some types of work and professions are more able to be flexible during the day eg the legal profession has little flexibility around court attendance requirements. There were a range of views about practicalities of either daytime or evening meetings in which the proximity of home location to the City and travel logistics strongly influenced views. There were also mixed views about whether being a common councillor after having retired from full time employment was beneficial, the overall picture was value being placed on an appropriate balance of working and retired Common Councillors reflecting the need for experience, current insight and the need for time to participate effectively. It is fair to reflect there was no consensus on what an appropriate balance should be.

In county areas these debates have strong resonance as members often live at some distance from County Halls, more often tend to be older and retired than in urban areas and, in addition to employment and other County Council business, Members often also attend District/Borough Council meetings as well as parish council meetings. The established pattern in most places is therefore that formal county council/cabinet/scrutiny meetings are held in the day (there is significant variation between morning or afternoon patterns), with district/borough councils meetings being held in the evenings and often parish council meetings are in the early evenings. There are also established patterns of which days of the week meetings are held with nearly all councils avoiding Friday meetings. The issue of whether some days were better than others was not raised in any of my discussions at the City.

In relation to the City Corporation, I noted that that the limited contact with officers from prospective candidates was reported to rarely involve questions about meeting timings. It was also interesting to hear that the timings of some meetings had been moved to the end of the day by the chairman of some committees, after discussion with the other participants as the time that most suited them. Increased use of that flexibility seems to be a pragmatic and appropriate way to work but it does not address the issue about the timings of the full formal meetings.

There was no consensus in my discussions about whether or, if so, how meeting times could be changed and no clear evidence base about the impact that might be sought or achieved. As in other authorities it is suggested that a collective settlement needs to be reached, through discussion, about the best arrangement and a clear agreement reached about the basis of future reviews (evidence needed – see below) and the timing of reviews (immediately after each election?). Without such agreement the potential for a distracting and unproductive circular debate is quite high.

Any proposed substantive move to meetings timings needs to also include consideration of the impact on staff who support meetings and associated costs. From my discussions most staff travel

significant distances into work so the impact could be significant depending on timings and length of meetings.

*Recommendations:*

*That a collective settlement is reached, through discussion, about the best arrangement for the formal meetings and a clear agreement reached about the basis of future reviews (evidence needed and timing) to avoid a distracting and unproductive debate.*

*That, where desired, greater use is made in Committees of the available flexibility to vary meeting times*

ii) **Strengthening the evidence base:** although there are strong views about what acts as barriers to potential candidates or why some people only serve for one term, there is currently no evidence beyond anecdote as there is very limited ability to collect views directly from people who could, but choose not to, stand. The electoral services team feedback was that awareness of the existence of the informal slates in wards and the requirement to have the Freedom of the City were potential significant barriers. Members' views on whether slates deterred or enabled candidates varied widely. Now the election has taken place, it would be worth considering the value of research through a survey of people with the potential to stand, particularly from what are felt to be target groups (younger/ working age, female, non-professional, disability and BME groups were all mentioned) about what influenced them in March 2017. It would also be worth considering following up with people who contact officers about an interest in standing but who subsequently choose not to pursue and also with those people who stood down after a single term of office. I was told that most contact with officers from potential candidates were referrals from Members, so thought could usefully be given to encouraging direct initial contact with officers to avoid any risks that Members unintentionally reinforce stereotypes of the nature of people who can be Members.

*Recommendation:*

*That the current evidence base, particularly following the March 2017 election, is strengthened to inform next steps*

iii) **Engagement leading to participation:** there seemed to be a consensus, which is supported by experience elsewhere, that people are often drawn to be involved, sometimes as elected representatives, because of a "single" issue. In my discussions I was told about specific roads crossings, cycle lanes and other specifics (including concern about quality of current representation of an area). Building on areas of interest through co-opting people onto working groups, creating reference groups or one off meetings/discussions using social media are all worth further exploration. Initiatives that focus on issues people are interested in and through which they can become more familiar with the City Corporation and therefore seek more involvement may well be productive and, even if it does not lead to an increase in candidates, will enhance the City Corporation's reputation for being a relevant and engaged organisation. It would also provide an opportunity to promote the traditional view of the organisation's role eg publicising contribution made to schools and other priorities in wider London.

There is a rich set of experiences and approaches from elsewhere to draw on, with details available through the LGA website. At East Sussex CC, for example, as with many other authorities we operate a Youth Cabinet and a Children in Care Council (with the latter also represented on the former) which draw together young people from a wide range of backgrounds

and locations who identify the areas they are interested in and are also consulted as part of regular ESCC business planning on issues such as the budget, service quality and priorities. There is a similar (but larger scale) set of older people's forums and also engagement with local businesses. There is an overview of arrangements at annexes 4 and 5 the report from the Youth cabinet and Children in Care council on the budget for 2017/18. In each case the residents are supported to ensure they are well informed and able to participate in the discussions. We have seen an increase in civic participation as a result of this work and one young person stood the 2015 General Election as a direct result.

Given the nature of the City Corporation, the engagement with livery companies and with the stakeholders within employers who organise the business vote is key and requires continued concerted action. Working with businesses (and discussion with their employees and key link staff in companies) to explore the way involvement with the City Corporation can provide career development opportunities could be fruitful especially if combined with 'significant' issues (see above) and using social media and other communication vehicles that will challenge the corporation's traditional image and be seen to value welcome debate and discussion. The resources developed by DCLG to encourage participation in the current Mayoral elections (appendix 5) provide some food for thought. The active participation of Common Councilmen and senior officers in events will be important to ensure they are seen as valued and significant.

*Recommendation:*

*That the current engagement with stakeholder groups is mapped and thought given to how, within available resources, the breadth and range of engagement could be strengthened*

iv) **Current Common Councilmen as ambassadors** – Everyone I talked to were strong advocates for the role and consideration could be given to harnessing this enthusiasm further. At East Sussex County Council we have recently made a series of videos (available on line at <http://beacouncillor.co.uk/east-sussex>) of four Members from different parties within East Sussex talking about their role. They have been well received by prospective candidates and were relatively low resource to produce. It might also be worth producing some 'myth busting' information to directly tackle issues that deter candidates once there is clarity about what those are (see ii) above)

**v) Payment**

As part of the discussions a limited number of people raised the appropriateness of current reward arrangements for Common Councilmen. Some felt that the lack of financial payment was a significant barrier to encouraging and retaining candidates. The majority felt strongly that the provision of facilities rather than payment were a core part of the organisation's working practice and that the lunchtime tradition assisted business and provided an invaluable opportunity for informal discussions and networking. The City Corporation is unique as far as I can establish in not paying allowances in any form. In other authorities the allowances for all members and additional special responsibilities vary hugely and are set for each authority by an independent panel. Details of the range of allowances can be found on the LGA website. Any introduction of allowances would represent a significant additional cost and, as regular media coverage demonstrates, is always a contentious issue for residents.

## **Conclusion and Recommendations**

There is significant effort and no obvious gaps in the work the City Corporation is undertaking to engage with its voters and encourage prospective candidates. The current effort will need to be maintained and seen to be valued and could be enhanced by a stronger evidence base, sense of priorities and evaluation.

### *Recommendations:*

1. *That following some more detailed qualitative research agreement is reached about whether action is needed (including the risks of not acting) and if so, about priority areas, related action and commitment to future reviews to provide greater organisational confidence in the arrangements.*
2. *That a clear evaluation framework is agreed to assess the accessibility and quality of information provided on line and through briefings.*
3. *That the resources developed by Councils, LGA and the Government for the Mayorial elections be reviewed to inform future updates of the City Corporation's approach.*
4. *That a collective settlement is reached, through discussion, about the best arrangement for the formal meetings and a clear agreement reached about the basis of future reviews (evidence needed and timing) to avoid a distracting and unproductive debate.*
5. *That, where desired, greater use is made in Committees of the available flexibility to vary meeting times*
6. *That the current evidence base, particularly following the March 2017 election, is strengthened to inform next steps*
7. *That the current engagement with stakeholder groups is mapped and thought given to how, within available resources, the breadth and range of engagement could be strengthened*

Becky Shaw  
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East Sussex County Council

20 April 2017

### **Members who participated in the review:**

Mark Boleat  
Henry Colthurst  
Edward Lord OBE, JP  
Catherine McGuinness  
Hugh Morris  
John Tomlinson  
Sir David Wootton  
Informal Members' Diversity Group

## Appendix 3: ESCC BE a councillor screen shot

**BE A COUNCILLOR**  
East Sussex County Council

HOME   COULD I?   WHAT DO THEY DO?   RESOURCES   FAQ   MEET THEM   EAST SUSSEX

## Be A Councillor

What do councillors do?

- ✓ represent their community
- ✓ make a difference
- ✓ represent interests of residents

[Meet the councillors >](#)

**TEST YOUR ELIGIBILITY**   If you have trouble accessing the quiz, please email [elearning@local.gov.uk](mailto:elearning@local.gov.uk)

INTRODUCTION TO THE ROLE

BE A COUNCILLOR, EAST SUSSEX COUNTY COUNCIL

FIND OUT ABOUT EAST SUSSEX COUNTY COUNCIL

HEAR FROM EAST SUSSEX COUNTY COUNCILLORS

HOW DO I BECOME A COUNCILLOR IN EAST SUSSEX?

KEY DATES

USEFUL RESOURCES

FAQS

ELECTORAL DIVISION MAPS FOR EAST SUSSEX

EVENTS

USEFUL CONTACTS

**BE A COUNCILLOR**  
East Sussex County Council

Can you stand for election?

**Introduction**

To stand for election to any council you must meet certain eligibility criteria. This quiz takes you through a series of questions that will help you determine whether you may be able to stand for election to East Sussex County Council.

The questions are based on guidance for election candidates produced by the Electoral Commission.

**TAKE THE QUIZ**

Hyperlink to webpage: <http://beacouncillor.co.uk/east-sussex>

## **Overview of engagement structures**

### Children and young people

Children in Care Council

Youth Parliament

Connections 360 – a voice for disabled young people

### Adult Social Care and older people

Older people's forums are open to anyone over 50 in East Sussex and help develop services for older people.

People Bank – influences development of ASC services.

### Voluntary and community Sector

Speak up – a forum drawn from the VCS which brings together the views of the sector and represents them to statutory bodies such as the County Council

### Business Ratepayers

Representatives of local businesses and chambers of commerce



**Extract from engagement report to County Council on the budget for 2017/18 – the views of the Youth Cabinet and Children in Care Council**

**3. Young People**

3.1 To mark the Office of Children's Commissioner's Takeover Day on Friday 18 November 2016, East Sussex County Council invited young people to discuss the policy proposals as part of the Reconciling Policy and Resources process. Twenty three young people from the East Sussex Youth Cabinet, Children in Care Council and East Sussex secondary schools took part in the discussions.

3.2 The young people were briefed about the main policy proposals by senior officers from Adult Social Care & Public Health, Children's Services and Community, Economy & Transport departments.

3.3 They discussed the proposals, asking questions and offering opinions about the proposals from the perspective of young people. The key points raised by the young people are summarised below:

Overall comments

3.4 Cutting jobs and services impacts on people's lives and the economy, because if people can't work, then they can't contribute to the economy and taxes etc.

Adult Social Care & Public Health

*Proposal: Have a greater digital approach to delivering services*

3.5 Comments from young people:

- Some old people can't use technology/some people can't afford Wi-Fi so cutting phone enquiries could have negative effect on them.
- By talking to someone directly, you gain more information as you receive a direct answer.

Children's Services

*Proposal: Changes to school support, so that schools are supported to work together and share best practice*

3.6 Comment from the young people: School-to-school support is a good idea; schools are best people to know about schools.

*Proposal: Changes to respite for young people*

3.7 Comments from young people:

- It feels wrong to cut respite for young people.
- Look at more day-to-day support (volunteers), and then you might not need as much respite.
- Small fees contribution for respite from families.
- Use some money for preventative work.
- Focus on supporting children & families to move themselves on so they are more independent.

*Proposal: Reviewing safe/unsafe routes to schools*

3.8 Comments from young people:

- Look at more ideas around car sharing and minibuses for safer routes, rather than reviewing the routes which is an expensive task.

- Look at bridleways as last resort, but carpooling is better.

*Proposal: Changes the Youth Cabinet – the elections to be held through School Council elections and schools to be charged a small fee to participate*

### 3.9 Comments from the young people:

- The proposal could raise the profile of the Youth Cabinet among schools and young people as it would be linked to the elections already being organised in schools.
- Telling schools to buy into the Youth Cabinet will deter them from signing up and result in young people having less of an influence.
- Cut the Youth Cabinet lunch budget.

### Community, Economy & Transport

*Proposal: Changes to grass-cutting*

3.10 Young people were surprised to learn about the cost of grass-cutting. While some young people could understand the need for grass-cutting for safety reasons, some questioned the need to balance other priorities such as Mental Health services.

### 3.11 Comments from young people:

- Think about involving volunteers to cut the grass.
- Keep grass-cutting on junctions where driver vision is compromised.
- Grass-cutting could be a form of community service.
- Take grass to sell as compost.

*Proposal: changes to the libraries services*

3.12 Young people commented that young people seem to use libraries less than older people. They suggested that the benefits are social interaction, use of equipment and quiet time.

### 3.13 Comments from young people:

- It would be good to find out the libraries that are mainly used.
- It might be useful to have cafes in libraries to raise money and encourage people to join.
- It is useful to have libraries, as some young people don't have computers at home or quiet spaces to work in.
- Libraries are hard to use if they shut early, as young people are in school during most of the day time.
- Publicise on-line libraries.

## DCLG promotion material for mayorial elections

# Devolution and mayors: what does it mean?

From: [Department for Communities and Local Government](#)  
Part of: [City Deals and Growth Deals](#)  
First published: 12 April 2017  
Applies to: England

Guides to explain the powers being transferred to English regions and new mayoral responsibilities.

## Documents



### [Cambridgeshire and Peterborough devolution deal: what does it mean?](#)

PDF, 2.82MB, 20 pages

This file may not be suitable for users of assistive technology. [Request an accessible format.](#)



### [Cornwall devolution deal: what does it mean?](#)

PDF, 1.23MB, 6 pages

This file may not be suitable for users of assistive technology. [Request an accessible format.](#)



### [Greater Manchester devolution deal: what does it mean?](#)

PDF, 2.6MB, 31 pages

This file may not be suitable for users of assistive technology. [Request an accessible format.](#)

Hyperlink to webpage: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/devolution-and-mayors-what-does-it-mean>