

<b>Committee(s):</b> Policy & Resources Committee – For decision	<b>Date:</b> 16 September 2021
<b>Subject:</b> Pre-election Period – Committee timetable	<b>Public</b>
<b>Which outcomes in the City Corporation’s Corporate Plan does this proposal aim to impact directly?</b>	3, 8, 10
<b>Does this proposal require extra revenue and/or capital spending?</b>	<b>N</b>
<b>If so, how much?</b>	<b>N/A</b>
<b>What is the source of Funding?</b>	<b>N/A</b>
<b>Has this Funding Source been agreed with the Chamberlain’s Department?</b>	<b>N/A</b>
<b>Report of:</b> Town Clerk	<b>For Decision</b>
<b>Report author:</b> Greg Moore	

### **Summary**

Since the introduction of quadrennial elections for the Common Council, it has been the practice of the City Corporation to seek to minimise the number of committee meetings in the weeks immediately preceding said elections. This aligns with the practice elsewhere whereby formal “pre-election periods” are observed which include restrictions on the types of activity that can take place.

Following the deferral of the 2021 City-wide elections until March 2022, Members are asked to consider whether the same principle as adopted for previous all-out elections – i.e., the minimisation of committee meetings wherever practicable – should be applied for a period of several weeks prior to these elections. In the interests of clarity and to assist with future date-setting arrangements, Members are also asked to endorse the adoption of this practice on a permanent basis for the future City-wide elections.

### **Recommendation(s)**

Members are asked to:

1. Support the principle of committee meetings being minimised in the period 22 February to 24 March 2022 and agree to the implementation of such arrangements.
2. Consider the various steps to mitigate the impact of the reduction in meetings, as outlined in paragraphs 15 to 19.
3. Endorse the adoption of this principle for all future City-wide elections.

## **Main Report**

### **Background**

1. On 23 and 24 March 2022, all-out elections will take place to elect 100 Common Councillors across the City's 25 Wards. These City-wide elections were originally scheduled to take place in 2021 but, as a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Court of Common Council took the decision to defer them by one year.
2. It has been the established practice of the Court, since the introduction of quadrennial elections in 2009, that the principle be adopted of minimising the number of committee meetings in the run-up to the City-wide elections.
3. Indeed, for both 2009 and 2013, Members indicated that they would prefer to have no committee meetings (if possible) in the period between the publication of the Notice of Election and the Wardmotes. This quiet, internal recess is common practice elsewhere.
4. For various logistical or legal reasons, a complete bar on meetings is impracticable for the City Corporation. For instance, there are a number of areas where statutory requirements (such as the consideration of appeals relating to licensing applications, if submitted) mean that meetings cannot be avoided; similarly, there will be time-critical decisions on projects, strategic matters, or financial allocations which it would be neither desirable nor appropriate to delegate to officers, nor would it be in the interests of the City or the City Corporation to defer.
5. Consequently, this practice has evolved into an in-principle agreement to minimise meetings or, where possible, reschedule them, such as to decrease the number of meetings in the period.

### **Current Position**

6. The Notice of Election will be issued for the forthcoming elections on 22 February 2022. The Wardmotes will then be held on 23 March, with the Poll and the Adjourned Wardmotes (where required) taking place on 24 March.
7. If a similar approach was supported for pre-election arrangements as in previous years, a reduced number of meetings in the period from 22 February to 24 March 2022 would be diarised.
8. As mentioned above, it would not be practicable to seek to prevent committee meetings taking place altogether, for various statutory or logistical reasons. This comes at a time when the City is striving to recover from the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and is seeking to deliver on a number of major projects with critical interdependencies, whilst also having already experienced a prolonged period of disruption to its normal activities and meeting arrangements (as a consequence of the pandemic).
9. It should be noted that, due to the way in which Easter falls, together with associated requirements around Member induction and legal formalities,

committee appointments processes, and paper publication requirements, the earliest date which meetings could be resumed following the elections is late April.

10. It should also be noted that, in 2022, the April Court of Common Council (21 April) as currently scheduled falls just within the Easter recess period; however, Members may wish to permit the exception on this occasion, due to the time which will have elapsed between Court meetings and the desire for meetings to begin as quickly as possible post-elections.
11. Nevertheless, it should be cautioned that there is a significant degree of activity required between the election and the first Court meeting, particularly in relation to the on-boarding of newly elected Members. Your Committee may feel, therefore, that deferring the Court meeting until 28 April is desirable so as to provide a greater period of time for new Members to be inducted and not potentially be at a disadvantage at the first Court meeting of the year. Alternatively, you may wish to consider permitting induction activity to also take place during the Easter recess period, and / or accepting that induction activities may, out of necessity, need to continue in earnest following the Court meeting.
12. In any event, as a result of the potentially lengthy period covering both the pre- and post-election window, a pragmatic approach, as was adopted in 2017, is proposed, whereby the principle of minimising meetings is adopted, with discretion exercised by individual Chairs to determine whether or not meetings should proceed, based on the urgency of decisions required and business before the committee.

### **Options and Proposal**

13. It is proposed (consistent with all previous quadrennial elections and established Corporation practice) that that the number of meetings is minimised during the election period for the coming all out elections in March 2022.
14. Several options to mitigate the impact of reduced meetings exist, which are recommended for adoption as detailed below.
15. Firstly, as with previous elections, officers should be instructed to seek to adjust project planning arrangements (where there is no detrimental impact) such as to minimise the volume of work coming before committees and requiring a decision within that window. This has previously meant that, where committees are still required to meet, the agendas are much lighter and focused on essential decisions, with lesser matters deferred to later meetings or brought forward.
16. Similarly, a more effective use of delegated authority arrangements has been employed previously, whereby committees are informed of the various items which may require a decision during the period but which do not necessarily warrant the summoning of a formal meeting. Authority is granted for such items to be considered under delegated arrangements and, when ready, reports are circulated to the full committee for comments within a designated time period (e.g. 5 working days), so as to inform the final decision taken under delegation. This ensures the entire committee is involved in decision-making, rather than

simply the Chair and Deputy Chair; decisions can also be published online immediately in the interests of transparency.

17. Where appropriate, efforts should also be made to reschedule existing meetings outside of the pre-election period, where the effect of doing so would not be detrimental to the efficient conduct of business.
18. If, notwithstanding the above measures, it is still felt that the meeting is required to proceed, it shall be for the Chair of the Committee, in consultation with their Deputy Chair, to make a determination (consistent with the provisions of Standing Order 29(1)(e).
19. In applying the above, the proximity to the election date should also be borne in mind as a key factor in coming to any determination.
20. To avoid repetitious reports ahead of each future City-wide election and allow for clarity in date-setting, it is also suggested that the principle of minimising meetings in the pre-election period for all-out elections be adopted as a standing practice.

#### **Court of Common Council and Policy & Resources Dates**

21. Of particular note to this Committee are the dates of the Policy & Resources Committee meeting and the Court of Common Council meeting in March, which fall within the window outlined.
22. The timing of the Court meeting is determined largely by the requirements of Section 30(6) of the Local Government Finance Act 1992, which specifies that a budget must be approved by the Court before 11 March. In keeping with this and the Court's practice of meeting on Thursdays, the date is usually determined as the Thursday immediately preceding the 11 March, so as to provide the maximum facility for the Chamberlain and the Finance Committee to make any final adjustments and submit a budget for consideration.
23. For 2022, this would fall on 10 March, and the Court is currently set for that date as a consequence.
24. A suggestion had been made that it might be preferable to move the meeting back by one week, to 3 March 2022, so as to allow for a greater period of time between the full Court being required to meet and the elections taking place. However, whilst the timing of Finance Committee meeting in February is scheduled such that the budget submission could technically be made within these timescales, this could cause potential difficulties, as there would be limited time in which to correct any omissions or errors spotted either at or following the Finance meeting. Additional complications arise relating to the scheduling of the Spital Sermon, which would be problematic. Consequently, such a rescheduling is not proposed.
25. Similarly, the Policy & Resources Committee is scheduled to meet on 17 March 2022. In the lead-up to the 2017 elections, it was determined that a late meeting of the Committee was desirable to be retained in the diary, to allow for any

emerging items of major corporate significance to be considered by this senior committee (rather than under urgency procedures) but with the agenda otherwise kept to a minimum. Members' views on this, or the potential rescheduling of the Committee to an earlier date within the month, are also sought.

### **Corporate & Strategic Implications**

- Strategic implications – ensuring that there are arrangements which will allow for the efficient conduct of business, whilst also respecting the pre-electoral period, will support the Corporation's delivery of its objectives across various priorities.
- Financial implications – none.
- Resource implications – none directly, although it should be noted that a heavy schedule of committee meetings could risk limit the ability of the Member Services team to deliver the induction programme for new Members effectively.
- Legal implications – none.
- Equalities implications – none.
- Climate implications – none.
- Security implications – none.

### **Conclusion**

26. The adoption of a pre-election period, in which official business is minimised, is considered best practice both externally and within the City Corporation, and has been utilised by the City for many years. In view of the City's unique arrangements, it is proposed that the principle of such a period, minimising committee meetings where practicable but exercising pragmatism as required, be endorsed.

### **Greg Moore**

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