

WEST DUNBARTONSHIRE COUNCIL

Report by the Executive Director of Corporate Services

Council : 28 January 2009

Subject: Standing Orders – Length and Timing of Council Meeting

1. Purpose

- 1.1** This report asks the Council to consider the timing and length of Council Meetings and whether to introduce a new Standing Order to deal with the issue.

2. Background

- 2.1** The current Standing Orders were originally approved by Council on 29 August 2007 for a six month period. On 29 October 2008 Council remitted consideration of a report on Standing Orders to a seminar for Members. That seminar took place on 5 December 2008. This report deals solely with the issue of the timing and length of Council Meetings and other proposed changes to Standing Orders are considered in a separate report.
- 2.2** The Section of the report to Council on 29 October 2008 which dealt with this matter was in the following terms:-

“New Standing Order – Length of Council Meetings

The Council meeting on 27 February 2008 considered proposals regarding the length of Council meetings. As members will be aware, ordinary meetings of the Council often continue until after midnight. This is not good practice as the standard of debate, officer advice and minute taking are all hampered by tiredness, particularly for those members and officers who have already had a full day at work. However it is appreciated that that members may be unhappy at the prospect of business being adjourned to the next day when members may have other commitments. There are three ways to address to issue:-

- 1. Reduce the volume of business at Council meetings.*
- 2. Rearrange the time of Council meetings.*
- 3. Cut the length of Council meetings by a guillotine process – i.e. setting a maximum duration for the meeting.*

In relation to 2, members will note earlier proposals which aim to cut Council business by ensuring that motions and questions which relate to the work of committees are referred to such committees.

Members are asked to consider the options. The recommended option is that for a trial period of 6 months the following is adopted:-

That the present business at Council meetings is unchanged, but that Council meetings commence at 6.30pm. The last item under consideration at 11.00pm will be the final item of business. The remaining business will be continued to the next ordinary Council meeting. If there are urgent matters outstanding then a Special Council Meeting could be called to consider these in terms of Standing Order 3. This would be reconsidered 6 months hence. A new Standing Order 6(c) would be inserted as follows: -

“6(c) No business, except business which requires to be dealt with by law or by these Standing Orders, shall be introduced after 23.00 hours”.”

3. Main Issues

3.1 At the Members seminar on 5 December 2008, there was general agreement that Council Meetings should not be permitted to continue beyond 11 p.m. at the latest. However, there were a number of differing proposals as to how this might be achieved. Particular issues which were identified were:-

- The meeting had been set for 7 p.m. to make it easier for members of the public to attend the meeting. However with the exception of those Council Meetings relating to Single Status, it was evident that the evening slot had not produced any greater attendance by members of the public. Indeed it might be argued that the fact that Council Meetings regularly finished at 1 a.m. could be a disincentive to members of the public to attend, particularly on dark winter nights.
- If meetings began in late afternoon then there might need to be an adjournment to allow Members to get something to eat. This would further prolong the length of the meeting.
- If there was a guillotine and items were carried forward to the next Council Meeting, there might be a temptation to filibuster in order to ensure that items nearer the end of the agenda were not considered for a further month.
- If the business was continued to the next day then there might be problems in Members being available to attend the Council Meeting, particularly for Members with day time jobs. Given the political make up of the Council, both of the main parties were understandably keen to maximise their Members attendance.

3.2 From the seminar it appeared that the most acceptable solution was that Council Meetings should start at 5.30 p.m. and that the last item under consideration at 10 p.m. would be the final item of business. Any remaining business would be continued to a Council Meeting on the next morning. Clearly this could be for a trial period of six months, as suggested in the report

to Council on 29 October 2008. After six months a report could detail to Council those items of business which had been caught by the 10 p.m. guillotine.

3.3 The seminar agreed that it would be helpful to invite individual Members and Groups to provide their view on this matter. To date the following further views have been received:-

- Guillotine at 11 p.m. and reconvene at 10 a.m. the next morning for the remaining business.
- Retain the status quo to accommodate as many members of the public to attend as possible. Concern also expressed as to the cost and delay in carrying over business to the next meeting and as to who decides what can or cannot be carried forward.
- Hold Council Meetings in the afternoons. The main argument against afternoon Council Meetings was that the public would find it harder to attend. However, Committee Meetings are presently in the afternoon and they often take decisions that are far more important than those made at the Full Council.
- Start at 6.30 p.m. and impose guillotine at 11 p.m.
- Start at 2p.m. However if this is not agreed, the latest starting time should be 5p.m. If a break for dinner was required, a 30 minute break could be scheduled which may stop the ad hoc adjournments which all add to the current late finish time.

4. Personnel Issues

4.1 There may be Working Time Directive issues in the event that staff who work during the day, continue to work until meeting finish in the early hours of the next day, and are then expected to attend work the next morning.

5. Financial Implications

5.1 There may be minor financial savings through reduction in overtime and heating costs in the event that Council Meetings finish earlier.

6. Risk Analysis

6.1 If meetings continue late into the night/morning there are risks that the standard of debate, officer advice and minute taking are all hampered by tiredness, particularly for those members and officers who have already had a full day at work. There may also be a risk of possibly breaching the Working Time Directive.

7. Conclusions

7.1 With one exception, Members appear keen to avoid meetings running beyond 10 or 11 p.m. If this is the case, then the main options are:-

- Start Council Meetings at 2 p.m. and run them without any guillotine and without any adjournment for food.
- Start Council Meetings at 5.30 or 6.30 p.m. and guillotine business at 10 or 11 p.m. The remaining business would be dealt with at a continued Council Meeting commencing the next day, possibly at 10 a.m.

7.2 Given the substantial agreement that the present situation is unacceptable, that Members may wish to opt for one of these options on a pilot six month basis.

8. Recommendations

8.1 In light of the responses received at the seminar and subsequently it is recommended that the Council chose between the following changes to Standing Orders:-

- Change Standing Order 2(a) to provide that Council Meetings will normally commence at 2 p.m. or as decided by the Council from time to time, or
- Change Standing Order 2(a) to provide that Council Meetings will normally commence at 5.30 p.m. (or 6.30 p.m.) or as decided by the Council from time to time, and
- Introduce a new Standing Order 6(c) as follows:-

“No business, except business which requires to be dealt with by law or by these Standing orders shall be introduced after 2200 hours (or 2300 hours). Any remaining business will be continued to a continued Council Meeting at 10 a.m. on the following day”.

8.2 It should be noted that in the event of the former option being chosen, that the Corporate and Efficient Governance Committee meets at 10 a.m. on every second month prior to the Council. However, to date this committee has always finished prior to 2 p.m.

Joyce White
Executive Director of Corporate Services

Person to Contact: Andrew A. Fraser, Head of Legal, Administrative and Regulatory Services, Council Offices, Garshake Road, Dumbarton, G82 3PU. Telephone 01389 737800
e-mail: andrew.fraser@west-dunbarton.gov.uk

Appendices: None

Background Papers: None

Wards Affected: ALL