

**REPORT TO THE MEETING OF CONSTITUTIONAL REVIEW
COMMITTEE ON 9 MARCH 2022**

Status:

Title: Review of Keeping Ward Members Informed

Originator: Babs Morris (Interim Monitoring Officer)

Where from: Motion from Council

Where to next: Council

1 Purpose of Report

1.1 To remind Members of the current Access to Information provisions in the Constitution and to note the other existing communication channels available to members in their Ward duties.

2 Recommendations:

2.1 (i) To note the Report and to remind members of the existing communication channels and Constitutional Provisions.
(ii) To determine if any additional mechanisms for Ward Member communication channels need to be provided.
(iii) That the amendment to the Constitution set out in the report, in relation to Part 5, Section 3: Section 10 of the Protocol on Member and Officer Relations, is considered and recommended to Council for approval.

3 Summary of Reasons for the Recommendations

3.1 An embedded framework exists at the Council to cascade information to elected members when engaged with the current tools available.

4 Impact on Communities

4.1 Elected members need to be well informed to carry out their community duties and cascade important information.

5 Key Facts

5.1 At the Council Meeting on 21st June 2021 the Minutes record the following:

NOTICE OF MOTION SUBMITTED IN ACCORDANCE WITH PROCEDURE
RULE 11.1 OF PART 4(1) OF THE COUNCIL CONSTITUTION

It was moved by Councillor Knowles, seconded by Councillor Dunton:

“The Constitution is an evolving document and there are clear needs from time to time to amend, upgrade and/or take steps to avoid ambiguity.

Keeping ward members informed is an important part of the functioning of Harborough District Council.

Having spoken at length to senior officers within HDC there seems to be support for taking a look at the specifics and mechanics of keeping ward members informed. I therefore move that officer be asked to draw up a report on this matter and to bring it as soon as possible for consideration to the Constitutional Review Committee”.

On being put to the vote the motion was carried.”

5.2 The Constitution

In light of the need to respond to the Motion the Interim Monitoring Officer has reviewed the Council’s Constitution in particular the Access to Information Rules contained in Part 4 attached at Appendix 1 to this Report and also the Member and Officer Relations Protocol in Part 5 attached at Appendix 2 to this report.

The Access to Information sets out in detail the rights to information, attendance at meetings, notice provisions for meetings, access to agendas, reports and minutes which members will be familiar with.

The Member and Officer Relations Protocol also deals with Access to Information and Council Documents, Correspondence, Public Relations and Press Release, Involvement of Ward Councillors, Officers Advice to Party Groups and Supporting Front Line Members in detail.

It has become apparent that as the “Sensitive Issues Procedure” referred to no longer exists, Section 10 of this Protocol needs to be amended and suggested new wording is set out below :-

10. Involvement of Ward Councillors

10.1 It is essential that in order for Members to carry out their duties they need to be kept fully informed about matters on which they may be required to make decisions or which affect their Wards.

10.2 It is vital all relevant staff are aware of the requirement to keep Members informed and that the timing of such information allows Members to contribute to those decisions. Local Ward Members shall also be kept informed about significant matters affecting their Ward.

- 10.3 Whenever a public meeting is organised by the Council to consider a local issue, all the Members representing the Ward(s) affected should as a matter of course be invited to attend the meeting.
- 10.4 Similarly, whenever the Council undertakes any form of consultative exercise, the Local Ward Member(s) should be notified immediately prior to the outset of the exercise.
- 5.3 The mechanisms for obtaining information to assist in enabling good communication is embedded in both the Access to Information Rules and the Member and Officer Relations Protocol, and Members should be aware of how they can request information and advice from Officers in order to carry out their roles where there is a need to know.
- 5.4 Other Tools available for Members

There are a wide variety of established communication mechanisms that are available to enable Members to obtain information, which include amongst other things the following:-

Channels

- Councils Web site which is regularly updated with information going on in the District.
- Planning Self Service Portal where members can sign up for weekly notifications relating to Planning matters.
- Regular Member Briefings from the Chief Executive during the pandemic period were introduced to provide up to date information, and more dates have been scheduled for briefings on a variety of topics going forwards.
- Councillor email updates.
- Monthly Members' newsletters.
- Councillors receive notification of all press releases before they are issued to the media.
- Members' intranet site.
- Social media channels: Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn and Instagram.
- Monthly Residents newsletters and fortnightly Business newsletters are issued and available to view on the Members' intranet site.
- Members specific enquiry email address is provided at memberenquiries@harborough.gov.uk
- Portfolio and Shadow Portfolio monthly meetings
- Group Meetings.

A possible new channel

- Numbered series of briefings that are circulated to Member and posted to the intranet as a central place for all briefings.

Other Mechanisms

- Service areas are expected to brief Ward members directly on key issues affecting their Ward and regular Service Manager meetings also facilitates information being cascaded down to Ward Members.

Strategies

The Council is in the process of preparing an Engagement Strategy, which will be focused on engaging residents and formal consultation processes and is scheduled for completion in the autumn of 2022. This strategy will be taken through the necessary governance processes for approval, before it is implemented.

The Council's Communication Strategy is available on the Council's website and will be updated during the summer of 2022.

Members' survey

A Member's survey was carried out by HR in the Autumn of 2020 and a Member's Covid Communications survey was carried out by Internal Audit and both results are available on request.

6 Legal Issues

- 6.1 Good communication is an essential part of achieving good governance and should always be reviewed to ensure it is fit for purpose.

7 Resource Issues

- 7.1 If no change to the present position none. Any changes may have cost implications.

8 Equality Implications

- 8.1 Any changes to the current communication mechanisms available would need to take into account the Council's duties under the Equality Act 2010 and carry out an Equalities Needs Assessment.

9 Impact on the Organisation

- 9.1 Enabled strong communications with the community via Ward Members and the Council.

10 Community Safety Implications

10.1 None

11. Carbon Management Implications

11.1 None

12. Risk Management Implications

12.1 None

13 Consultation

13.1 Changes to the Council's Communications Strategy would require consultation with key stakeholders.

14 Options Considered

14.1 The Council has an obligation to keep its Constitution under review. The Committee does not have to recommend any of the proposals set out in the report to Council for consideration and adoption.

15 Background Papers

15.1 None

Appendices:

1. Constitution Part 4 (2) Access to Information Procedure Rules

2. Constitution Part 5 (3) Protocol on Member and Officer Relations