

Public Participation in Growth Board Meetings

Report Purpose

- 1) At the Growth Board in September 2015, the Board were invited to adopt a protocol for public participation in future meetings.
- 2) The proposal was adopted, together with a commitment to review the effectiveness of the scheme at some point in the future.
- 3) Accordingly, this report offers the opportunity for review, predicated upon feedback from recent participants who have suggested changes to the current scheme.

Recommendation

That the Growth Board consider the proposed changes to the current scheme of public participation contained in this report.

Background

- 4) At the Growth Board in September 2015, the Board were invited to adopt a proposal for public participation in future meetings. The adopted current scheme is set out at Annex 1.
- 5) The scheme is based on the scheme adopted by the West Northamptonshire Joint Strategic Planning Committee (WNJSPC) and has been used successfully there since the WNJSPC came into being in 2008.
- 6) The scheme allows for members of the public to present petitions to the Growth Board, ask questions of Growth Board Members or address the Board on any substantive agenda item at ordinary meetings, subject to certain restrictions.
- 7) By way of review officers' sought feedback from individuals and organisations that had recently engaged with the Board to understand how well the scheme was working.
- 8) Responses to this request was limited, however some general feedback was received which is summarised below.
 - A view that the length of time between the publication of the agenda and the deadline for questions or statements to be submitted was too short, meaning that the participants felt that they did not have sufficient time to consider the agenda items and any responses they might like to make.
 - That the current protocol for responses to questions- with most being responded to in writing- was unsatisfactory and that responses from the chairman at the meeting would be preferred.
 - That the limitation of one question and response was not assisting participation

- That the current arrangements for the publication of Growth Board meeting details and supporting information on partner council web sites did not help the public to access the information.

Proposed amendments to the scheme

- 9) Officers suggested responses to the feedback is as follows

Time period between agenda publication and deadline for submission of questions or statements

- 10) The Board's then chairman, Cllr Barry Wood considered the issue of the notice period between the publication of the meeting agenda and deadlines for question or statements when Cherwell held the chair.
- 11) Cllr Wood's response was sympathetic to the point but noted that the Board is the culmination of a series of meetings that lead to the Board and it was difficult to extend the timeline for these meetings and hence the time period between the agenda's publication and the Board meeting.
- 12) Cllr Wood gave a commitment however that, whenever possible, officers would seek to maximise the time period between agenda publication and the Board meeting to also maximise the time that could be allowed for the receipt of questions and statements from the public, this commitment remains.

Written responses to questions

- 13) The Board will be aware that the agreed methodology for responses to questions was that these should always be made in writing so as to allow for all partners to review a draft response and comment before it was sent. This process was inclusive for Board members but can lead to a perception that the Board is not open to inclusive participation at meetings.
- 14) Officers' view is that the necessity of seeking partner's approval of responses, particularly for complex questions will always necessitate a written response. However when it is appropriate- at the discretion of the chairman- verbal responses could be provided.

Limit of One question

- 15) The Board will be aware that there are a number of examples where partner councils allow limited supplementary questioning in addition to the primary question. The County Council, for example allow, once a question has been asked and answered a supplementary question, provided it arises directly out of the original question or the reply received. Officers suggest that a similar procedure could be allowed for the Board.

The publication of Growth Board information on web sites

- 16) Officers agree that the current practice of publication of Growth Board information on the websites of the charring authority, whilst appropriate at the time the Board was established is proving less appropriate as the work of the Board grows and the weight of information provided expands.

- 17) Officers' also note that it is not an efficient use of the web to have information duplicated on various partners web pages, a practice that also leads to issues with accurate updating.
- 18) Officers' consider that it could be appropriate to consider the establishment of a separate Growth Board web page. Perhaps, for example a micro-site of an existing web platform that nonetheless was, from a user perspective a separate page distinct from those of partners. This would contain all relevant Growth Board information including meeting reports agendas and supporting or background papers and could be maintained by the secretariat.
- 19) This would allow officers to ensure that these pages were updated regularly and accurate and allow partners to use web-links on their host pages to guide visitors from their sites to the Board's site.

Conclusion

- 20) When the Board adopted the current public participation scheme it agreed to review its working after a period of time. This report fulfils that commitment.
- 21) Whilst responses to the requested feedback were by no means comprehensive, those that did respond raised interesting questions that are addressed in paragraphs 9-18.
- 22) Officers consider that the amendments proposed in response to these proposals allow meaningful public engagement and ask the Board to consider them and approve or amend as it deems appropriate.

Annex 1: Oxfordshire Growth Board: Public Participation

1. Introduction

1.1 Members of the public may present petitions to the Growth Board, ask questions of Members of the Growth Board or address the Growth Board on any substantive item at ordinary meetings subject to the restrictions set out below. There shall be a specific agenda item near the start of the each meeting of the Growth Board to permit such public participation to take place.

1.2 Petitions and questions shall be directly relevant to some matter in which the Growth Board has power and duties and which directly affects the area of Oxfordshire.

2. Petitions

2.1 Any member of the public shall be entitled to present a petition containing a minimum of 50 signatures to an ordinary meeting of the Growth Board. S/he must notify the Chief Executive of one of the partner authorities in writing or by email at least three clear days before the meeting (i.e. not counting the day of the meeting or the day of receipt). In the event that the receiving Chief Executive is from a partner authority other than the host authority, s/he shall forward the petition to the host Council's Chief Executive forthwith.

2.2 A representative of the petitioners may speak at the meeting in support of the petition for up to three minutes.

2.3 The petition shall then be referred without discussion to the next meeting of the Growth Board.

2.4 The Chief Executive of the host authority may, in consultation with the Chairman of the Growth Board, refuse to submit a petition to the meeting if s/he considers it to be offensive, defamatory, frivolous or vexatious.

3. Questions

3.1 Any member of the public wishing to ask a question of a Growth Board Member may do so at an ordinary meeting of the Growth Board. S/he shall give notice of the question in writing or by email to the Chief Executive of one of the partner authorities in writing or by email at least three clear days before the meeting (i.e. not counting the day of the meeting or the day of receipt). In the event that the receiving Chief Executive is from a partner authority other than the host authority, s/he shall forward the petition to the host Council's Chief Executive forthwith.

3.2 The questioner may nominate a Growth Board Member to whom any question shall be put, although the Chairman may nominate a different Growth Board Member. The Chairman's decision shall be final in this regard.

3.3 If no Growth Board Member is nominated by the questioner, the Chairman shall nominate a Growth Board Member to answer a question.

3.4 The questioner can speak in relation to the question for up to three minutes. No supplementary question may be asked unless it is to seek clarification of the answer given to a question.

3.5 The answer may take the form of an oral statement by the relevant Growth Board Member, or may be given subsequently in writing to the questioner with a written copy circulated to all Growth Board Members with the agenda for the next ordinary meeting of the Growth Board.

3.6 No discussion shall take place on the question or the answer.

3.7 The Chief Executive of the host authority may, in consultation with the Chairman of the Growth Board, refuse to submit a question to the meeting if s/he considers it to be offensive, defamatory, frivolous or vexatious.

4. Addresses

4.1 Any member of the public may address the Growth Board on any substantive agenda item for the relevant meetings. Such address shall be for up to three minutes.

4.2 The speaker shall give notice of their wish to address the Growth Board by email or in writing no later than 12 noon on the day before the meeting to the Chief Executive of one of the partner authorities. In the event that the receiving Chief Executive is from a partner authority other than the host authority, s/he shall forward the petition to the host Council's Chief Executive forthwith.

4.3 Once the member of the public has spoken and, with the leave of the Chairman, any questions of clarification asked of the speaker by Growth Board members duly answered, the Growth Board shall proceed onto the next item of business with no debate on the representations made.

5. Restrictions

5.1 No more than five petitions and/or questions shall be presented/submitted to any one meeting.

5.2 Those submitted shall be dealt with in the order of receipt by the Chief Executive of the host authority.

5.3 No more than five members of the public may address the Growth Board on a substantive agenda item. The Chairman, in his/her discretion, can agree to permit the maximum of five to be exceeded by a defined number at a particular meeting.