

## Member Survey Feedback

The questions asked were:

1. What do you feel works well with the current governance arrangements – i.e. having an Executive system
2. What do you feel doesn't work well with the current governance arrangements?
3. What are your suggestions for improving the Council's governance arrangements?
4. Do you feel that you can influence policy and the decision-making process?  
Yes/No/Unsure
5. Please explain your answer to question 4

### **Question 1. What do you feel works well with the current governance arrangements i.e. having an Executive system**

Responses:

- Resource efficient – both in terms of officer time and cost
- Not working in silos
- Nothing. It's outdated, cumbersome, and undemocratic
- I think the best is having the current system – the executive style as it goes, to me, gets results.
- I have nothing to compare this with as it was in existence when I became a Cllr. I do feel, however, that there is not enough opportunity for back benchers to be quite so involved.
- I believe that the present of Executive system is more cost effective and a better use of members and officers time than the committee system
- Our governance system is AWFUL. The only things that work semi-ok in the current system are the bits that are not influenced by the Exec ie the regulatory committees but even they have been subject to a bit of top down tinkering re chair/vice chair nominations which was horrible. See also my comments re Q5. I had an open mind as to governance structures when I joined the Council. I would say it only took 6 months if that to grasp how bad an executive system is in terms of hoarding power, questionable decisions being made because of lack of democratic engagement and involvement, failing to utilise breadth of knowledge and expertise across councillor body, this awful 'us and them' culture. Even if we have only a couple of years left as an authority we need to ditch this rotten system and have modern, democratic replacement ready for next spring.
- I feel the current system works well and I personally wouldn't want to see a fundamental change
- I think the Member briefings are good

- Not much. It may allow the council to make some decisions more quickly in some circumstances where needed, but other systems can allow for this too. It provides figureheads to be quoted in the press, but that is possible under other systems too and in ways that are more representative of the whole council.
- I do not personally like Executive Systems and I would prefer the Committee structure, where all members feel equal. However, during the current pandemic crisis, I believe the Executive System has worked extremely well, to the benefit of local residents and tax payers. I also believe the Council should give more delegated power to the Leader in the event of an emergency, however this must always be transparent with a small time limit. I love the Newsletter, an excellent idea.
- Having great members of staff who are willing to help out as much as they can!
- No I don't think it works well. As a new member I didn't know what to expect but quickly realised that there was little point being a Councillor unless you were on the Exec. So we have 50+ Councillors the majority of whom are only able to contribute occasional comments. It's an awful waste of people's time.
- The current governance arrangements fall short of expectation. The exec system is, as far as I am concerned undemocratic. There is a complete lack of engagement with back benchers and this can lead to unsound decisions. Rather than embracing the views of other councillors it is very much a "do as we say approach". Regulatory committees work better and of course are made up with cross party mixture of councillors however, there is a sense recently that these are being subject to influence from the Exec. However, I consider that Scrutiny is purposely overloaded so that members do not have the time to properly scrutiny an item and often officers in attendance are not fully up to speed on the particular matter and thus cannot answer questions, promising follow up in writing. This often does not materialise and then has to be followed up. I do not consider that any part of the current governance system works well at all and this leads to bad decision making.
- Very little, The Scrutiny Committee is one of the most efficient committees whereby thus far, party politics does not interfere in the decision making process. Unfortunately the work of the Scrutiny Committee is rarely able to influence the executive policy. I have worked in private sector most of working life and most decisions were based on communicating and interacting with colleagues in a proactive way. I always encouraged good ideas by allowing colleagues the freedom to follow their passions and thinking with their heads. This culture is not possible with the current governance. Politicians of all persuasions must be closer to the decisions/actions as decision makers in local government or else, it is a pointless exercise. Consulting with council executives seems to be hard; we all should be working through the logic of their decisions, which makes managing politicians much easier, they hope! With current system there is no room for improvement. We should be looking for guidance from both the public and private sectors on some decisions. If your idea does not resonate with the member of executives or the leadership, you can spend many months or years to convince

them otherwise, this is not acceptable in today's world. This model of governance is the death nail in the coffin of democracy.

- I do not think that the Executive system involves the views of all councillors. We are able to comment but decisions have already been made.
- Seems to work reasonable well if you are in the controlling party. If you outside the executive of another party, whether governance is working is a bit of a mystery.
- The current system allows for quick decision making when this is required eg during the Initial lockdown of the Covid crisis. However this is not sufficiently democratic. Backbench councillors are not consulted about many decisions that are made by the Exec.
- With the possible exceptions of Licensing and Planning, both of which are quasi-judicial frankly not much. The "Strong Leader" model does and always will, fail to engage with anything other than a small number of "Hand-picked" Executive members. Whilst I personally do not agree, it could be argued that the "Strong Leader" model permits fast decision making. To my mind, this is a false positive. It only provides a thin veil of transparency and leaves most backbenchers feeling left outside the decision-making process. It does allow the Officers a simpler route to decision making. However, we must not lose sight of the old adage "Officers advise, but, members decide"
- Fair to say that it works in an operational sense and in a very few urgent situations it can deliver quick decision-making
- Every system has to have a balance, as we are currently using a Executive system it works as well as it can do when the political balance is tilted in one direction. This enables policies to be pushed through but makes the "other" members somewhat not involved in the day to day operations.
- I think this works well to the extent that it is effective and able to make firm and swift decisions to enable responses to crises like COVID and Brexit be effectively managed. I am aware that it seems to exclude backbench councillors in some decisions but when I was a backbench Cllr at work I did not have time to do more than I did in keeping up with decisions and actions and reading Cttee Agendas and minutes.
- The cycle of Scrutiny before Exec before Full Council works well in most instances but often it feels that decisions come to us already worked up so it's difficult to say no to them, or to have a really informed debate about them. I think the briefing sessions work really well as it's very much open discussion and information-giving without pressure to push something through. Having Exec portfolio holders in a sense relieves ordinary councillors from a degree of burden of responsibility as it's the PHs who take the rap when the things go wrong, as well as receiving the public's ire, which is sometimes unreasonable and uninformed. The Exec. also carry the workload. It is my impression that some members don't appreciate the hours and commitment put in by the Executive

members. I do appreciate it. Having an Executive possibly makes decision making easier and faster as there are fewer individuals to reach consensus but of course they are acting on behalf of the larger councillor group, so the decisions should be made democratically. I like the way in which officers do the communicating with councillors and give guidance on process as I feel their neutrality and professionalism work as a useful buffer where there might be political differences or personality clashes. Cross-party committees to my mind are working really well. The political balance is helpful and most members think independently and work collaboratively. Having a specialist area in which you can become more knowledgeable and skilled at decision-making (eg Planning) is helpful.

- Planning and Licensing are cross party and their decisions are transparent, although by the nature of the services, not always received well by everyone. One can argue that the decision making process is quicker under a strong leadership model, but this must be weighed against whether the decisions prove to be good ones or not. In recent times our Council is making decisions about investment of very large sums in various projects. Would a specific economic development/ investment committee with cross party membership with the relevant experience not be serving us better in these circumstances? From an officer perspective, having to persuade just one portfolio holder or 10 Exec members of a course of action is much easier than a cross party committee, but is this a good thing ?
- The Executive system is sub-standard, concentrates too much strategic decision making in a small group and lacks true transparency. I suppose there are some inherent benefits in terms of swift decision making etc, but hard to muster a significant number of positives.
- As a new councillor, I perhaps do not have as much as others to compare with, however, I have been surprised at how little really I am consulted or asked queries. Particularly when it comes to matters that impact the community I represent. The briefings are a positive for me, and have enabled a greater understanding of the delivery of the council. Training when it has happened has been good, and I have always felt the officers have genuinely done their best on at times tricky issues. I have found the IT and IPAD system to work well and can see there is good sense in many of the ways things are done. I know to start with the change was a challenge for some councillors but most have embraced it. I do wonder whether there may need to be an assertive outreach approach to councillors who struggle more with the technology, as I worry it impacts their ability to contribute at times. I am not always the most assertive person often choosing to sit back and observe, and consider my response. Sometimes other more vocal councillors have had quite some table time and I am not sure this is always great. But I know officers and executives are aware of this and make efforts to ensure all are heard. Certainly on a number of occasions I have been very grateful to James for allowing space for questions/comments to be heard and answered.
- I'm happy with the current system.

- I feel that I must give the same answer to both questions, the decisions which go before full council are made by the Portfolio Holder and Officers with little or no input from members. The first time members see them it is normally at a members briefings, by which time its to late to add or remove anything. Member Briefings in my opinion are no more than questions and answer sessions, where the Portfolio Holder and Officers are only interesting in justifying their decisions and not listening to general members. If an item does manage to get to scrutiny it's normally too late to make major changes before the item gets to the Full Executive and Full Council, as the three meetings come very close together.
- It is easier to make urgent decisions with the current system and the pfh is accountable when making a decision
- Expedited decision-making, no endless committee discussions, easy for public to identify a single member-level point of contact, easier for the ruling group to implement their manifesto,
- Having Briefing sessions to give us some information.
- The decision-making process is clear, simple and relatively speedy. Exec members can make decisions themselves where possible. It doesn't require much evening attendance or endless committee meetings.
- I don't know how it works behind the scenes but perhaps portfolio holders have the opportunity to explore what mutually beneficial, or possible unintended consequences for each other's areas of responsibility might arise from their respective proposals in ways that a committee system might not easily allow. Officer briefings are an important aspect of the current arrangements, but could presumably be continued under a committee system.

**Question 2. What do you feel doesn't work well with the current governance arrangements?**

Responses:

- Could be improved with addition of Policy Advisory Groups
- Most things, it is undemocratic
- Knowing who to contact and having to use the member support through the Jess McVie team
- I personally feel there is too much responsibility given to too few people
- No system is perfect but cannot see any obvious improvements.
- Currently under the Executive system: Only a small handful of councillors (9) are involved in formulating policy and shaping decisions. We have 59 elected members who have a wealth of experience, knowledge and expertise but this is not utilized. That's a waste and carries the risk of flawed policy making through ignoring relevant insights and expertise. I can tell my colleagues 'oi I used to work

for the Disability Rights Commission and worked on the Equality Act when it was going through parliament and you are trampling all over the Equality Act by not making provision for blue badge holders whose impairment necessitates parking really close to key services' they are not listening, that expertise is apparently irrelevant, not needed, not welcome GRRRRRR!!!! There is a democratic deficit. Power is concentrated in far too few hands. This creates an unfortunate arrogance frankly. A small coterie only hold power, they can then impose a line on the rest of their political group ( with threats of disciplinary action if you deviate) and that group has an inbuilt majority. Thus matters brought to full council tend to be foregone conclusions rather than be debated and decided on their merits. There is insufficient scrutiny and challenge - there is just one scrutiny committee so they don't have time to examine everything and their recommendations can simply be ignored by the Executive. In addition I feel that ordinary councillors are not provided with enough information to be able to assess different policy options because officers see themselves as serving the exec so there are behind the scenes discussions and we get a 'version' but not the full whammy. Also I feel members of the public are often made to feel like a nuisance and not accorded enough time to have their say or even enough respect. They have no opportunity to put decision makers really on the spot. Some processes allow for no public involvement - eg SWT can extend leases with no public engagement process. Too much power is delegated to officers. The lack of any directory of staff creates the impression that the machine wants to keep us at arms length! I think we can be trusted not to be plonkers and treat officers with respect and if we don't we would get taken to the cleaners anyway. Local ward members are not routinely consulted on decisions affecting their ward. There is a culture of secrecy - what happened to the BID vote? Are we actually buying commercial properties? Where is that 600 page document commissioned with public money under last administration setting out business case for a new Brewhouse?

- Scrutiny has a real value and maybe the one Committee is somewhat overloaded
- I feel the current system works well and I personally wouldn't want to see a fundamental change
- There is a lack of clarity. Who is taking decisions and accountable – officers or portfolio holders? Some PHs seem more confident in their roles than some who appear mostly led by officers and look like they barely know what they are doing. There is a big lack of involvement for other political groups, apart from the one group making up the administration. Scrutiny is little substitute for being involved in policy development and deciding on project implementation. There is a lack of opportunities for involvement of backbench councillors, especially those not in the largest group. It is known that the administration has regular group meetings to discuss policy and decisions, which are held behind closed doors and give extra access for those in that one group to the executive and PHs. With a committee system that type of group meeting should be OK, but with an executive/cabinet model it just further excludes those in other groups.
- I believe it fails to include all members at all times. Also, there is definitely a divide between Taunton and West Somerset, something which could take years

to overcome, if ever. Only time will tell. Mind you, the current Covid 19 crisis has put a lot of extra pressure on the system, which has worked well. Also, I would rather attend a meeting in person, then do a meeting with zoom, which I find very impersonal.

- Having to go around the houses instead of being able to go direct to the department/officer concerned. Not knowing who does what. We should have a directory of officers to be able to contact either by phone or email. Having to go to one person and then wait a few days or a week or more is not ideal when the public want answers there and then.
- I'm not impressed with the system of local government. It's very slow and time consuming- but much of that time is wasted as decisions are made by few and presented to Full Council as fait a complete.
- Power is concentrated in the hands of the few and decisions are rarely challenged. Some councillors are fearful of challenging matters as they feel they may be victimised/ bullied. Within the entire councillor group there are many specific skill sets but these are untapped. This is inefficient. I also find the treatment of the public who bother to attend FC to be astonishing as they are not afforded time to state their particular case nor receive an adequate response to their issue. It is almost as if they are a nuisance. I consider too many matters are discussed behind closed doors. This culture of secrecy is not helpful in a body which is publicly accountable. I accept that some commercially sensitive decisions may have to be kept secret but there is a feeling that just about every item is deemed "confidential". Ward councillors are not always consulted on specific ward matters. This causes conflict in our communities as people expect answers from their councillors. Member briefings are more frequent and are merely a means to advise members of a conclusion rather than engagement in an inclusive consultation. Most councillors would like more engagement, more concise reports and that both PH and officers clearly show they have grasped the issues which they are presenting and willingly answer questions
- The failure of the current system to even listen to, let alone respond to community concerns is a major problem. Decisions are made and then the councillors and public have to accept them. As local authorities gain more autonomy through reduced central government funding, council executives/leaders will be increasingly held to account for progress against expectations. This is unfair. They will be accountable for all decision making, understanding and taking action on the voice of the public and translating central government policy at a local level is often challenging. If it does not enjoy the support of cross party it will turn possible advocate to outright opposition both within the council and in the public, which cannot be sustainable.
- A fait accompli
- Transmission to all members.
- The present system is divisive, with two groups within a governing party ie Exec and non Exec. The Exec have considerably more interaction with council officials

and because they are seen as the important Executive Councillors officials will also be far more proactive when dealing with them. Officials are not in contact with ward councillors like myself on matters the Exec are dealing with. They also fail to be in contact on other local issues that impact on the ward I represent. The culture discourages contact. It is bizarre that I have even got the impression that councillors should keep officers at arms length and not even contact them. The lack of any directory of staff with a list of officers and phone numbers was an early sign of this approach. A committee system would be more democratic and use the experience and the abilities of all councillors eg business and financial. I am a member of the Licensing Committee but it has only had a few meetings since May last year. Officials obviously make nearly all the decisions.

- The current Scrutiny processes do not really add value, no matter how much it suggests alterations to the Executive all those suggestions can and are dismissed in short order unless they are very minor. This system does not allow or even listen to the ideas or questions from Councillors from all walks of life and many with great experience in the world of business. This leaves Councillors who are not members of the Executive frustrated and disillusioned in their backbench roles. It is also incredibly wasteful of an enormous and varied pool of talent. Genuine concerns from the communities we represent should be catered for not brushed aside. Members Briefings are mostly used to TELL Councillors of decisions that have already been made. This engenders a feeling of disenfranchisement in backbenchers of all parties or none. The local member should be informed of any important or contentious issues in their ward as they will have to help sell the idea to their residents.
- 1. The majority of councillors in both the ruling group and opposition parties feel excluded from meaningful participation in policy-making and decision-taking. The result is disaffection and disillusionment among cllrs who were keen to stand for election but lack the time or possibly skills to be a member of the Exec. 2. Portfolio Holders have very heavy workloads, the equivalent of a near full-time job in some cases. Many cllrs cannot give this commitment but would still more involvement in SWT work than they currently have. 3. The existence of a small Exec group encourages secrecy and unnecessary use of confidentiality. This excludes and alienates many other cllrs. Officers tend to treat the Exec as “real” cllrs and the rest of us as nuisances.
- When the political balance is tilted in one direction as is the case currently suggestions made by those member not in the political majority tend to be looked on with distrust and general discounted those ideas. We loses the sight of the fact that good ideas are not limited to those of the majority party or if fact other people. This enables policies to be pushed through but makes the “other” members somewhat not involved in the day to day operations.
- There is clearly deep misgivings amongst Cllrs about this Strong Leadership system from both those who have experienced a Cttee system in the past and from some, like me, who have never experienced it. People feel excluded from decision making and despite regular briefings and group meetings they still do not feel fully part of the process and so are alienated by it. The issue has become increasingly difficult for both members and Executive and in my view



needs to be addressed urgently. I suspect that the SMT also prefer to deal with an Executive but I do not feel that is a justification for keeping it.

- As stated in my previous answer, some decisions come to us already worked up and it feels as if we are heavily persuaded to vote them through or there would be negative consequences. I don't doubt that these are usually the right decisions and I trust on the whole the judgement of both the Executive and the officers, (as a new councillor I often feel I'm making decisions within areas outside my skill-set and specialist knowledge, despite training) but it doesn't always feel democratic. The current system also requires us to be a "jack of all trades" and sometimes members are voting on issues they don't know a great deal about.
- The Executive system concentrates decision-making and power in the hands of a few members. This is a poor arrangement as it does not make use of the abilities and knowledge of the majority of cllrs. Exec members, and especially the Council Leader, are often overloaded with information and decisions while the skills of other members are neglected. The scrutiny process does not work. However constructive and positive the discussions at scrutiny the impact on decisions is usually marginal or negligible. By the nature of the Scrutiny process, it has to deal with a very wide range of issues and policies across the Council, and sometimes beyond, but with a very limited say in the actual policy. This is a very inefficient and ineffective process which takes up a lot of members time but with little impact on policy. The ineffectiveness of the process is a source of frustration for Scrutiny members as well as other cllrs. It is not just opposition members that feel that the process does not allow a better decision-making process, many members of the majority group also feel disenfranchised. Members briefings have become more frequent and are often a means of telling us what has been decided and why, rather than a real attempt of consultation. Council meetings are often too long, partly as a result of members not having had a chance to make their key points previously. Councils under a strong leadership model are more likely to make disastrous mistakes as the experience and benefits of collective decision-making can be ignored. The enormous cost of the recent so-called transformation process is an example. The extremely costly decision to allow all officers to claim redundancy payments is perhaps a good example of a basic mistake which would surely have been picked up by a committee process.
- Too much decision making in too small a group. Scrutiny is effectively "after the fact" and therefore limited in power to influence. Large numbers of members not part of it, and therefore not representing the views of electorate. Broadly (currently) urban dominated. Would be equally bad if it were rural dominated by the way. The system needs to reflect the spectrum of the community. Currently drives too much focus towards Taunton. Does not effectively capitalise on the broad wealth of experience across the elected membership. People could contribute more. Officers are accountable to Executive but can be unresponsive to other members, with little consequence.
- It seems that some portfolio holders embrace the role, but others there is a lack of communication and consultation. It surprises me that with the broad spectrum of experience in elected councillors this is not tapped into more. I have acted as a shadow portfolio since being elected but have not been given any opportunity

to deliver on this, despite pushing both the portfolio holder and lead officer. It feels like there is a closed shop on this from some in the leading party. Though I know colleagues have had a very different experience so assume some of this is down to individual traits. However, if there were a formal expected system this would reduce this, and I think allow for more collaboration and broader spectrum of opinion. While I appreciate it may slow decision making down at times, I think also think a better engagement with councillors earlier on in issues might help and make officers jobs easier in coming to a good decision, though appreciate this could make processes long. It would be useful to have a full list of working groups/task&finish etc. I have offered to help in a number of different ways but not heard anything back. I have also found it hard to engage with some of the existing processes. I have tried to attend Planning Training as a substitute. But on a number of occasions training for this has happened at a time not defined, in or around the end of the planning committee. I don't think this worked well and should have been at a different set time. While planning members were there they were often tired after a meeting or for those not there had no way of knowing the right timing, and on one occasions despite following all that was asked of me it still went ahead at a different time.

- If you mean the officers in the governance team, then I think they do a good job, particularly under the current Covid restrictions.
- I feel that I must give the same answer to both questions, the decisions which go before full council are made by the Portfolio Holder and Officers with little or no input from members. The first time members see them it is normally at a members briefings, by which time its to late to add or remove anything. Member Briefings in my opinion are no more than questions and answer sessions, where the Portfolio Holder and Officers are only interesting in justifying their decisions and not listening to general members. If an item does manage to get to scrutiny it's normally too late to make major changes before the item gets to the Full Executive and Full Council, as the three meetings come very close together.
- It can stifle debate and be seen as a system that's not very inclusive.
- Heavy load of Exec/Full Council meetings though, given the size of the programme, understandable. Would be worse with a committee system though. Maybe greater delegation to PHs? A second scrutiny committee would help with their workload. Maybe also split off Audit as a separate committee.
- Confidential agenda items not being available on the mod gov site or given directly to Cllrs
- Some Councillors don't understand the democratic path of Group, Exec, Scrutiny, FC - this does seem to vary widely and it could be explained simply for each paper. As a result, some councillors feel left out of the process, simply because they don't understand it.
- It doesn't enable 'back-bench' councillors across all groups to contribute their knowledge and ideas in a deliberative process of policy development. Cllrs

represent a range of communities and have many different areas of experience, expertise and perspectives that can enrich the process and outcomes.

### **Question 3. What are your suggestions for improving the Council's governance arrangements?**

Responses:

- Could be improved with addition of Policy Advisory Groups
- Bring in a Committee system, and a Scrutiny Committee that does not have a majority membership that reflects the majority on the Council. Scrutiny needs to be able to halt a Council, with a political majority, running roughshod over the whole Council.
- Members being able to contact officers direct when they need to
- We should revert back to the Committee system so that Cllrs could be involved in a more specific topic rather than expected to be "masters of all".
- No system is perfect but cannot see any obvious improvements.
- SWT should abandon the Executive /'strong leader' model and adopt a modern, democratic committee system so that power is dispersed, consensus is the goal and every Councillor can have a real voice and contribute their insight and expertise to public policy and decision making. This would be pretty much cost neutral in terms of allowances ( chairs replace exec members etc); ideally one would build in some extra policy/ democratic services capacity. Doubtless there will be training needs. My feeling is anything spent on getting a more robust, open, democratic system is money well spent and will save money by preventing copy decisions. You would still have a leader elected by full council who can represent us externally and provide leadership internally. The executive would go. You could have around 7 -8 committees with places (11 councillors) allocated in proportion to political group representation each with a Chair and Vice Chair( of different political persuasions). I would go for something along these lines:

#### Strategic Committees:

- Policy and resources committee - responsible for overall strategic direction and budget, resource planning and allocation, emergency planning, equality and human rights, economic development, anything that doesn't fit neatly under another committee, made up of chairs/ vice chairs of cttees or nominated reps from political groups. Leader of Council would Chair. This cttee I would have responsible for commercial investment decisions (see below)
- Climate change and environment - climate strategy, tackling ecological emergency, coastal protection, active travel and green transport, parks and green spaces, biodiversity, waste and recycling ( to feed through reps into Somerset waste partnership board - currently there is insufficient democratic input I feel )
- Housing and Planning - strategic planning, local plan, HRA, council house building programme, estate regeneration, housing standards, hmo licensing,

regulation of private sector housing, building control, heritage (another option is have cttee devoted to Housing and have one dealing with Planning and transport)

- Internal services/ operations - finance, IT and HR, assets
- External services/ operations ( Kingston calls theirs 'Community and Engagement,') - communications, public engagement, crematorium, arts and culture, leisure, electoral services , voluntary sector grants and partnerships

Regulatory type committees:

- Development control
- Licensing
- Plus Audit, Governance and Standards Committee( could this be incorporated in internal services?)

All committees need to have a focus on equalities and inclusion and carbon neutrality. The new member/officer working group on Equalities should continue and have a link into Policy and Resources and be a resource for all committees. Obviously Full Council would continue to meet regularly to debate key issues, approve policies and strategies, decide the budget in feb, to appoint councillors to outside bodies with provision for petitions, motions etc as now. I think members need more opportunity to have things on agenda that matter to their constituents. So Modern Committee System that's the really big and most important change we need. In addition: I think delegation schemes need reviewing. Even in pandemic scenarios there can and should be more elected member control over decisions. Re the leisure services contract by the time we got a say our hands were effectively tied by decision of CEO to begin shovelling money Everyone Active's way. I want to see modern committee system where in between meetings there can be dialogue and involvement ongoing through email etc and mechanism for urgent things to be voted on remotely when necessary by whole committee.

I will be in a minority no doubt but I still find it completely and utterly shocking that a tiny coterie gets to decide massive commercial investments - it's just beyond my comprehension. Appalling. Decision to buy gaumont went through full council rightly so - all the stuff about oh we need to be fleet of foot is a distraction, we managed to consider that purchase ( gaumont) utilizing the democratic process. In new committee system I would run these decisions through policy and resources and if time the full council.

New protocol for consulting and informing ward councillors about decisions affecting our ward. I was incandescent when a fun fair turned up in my park at the end of August with no prior notification and in the middle of a pandemic – should have been blatantly obvious this was sensitive and should have been guided by political steer from elected members not officer just deciding.

More transparency across the board. The commercial investment strategy should never have been debated in secret. I will never recover from the horror of that, never. Shocking. When there are genuinely confidential matters fine discuss in camera but at least give us all the full info - too often I feel people are sticking their hands up willy nilly for stuff they don't understand which is the opposite of good governance.

I really wish there was a provision against party political whipping in local government - I have come to despise that with avengence. Carry people with you but accept the fact there will be divergent views would be a more mature approach. It is totally inappropriate in my view – a lot of decisions are not political

they are business decisions so people should be allowed to use their professional judgment, in any case our first duty is to our communities not party. Unfortunately I expect this will be left up to political groups and without scope of review.

- I do wonder if a policy advisory group for each portfolio holder might be a good idea.
- Maybe a group of 4 people cross party who could discuss in a private forum ideas with the Portfolio Holder and lead officers to help steer policy in a cohesive way. I would see this as being led by Portfolio Holder and the topics for discussion coming mainly from them or lead officers
- I think the briefings are good
- Switch to a committee system, with representation in relation to group size and committee chairs to speak on behalf of the committee. I don't think Scrutiny would be needed as there would be a greater spread of views on the committees, which should improve decision-making and result in scrutiny being undertaken at the same time on the committees. There would be a committee with a co-ordinating and strategic role, including for developing the annual budget.
- As the Council is coming to an end within the next two years, I would personally leave the Council's governance arrangements alone. It would be a waste of time and money to charge things now.
- Go to Committee working. Have a dedicated person in each department who can answer councillor's questions.
- Fewer Councillors! Committees that are cross party, trained, with working parties to inform decision making by dedicated Councillors.
- The current system should be disbanded and a modern committee system introduced. This gives every councillor a voice, regardless of their political beliefs. This system would work across parties, members could focus on matters which interest them and for which they have experience. It would streamline council meetings making them more efficient. A committee system would also ensure that a full democratic process is respected. It is likely to be cost neutral. There will still be a Leader for external representation and internal leadership. The remainder of the Exec would be abandoned and 6-10 committees could be formed with members and a Chair and Vice Chair of different political persuasions. I would like to see political neutrality across the whole regime. I would also like a position where dialogue and involvement can take place at short notice for specific urgent matters. Covid has taught us we need to be more agile and remote voting etc is wholly acceptable in certain situations
- We need a change from strong leader cabinet model to a more open, transparent and democratic committee system, whereby positive and productive contributors are encouraged-not discouraged. We should capture

the best local knowledge and expertise in order to come up with solutions to future challenges that lies ahead, one that bubbles from the community, a bottom up strategy, not a top down one. We need to be able to work effectively and proficiently/profitably with external suppliers and delivery partners. Flexibility, agility, proper decision-making process and expert project management will be prized skills in the new-look future new authority, where it is vitally important to reach out to all parties.

- A committee system which involves more councillors in decision making.
- Wider communication
- We need to abandon the undemocratic, strong leader cabinet model in favour of a more open and accountable committee system. The local knowledge and expertise of all councillors should be valued far more. Committee debate will allow many good alternative ideas to develop.
- An immediate change to a modern Committee system. There would be no loss of power to the majority group because the Executive Councillors would simply move over to become Chair of the Committee (with casting vote) the majority group would have under political proportionality rules a majority on each Committee. All these new Committees would attract members from all parties or none with either knowledge or interest in each subject. When the decisions have been made and if required, go onto Full Council for ratification then those items are going with the support of the Committees recommending them to Full Council. This will allow for smoother Full Council meetings negating the rehash of old arguments. The membership of Committees should be no more than 11 members, with political proportionality. The members of any Committee would have more engagement with Officers advising that Committee and would therefore be fully engaged with the process. There should be a minimum of two Scrutiny Committees. There should be two regulatory Committees Licensing and Planning/Development Control. A Climate Committee. A Council Property Committee dealing with all Council-owned assets. A strategic Committee and both an External and an Internal operations Committees. There should be an overarching Policy & Resources Committee chaired by the Council Leader and having all the Committee Chairs as members.
- Move to a Committee system which the provision for each chair to be able to take quick pre-emptive decisions if the need arises.
- To engage member that are not involved in the portfolio level, it should be about taking suggestions/ideas no matter where they come from and not those used for council business aimed at capital political gain.
- As a matter of urgency we should divide the Scrutiny Committee into 2 committees as was previously the case and set up a Town Council for Taunton. This should happen without delay. I should like to see a report on what Committees would be needed to run a Council under the Committee

system and that the Full Council should get an opportunity to review and vote on these proposals in time for them to be implemented in April 2021.

- I would certainly like to explore different models of a committee system to see what the implications would be and how things would change. I understand that one criticism of the committee system is that councillors will be expected to attend more meetings and attendance is crucial. I can see this may be a problem but recently I seem to be spending most weekday afternoons and evenings attending meetings or briefings anyway (and weekends reading the documents)! I think that greater ownership of decisions would reduce cross-party conflict and indeed between members of the ruling group. But I do want to know the downsides.
  
- The establishment of a modern committee system is essential. This would have the following advantages :-
  - 1) Cross party membership would be a democratic consensual approach to decision making.
  - 2) Members would be able to focus their efforts on subjects in which they are particularly interested or have particular skills or knowledge.
  - 3) All members would feel involved, be able to influence actual decisions within a system of proportional party representation and cooperation.
  - 4) Full Council meetings would be likely to be shorter and an affirmation of policies in which all has had the chance to participate.
  - 5) The Chair of each committee would be in a position to take all views into account and come to Full council in the knowledge that the democratic process has been respected.
  - 6) Members of all parties and none would have better access to officer advice and be likely to spend time seeking information which they feel they need to take decisions.

Some changes to the way committees have operated in the past at the two Councils should be considered. Some of these might be :-

  - 1) Two stage reports to committees, an initial report outlining the proposal with a relatively short report which can either be approved as is or members may feel that more info was required and ask for a second more comprehensive report before deciding.
  - 2) The number of members on each Committee could be reduced to 13 or 11 perhaps, depending on the nature of the committee.
  - 3) The time each member is allowed to speak could be limited in some way if the Chair felt it necessary. We all know that sometimes members can take too long to get to the point! A limit of 5mins on each item might be appropriate.
  - 4) There would be some sort of overall Policy and Resources committee, chaired by the Leader and having Chairs of committees but with a proportional representation. This would enable the Leader to focus on the big issues and co-ordination of Council policy.

There may be other ways of modifying the committee system to make it as relevant as possible to present day circumstances and further discussion on this would be welcome.

- Like many others, a Committee system would seem to address the core issues of centralisation of decision making and lack of reference to full council.
- I would suggest a skills audit of councillors would be useful to identify possible strengths and supports that could be utilised in working with officers. This I understand could be utilised if a committee system were in place. I also think this would support better decisions as often there is a lot of complex information and if only a few analyse then crucial detail may be missed. When first elected I also put myself forward to be a councillor trustee for an organisation in the community, and this was from a list of councillor representations. However, I have never been asked to report back on this, or given a template/process to do so. This feels like a vital part of the council having a sense of its community and a lost opportunity. I also think a briefing on this would be useful, in terms of how councillor trustees etc might make best endeavour of this.
- We have direct lines into the team, what we need is direct dial numbers to a contact in each department to gain better responses for those we represent.
- A committee system would allow the views and ideas of members to be put forward and fully debated before any decisions are made and they go to full council. I for one would feel that I would be able to put my views across one way or another. It also removes the danger of a strong willed officer pushing through ideas that a weaker Portfolio Holder may be willing to accept. Also as committees would be made up of cross party members the decisions would reflect the views of the whole council
- A hybrid version of the current system
- Heavy load of Exec/Full Council meetings though, given the size of the programme, understandable. Would be worse with a committee system though. Maybe greater delegation to PHs? A second scrutiny committee would help with their workload. Maybe also split off Audit as a separate committee.
- More reports from non committees through there stages of working. Effectively more info of what is going on behind the scenes ,not just the final report .
- Some Councillors don't understand the democratic path of Group, Exec, Scrutiny, FC - this does seem to vary widely and it could be explained simply for each paper. As a result, some councillors feel left out of the process, simply because they don't understand it.
- A Committee system along with officer/expert briefings and, where appropriate/desirable, utilising well worked out methods of public consultation.



**Question 4. Do you feel that you can influence policy and the decision-making process?**

Yes	8
No	13
Unsure	8
No response	2

**Question 5. Please explain your answer to question 4**

- Political balance of Council
- Whilst a member of the Council might feel they can make suggestions, some of which could be taken into account, the “ruling party” can/could become dictatorial
- Working with other Councillors to do so. For my part too, being an Executive member is advantageous
- Councillors should work together to get the best results. When they do things certainly seem much better.
- Every member has the chance to influence policy through speaking at Full Council, Executive and Scrutiny. Whether the ruling group will act on good suggestions from opposition members is another matter but always has been and always will be
- No but there have been exceptions, as a rule though, no. In general the exec system especially when combined with political whipping make for a sorry situation where most councillors just feel like window dressing – ‘oh look this is democratic we have elected members in the room’ but the power lies with senior officers primarily followed by the Exec. By the time we get a look in it is often too late to change trajectory or there is unwillingness to take a different approach, things have been largely stitched up. I think exec feels it needs to defend its line rather than listen and adjust and change (although there have been examples of enlightened exec members occasionally going with councillors’ view, ok actually only one I can think of!) Exceptions:- when cross party committees/groups are involved at the beginning of a process, eg scrutiny during initial development and scoping of climate change strategy I felt our input actually did some good and was heeded as the post holder and officer concerned were very open to suggestions. Ditto Local Plan member steering group – chaired by opposition member, good old mix of people, it feels like we are all equal and can contribute and again, because we were involved at the beginning it was worth the effort writing and submitting pages of notes!
- I feel I can influence decisions via our group meetings primarily. Where groups complain about lack of info I don’t think that the council is to blame for that it is a group issue

- Barely at all. I sat on a working group intended to be involved in developing policy and recommending this to the Council for decision. However, the process was poorly managed, so that policy discussions were nearly non-existent. We had presentations when officers, in effect, told us what policy would be and seemed to have little interest in our views. Only the views of Portfolio Holders seemed to count, which were presumably given at other times elsewhere. This gives the appearance of the real policy making being a secretive process hidden from most councillors. The only effective opportunities to contribute to policy appeared to be when allowed to submit comments on draft papers. However, it appeared officers then decided on what went in the final version and there was NO cross-party or wider debate or discussion on different options or possibilities. It appears that having Portfolio Holders can stifle other forms of policy making and encourages officers to look to work with them. It can then depend on the characteristics and abilities of the Portfolio Holder whether others may be involved. Some seem able and willing to listen to others. Some appear to lack what would be needed to fulfil the role in this way. There is no official role for shadow PHs, which, possibly, might allow a small improvement, but moving to a committee system should be far better.
- As an individual elected member I believe I have very little influence on policy, this is because the Council is political. Where the winner takes all, under the current decision-making process, at this present time we have a Liberal Democrats administration in control. Who knows, in two years' time it could well be a Conservative administration or another group. All top appointments are made to the Cabinet System from the winning party. Not a very inclusive system, especially if you are an independent elected member not affiliated to any political group.
- Decisions are made by ??? I am not sure who does make the decisions and therefore would have no idea if I could influence them or the policies of the council.
- If I was willing and able to devote more time, and eg get on the Exec or Chair a Committee then maybe it would be possible to influence policy, but I'm not! Consequently my skills and experience and decision making ability are not utilised.
- Generally not as often feel totally ignored. Councillors are often consulted at a late stage where a decision has effectively been made by the exec. Some of these decisions are fine but there are some which have been found to be lacking. Often we are subjected to the "closed mind syndrome". It is in fact quite demoralising to have to listen to some unsound decisions being voted through for various reasons but often because of a lack of member's understanding, sometimes because briefings recommendations do not cover the bigger picture and are rushed through with limited time for consideration.
- NO, I fear the executives have the monopoly on most important decision-makings and any influence to change the policy will take years, unless it has executives support and it is inline with their thinking. Most executives have their own priorities and are influenced by officers and are not professionally/adequately

equipped to bring the rest of the councillors on board from the start. As we have witnessed with overseeing the transformation that has taken a few years and yet to function effectively, we are still taking the necessary steps to fill some skill gaps. We need a good mix of knowledge/expertise to complement and guide officers for the best outcome. One thing that is lacking within the executives is commercial mindset as it will be a top priority in years to come for the team and as the local councils will shrink, along with, project management skills, flexibility, a clear vision and digital expertise to combat future challenges. Tapping in to the expertise that we have across party politics will help and support future decision-making.

- It seems to be a done deal by the Executive
- As a member of the minority party I don't feel I have any influence on council activity.
- Generally no with a few exceptions. I feel the Executive have a monopoly on many decisions and often other councillors are unaware of the issue or the decision. Consultation with ward councillors is inadequate by the Exec and council officials. On a few occasions I have been completely unaware of issues that affect my ward and didn't know about meetings arranged to deal with these issues.
- The material decisions are seemingly made before they reach the Committee and the current Executive appear to defend the decisions rather than discuss any potential for an alternative, possibly even better outcome for the people we serve. We must be seen to be responsive to our electorate after all, without their votes we would not be Councillors.
- Only through informal means such as lobbying and relying on friendships among cllrs. It needs to be hard-wired into the system. Let me give an example; I'm a councillor very interested in Ec Dev. Where is the routine opportunity for me to influence policy in this area? Marcus K does a good job as PH but there is no Cllr group or working party around him, just the relevant officers. So beyond bending Marcus's ear on an informal basis, what am I supposed to do. I could table issues at LD group meetings, but what about the 29 or so cllrs who are not Lib Dem's?
- Unfortunately, where an unbalance situation exists there is a tendency to marginized any help offered as coming from other motives particularly those coming from outside the current majority party. This does a disservices to not just other members but also to the public at large not just those who voted for them or not. It is very difficult in these circumstances to influence policy and the decision-making process; a good example of how this is played out in practice is the make up of the members on the investment board. Initial discussions made it clear the make up of the board would not include any members outside the Executive although this by far one of the most important functions of this council. However after a lot of lobbying a concession was made to have a non-voting member included on the board but they were not able to vote - why.? It was make clear that any member outside the Executive was not trusted to vote in line with

the other members and concerns maybe raised by the non-exe member and delay the proceedings consequently although an outside the Executive could attend the board they could not vote. This attitude does not encourage engagement in the policy and the decision-making process hence the lack of participation.

- Yes. I do to some extent but I am part of the Executive. When I was a backbencher I did not really understand how the Council worked or how decisions could be influenced and made but that is clearer to me now. Were I to be campaigning or particularly passionate about a particular issue or matter I think that my path to get that issue dealt with would, as a backbencher, be far more difficult notwithstanding that I am in the majority party for the time being. I think some experienced Cllrs were used to dealing directly with officers of the previous Council and that they feel much less effective with new officers that they do not know. I think that this has compounded the problem of disaffection with the current system.
- I haven't answered question 4 because none of the answers really fit for me. I can influence the decision-making process in that, as part of the ruling group, I can vote in Group meetings, and of course I can vote in Full Council. However, there will be times when my vote will be influenced by Group loyalty. There have been times when I have shaped policy but on the whole I feel more as if my role is one of scrutinising decisions that come to me fully formed. I have made suggestions which have not been taken up but I am well aware that too often members push for their own areas of interest without awareness of the big picture.
- Comments as follows:
  - 1) If decisions are taken by a few Exec Councillors why would I want to be a Councillor?
  - 2) How can I represent those who elected me if I have so little say in the decisions of the Council?
  - 3) As a democrat, I wish to see members of all parties and none have some meaningful say in the decisions of the Council.
  - 4) Why should I support the Council's decisions if I have had no meaningful involvement in them?
  - 5) Why should I have to spend so many hours listening to debates about details of Council activities in which I have little interest and which are not relevant to those who elected me, and yet not have say in those issues which do ?
  - 6) I would like the time I spend on Council work to be relevant to those issues which are most relevant to me and my electorate and make my contribution effectively and efficiently, preferably on issues about which I have some expertise.The current system does not do that
- Not enough. As per answers above, the Executive system puts too much emphasis on the few and does not empower the rest. This permeates into the whole organisation and results in an authority that does not always respect the importance of those democratically elected yet not at the top table.

- Yes but not as much as I would like. I have found the briefings provided to councillors a great benefit and grateful to James/others from introducing these. I do my best to attend all, and the timings of these are good. Sometimes I wonder if a greater range of options might need to be presented at these briefings though, as sometimes it feels like a decision has already been made and therefore we are just being told what has been done/is going to happen. I also feel that again if there were a committee system more input to come to the right decision could be achieved. I am often surprised at some of the comments statements that happen in Full Council when those ideas and details could have perhaps been addressed in an earlier stage. With regard to my earlier suggestion of a skills audit and interests audit I think this would also allow for councillors to really contribute in key areas they have knowledge and interest. Though recognising there will always be less interesting areas that will still need councillor time, and we cannot all be deployed on the key areas. Overall I think there could be more collaboration which would I think bring about more ownership from councillors.
- We started off well post election, lots of working together etc. Now this has lessened considerably. Involvement of the opposition parties is important. We have some excellent councillors, their opinions and ideas should be sought.
- As above in question 1/2 all I done at present is to vote on decisions put forward by executive and officers with no input at all and very little chance to challenge the decisions I feel are weak or not in the best interests of the people that elected myself. I have over the last year questioned why am I wasting my time being a councillor if no one is prepared to listen or take notice. It's not always wise to go with those that shout the loudest be they councillor or officer.
- I feel I know how to ask the right questions and can approach pfh s direct with ideas
- I know who to speak to on any issue.
- Most unlikely - Being a member of a minority group
- Democratic path offers plenty of opportunity for involvement of members.
- If you're not part of a deliberative process, but are presented with limited choices already determined by vote within the ruling group there are limited opportunities to have an impact on decisions.