

Central Bedfordshire
Council
Priory House
Monks Walk
Chicksands,
Shefford SG17 5TQ

**This meeting may
be filmed.***



**Central
Bedfordshire**

please ask for Leslie Manning
direct line 0300 300 5132
date 3 December 2015

NOTICE OF MEETING

GENERAL PURPOSES COMMITTEE

Date & Time

Thursday, 17 December 2015 10.00 a.m.

Venue at

Room 14, Priory House, Monks Walk, Chicksands

Richard Carr
Chief Executive

To: The Chairman and Members of the GENERAL PURPOSES COMMITTEE:

Cllrs Mrs J G Lawrence (Chairman), G Perham (Vice-Chairman), L Birt,
Mrs C F Chapman MBE, P Hollick, J G Jamieson, M R Jones, K C Matthews,
M A G Versallion, N Warren, B Wells and A Zerny

[Named Substitutes:

Cllrs D Bowater, N B Costin, Ms A M W Graham, D J Lawrence, B Saunders,
T Stock and J N Young]

All other Members of the Council - on request

***MEMBERS OF THE PRESS AND PUBLIC ARE WELCOME TO ATTEND THIS
MEETING***

***Please note that phones or other equipment may be used to film, audio record, tweet or blog from this meeting. No part of the meeting room is exempt from public filming.**

The use of arising images or recordings is not under the Council's control.

AGENDA

1. **Apologies for Absence**

To receive apologies for absence and notification of substitute Members.

2. **Minutes**

To approve as a correct record the minutes of the meeting of the General Purposes Committee held on 25 June 2015 (copy attached).

3. **Members' Interests**

To receive from Members any declarations of interest.

4. **Chairman's Announcements and Communications**

To receive any announcements from the Chairman and any matters of communication.

5. **Petitions**

To receive petitions from members of the public in accordance with the Public Participation Procedure as set out in Annex 2 of Part A4 of the Constitution.

6. **Questions, Statements or Deputations**

To receive any questions, statements or deputations from members of the public in accordance with the Public Participation Procedure as set out in Annex 1 of Part A4 of the Constitution.

Reports

Item	Subject	Page Nos.
7.	Pay Policy Statement 2016/17 To consider the proposed Pay Policy Statement for 2016/17.	+ To Follow
8.	Virtual Attendance at Meetings To consider the opportunities for virtual attendance at Committee meetings.	* 11 - 16

9. **Webcasting Review** * 17 - 20
- To consider a review of webcasting and possible improvements and next steps to increase transparency and participation in the Council's decision making.
10. **Annual Report on the Arrangements for Ethical Standards** + To Follow
- To consider a report setting out a summary of the Council's ethical governance and arrangements over the last twelve months.
11. **Proposed Amendment to the Constitution - Officer Decision Making** + To Follow
- To consider a report setting out proposed changes to officer decision making regarding delegated authority and Key Decisions and, in particular, clarification of the level of expenditure that constitutes a Key Decision.
12. **Review of Petitions Scheme** * 21 - 26
- To consider a report setting out a proposed review to the Council's Petitions Scheme.
13. **Work Programme** * 27 - 30
- To consider the Committee's work programme.

CENTRAL BEDFORDSHIRE COUNCIL

At a meeting of the **GENERAL PURPOSES COMMITTEE** held at Room 15, Priory House, Monks Walk, Shefford on Thursday, 25 June 2015

PRESENT

Cllr Mrs J G Lawrence (Chairman)
Cllr G Perham (Vice-Chairman)

Cllrs L Birt
P Hollick
K C Matthews

Cllrs M A G Versallion
N Warren
A Zerny

Apologies for Absence: Cllrs Mrs C F Chapman MBE
J G Jamieson
M R Jones
B Wells

Substitutes: Cllrs N B Costin
D J Lawrence

Officers in Attendance: Mr I Ali – Corporate Lawyer
Mrs D Broadbent-Clarke – Director of Improvement and Corporate Services
Mr R Gould – Head of Financial Control
Mrs S Hobbs – Committee Services Officer
Mrs C Jones – Chief People Officer

GPC/15/2. **Minutes**

RESOLVED

that the minutes of the meetings of the General Purposes Committee held on 15 January 2015 and 21 May 2015 be confirmed and signed by the Chairman as correct records.

GPC/15/3. **Members' Interests**

None were declared.

GPC/15/4. **Chairman's Announcements and Communications**

The Chairman provided an update on the recruitment of Social Workers within Children's Services following the change of provider. The Chairman was pleased to announce that the Council had retained all the Social Workers and no one had left the organisation. An update had been scheduled to be considered by the General Purposes Committee on 17 December 2015 and the Chairman advised that this item would now be removed from the Committee's work programme. If there was a need to discuss this issue further a report would be considered by the Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

GPC/15/5. **Petitions**

No petitions were received from members of the public in accordance with the Public Participation Procedure as set out in Annex 2 of Part A4 of the Constitution.

GPC/15/6. **Questions, Statements or Deputations**

No questions, statements or deputations were received from members of the public in accordance with the Public Participation Procedure as set out in Annex 1 of Part A4 of the Constitution.

GPC/15/7. **The Local Authorities (Standing Orders)(England)(Amendment) Regulations 2015**

The Committee considered a report that provided advice on the legislative changes to the Standing Orders relating to the dismissal of statutory officers. The Orders had come into effect on 11 May 2015 and changes to the Council's Constitution was necessary to effect their implementation as far as was currently feasible.

The Regulations removed the requirement for a Designated Independent Person and provided that any decision to dismiss the relevant Statutory Officer must be taken by full Council. The terms of reference for the General Purposes Committee already contained arrangements for the dismissal of the Head of Paid Services via the Appointments Sub-Committee. It was proposed that the terms of reference be extended to include the Chief Finance Officer and the Monitoring Officer and to provide for the inclusion of independent persons. The independent person would be drawn from the list of independent persons that had previously been drawn up by the Council.

The Committee were advised that the new regulations still needed further clarification with regards to the Statutory Officers existing contractual position and discussions were taking place with the Local Government Association.

RECOMMENDED to Council

1. ***that the Independent Panel designated to deal with the dismissal of Statutory Officers will be the Appointments Sub-Committee;***
2. ***that the Officer Employment Procedure Rules contained at H4 of the Constitution and the General Purposes Committee terms of reference be amended, as set out in Appendices A and B to the report, respectively to reflect the requirements set out in the Local Authorities (Standing Orders)(England)(Amendment) Regulations 2015;***
3. ***that the current relevant Independent Persons appointed to the Council be invited to join the Appointments Sub-Committee when dealing with the dismissal of the Chief Executive (Head of Paid Service), Chief Finance Officer (Section 151 Officer) and Chief Legal and Democratic Services Officer (Monitoring Officer); and***
4. ***that the composition and remit of the Appointments Sub-Committee remain as currently constituted save that in the case of dismissal of the Chief Executive (Head of Paid Service), Chief Finance Officer (Section 151 Officer) and Chief Legal and Democratic Services Officer (Monitoring Officer) the Sub-Committee may only make a recommendation to Council.***

GPC/15/8.

Constitution Update

The Committee considered a report that provided Members with the amendments made by the Monitoring Officer under her delegated powers to maintain the Constitution.

The report also set out a proposal to amend Part K, Members' Allowances Scheme in line with a decision approved by the Executive in 2011. The Executive were seeking to change a provision which had enabled Members to make financial claims for ICT equipment under various provisions effective in the legacy authorities prior to the creation of Central Bedfordshire Council in 2009. Following the Executive's consideration and implementation of the new approach, such claims stopped. Unfortunately a recommendation had never been made to full Council to amend the Constitution with the provisions approved by the Executive.

RESOLVED

1. **that the amendments made by the Monitoring Officer under her delegated powers to maintain the Constitution, as set out in Appendix A to the report, be noted.**

RECOMMENDED to Council

- 1. that the provision for Members' ICT allowances be included in Part K of the Constitution, Members' Allowances Scheme, as set out in Appendix C to the report.**

GPC/15/9. Local Government Pension Scheme Update

The committee considered a report that provided an update on the governance of the Local Government Pension Scheme. The Bedfordshire Pension Fund was administered by Bedford Borough Council, which was responsible for the pensions of Local Government employees across Bedfordshire.

A Pension Board had been established to assist the Pension Committee to secure compliance with regulations and to ensure the effective and efficient governance and administration of the Local Government Pension Scheme. The Leader of the Council had been appointed as Central Bedfordshire Council's representative on the Board. Central Bedfordshire Council also had Councillor Wenham and Councillor Collins as respectively the voting member and substitute voting member on the Bedford Borough Council Pension Committee.

Members discussed the financial performance and risk and noted that this was scrutinised by the Audit Committee as it was within their remit.

NOTED the report.

GPC/15/10. Market Rate Supplement Payments - Annual Update

The Committee considered a report that provided Members with an annual update on the current application of market rate supplements (MRS) to posts across Central Bedfordshire Council.

Members were advised that salaries were benchmarked regionally and nationally to carry out salary checks. MRS was only appointed to posts where there was difficulty in recruiting and this was closely scrutinised by the Corporate Management Team. There was still a national challenge to recruit and retain experienced social workers for Children's Services and there was also signs of pressure in areas of Adult Social Care. Other areas of pressure were in Planning and Building Control, IT and Finance. MRS payments were mainly paid to staff in the middle salary bands and not senior managers. However, evidence had shown that over the last two years the value of individual MRS had to be increased so a greater number of supplements were now paid in the higher pay bands.

NOTED

the annual update about the current application of market rate supplements to posts across Central Bedfordshire Council.

GPC/15/11. **Work Programme**

The Committee considered a report that set out the Committee’s work programme for 2015/16. The Committee noted that the item on ‘Children’s Social Worker Recruitment Update’ had been removed (see minute GPC/15/04 for details).

It was proposed to move the ‘Standards Complaints – Annual Report’ scheduled for 27 August 2015 to the 5 November 2015 and if no other business was scheduled then the meeting on 27 August 2015 would be cancelled.

It was noted that the item schedule for 24 March 2016, Standards Complaints – Six Month Update would only be submitted if exceptional circumstances arose. The Committee requested that this item be considered in March and to remove the wording ‘submitted only if exceptional circumstances arise’.

RESOLVED

to amend the work programme as set out above.

(Note: The meeting commenced at 10.00 a.m. and concluded at 11.10 a.m.)

Chairman

Dated

This page is intentionally left blank

Central Bedfordshire Council

GENERAL PURPOSES COMMITTEE

17 December 2015

VIRTUAL ATTENDANCE AT MEETINGS

Report of Cllr Richard Wenham, Executive Member for Corporate Resources
(richard.wenham@centralbedfordshire.gov.uk)

Advising Officers: Deb Broadbent-Clarke, Director of Improvement and
Corporate Services (deb.broadbent-clarke@centralbedfordshire.gov.uk); and

Jonathon Partridge, Head of Governance
(Jonathon.partridge@centralbedfordshire.gov.uk)

Purpose of this report

To enable the General Purposes Committee to consider the opportunities for
virtual attendance at Committee meetings

RECOMMENDATION:

That General Purposes Committee review the options detailed in paragraphs
9 to 11 and agree their preferred approach to enabling virtual attendance at
meetings in the future.

Introduction

1. Central Bedfordshire is committed to the openness and transparency of its democratic processes. The Council's meetings provide an important mechanism for engaging residents in decision-making and enabling elected Members to represent the concerns and views of residents.
2. Over the previous year webcasting has been introduced to many of the Council's meetings as a way of making the most of modern technology to encourage residents and organisations to connect with meetings without having to physically attend.
3. In addition to webcasting several public authorities have trialled the use of virtual meetings as a way of improving productivity, flexible working and improving attendance at meetings. Solutions used by authorities have involved various different forms of technology, such as Skype and Facetime.
4. At Central Bedfordshire we have recently trialled the use of Skype to enable officers to attend internal meetings virtually. Skype is an internet-based service and a poor internet connection at either end of

the call can cause poor audio and/or video quality. Experience of Skype has so far been mixed with some calls experiencing very high quality audio but some experience has been very poor. Poor video and audio quality is due to a mix of factors such as the strength of the internet connection at either end of the call, problems with the Skype application itself or the version of Skype software being used by participants.

5. As a result of this mixed experience IT are currently reviewing options to implement a more stable system of video-conferencing between Council devices that will provide a suitable solution and alternative to Skype. Testing of these options should commence before the end of the municipal year.

Presence required for 'attendance' and voting

6. Relevant legislation states that in order to vote on decisions or recommendations a Member must physically be present at the meeting at which the matter is considered. Similarly, in order to be counted towards the quorum of a meeting a Member must physically be in attendance.
7. Despite lobbying of DCLG by other authorities to amend legislation, allowing Members to be considered present at a meeting when attending virtually legislation has remained unchanged.

Options for consideration

8. The Committee is invited to review the options detailed below and consider a way forward. Notwithstanding the options below it is considered good practice for the Council to investigate the manner in which virtual attendance can be facilitated at non-public (informal) meetings. Informal meetings are not webcast and it is good practice to encourage officers and Members to attend meetings virtually where this will provide efficiencies.

Option 1:

9. Virtual attendance at meetings is not permitted. Any Member unable to attend a meeting must continue to use the established mechanism and submit questions two days in advance of the meeting to the clerk or to an agreed substitute. Where questions are received in advance of the meeting they can be circulated and raised under public questions, statements and deputations with a formal response being provided to the Member outside the meeting or to their substitute at the meeting. Consideration will need to be given to the following:-
 - a. Members must ensure they provide questions or statements two working days prior to the meeting for them to be circulated and a formal response provided in a timely way.

- b. Members will need to make every effort to ensure the arrangement of substitutes for meetings they can not attend.
10. The Chairmen of Committees should ensure that where questions are provided by submitted by Members who are not in attendance or have not been able to arrange a substitute that they are acted upon and a response is provided to that Member.

Option 2:

11. Facilitate virtual attendance of Members at formal Council meetings in their role as 'community leaders' but not as Members of a Committee. Consideration will need to be given to the following:-
- a. In light of relevant legislation it is not possible for Members to 'attend' formal meetings in order to vote or take part in the meeting in their capacity as a Committee Member. .
 - b. Appropriate equipment will be required both by the virtual attendee and at the meeting, both of which will require testing. The Council will incur additional cost to both supply and use equipment to facilitate virtual meetings. The attendee will need to advise the clerk and the Chairman within a required period of time in advance of their intention to attend a meeting virtually.
 - c. The use of Skype is not currently suitable to facilitate virtual attendance at meetings for a prolonged period of time. The attendee would need to consider whether their participation relates to just one item or to several items on the agenda. If there are more items of interest a more stable connection will be necessary within the Council offices and it would be appropriate to wait until a suitable IT solution for video-conferencing had been implemented within the Council before implementing this option.
 - d. Additional resources will be required to provide capacity for staff to operate equipment prior to and during meetings and to facilitate the engagement of virtual attendees. This will require the presence of an additional officer. In circumstances where more than one Councillor attends a meeting virtually the impact on resources will be more pronounced and further additional staff will be necessary to attend a meeting. Whilst it might be possible to facilitate the virtual attendance of one Councillor the meeting would become more complex with multiple virtual attendees.
 - e. Meetings in the Council Chamber are webcast, a process will be required to ensure anyone watching via the webcast remotely and also those present at the meeting are able to see and/or hear the virtual attendee. Further consideration will also be necessary of the manner in which disruption of a meeting caused by virtual attendees can be prevented.
 - f. Virtual attendees must be aware of their surroundings. Confidentiality and sensitivity of information must be considered.

Where necessary attendees must not be in a place where the conversation could be overheard. The security of links enabling virtual attendance may also be an issue, particularly if an exempt matter is under discussion.

Reason for decision

12. Members are asked to consider the options detailed above to provide a steer on the extent to which virtual attendance at meetings should be permitted at meetings. Following that steer officers will be able to undertake more detailed analysis of the costs and the protocols required to implement the preferred approach.

Council Priorities

13. The Council is committed to providing opportunities for residents and Councillors to engage in the democratic process.

Corporate Implications

14. If Members support virtual attendance at meetings training for staff and Members would be required to ensure the system runs smoothly. An additional officer would be required to attend meetings to facilitate virtual attendees.

Legal Implications

15. The requirement to be physically present at a meeting in order to be part of the quorum and to vote is detailed in the Local Government Act 1972 (paragraphs 6 and 39 of Schedule 12) and this is mirrored in the procedures for meetings within the Council's Constitution. None of the proposals detailed would contravene the legal requirements. Going forward the rights and responsibilities of members will need to be preserved as will transparency and accountability of members and the decision making process. If virtual attendance is allowed mechanisms will need to be in place to govern the appropriateness of such attendance in particular meetings, ensure the same level of interaction is available and that there are processes in place to counter any breakdown in technology.

Financial Implications

16. Any virtual attendance at meetings will result in both capital and revenue expenditure. Should Members agree to encourage virtual attendance at formal meetings a detailed analysis of the financial implications will be required to determine the costs of necessary IT infrastructure.

Equalities Implications

17. In their role as community leaders it is important for elected Members to represent the views of residents within Central Bedfordshire. Central Bedfordshire Council encourages engagement in the decision-making process and particularly in public meetings and already provides several opportunities for residents and Members to engage. Councillors can raise questions on behalf of residents or during the debate of a particular item and Committee Members are also permitted to send substitutes to raise issues on their behalf. Finally residents are able to attend meetings themselves to raise questions first-hand. These existing mechanisms have facilitated the engagement of Councillors and residents from across Central Bedfordshire in a wide range of public meetings.

Conclusion and next Steps

18. Members are asked to review the options detailed in this paper and recommend a preferred approach, taking into account the staff and financial implications. In light of the steer provided by the General Purposes Committee a more detailed report can be provided prior to a trial of a different approach.

Appendices

None

Background Papers

None

This page is intentionally left blank

Central Bedfordshire Council

GENERAL PURPOSES COMMITTEE

17 December 2015

WEBCASTING REVIEW

Report of Cllr Richard Wenham, Executive Member for Corporate Services

Advising Officers:

Deb Broadbent-Clarke, Director of Improvement and Corporate Services
deb.broadbent-clarke@centralbedfordshire.gov.uk

Karen Aspinall, Digital Communications Manager
Karen.aspinall@centralbedfordshire.gov.uk

Purpose of this report

This report summarises the review of webcasting and recommends improvements and next steps to further increase transparency and participation in council decision making.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Committee is asked to:

1. Review feedback from a range of stakeholders on the initial phase of Central Bedfordshire Council's webcasting.
2. Agree to the extension of webcasting to all Overview and Scrutiny Committee meetings with appropriate additional Member and Officer support and training.

Overview and Scrutiny Comments/Recommendations

Not applicable.

Introduction

1. Webcasting is a process that allows anyone to view democratic processes online, either through live transmission or watching later after the event.
2. Central Bedfordshire Council introduced webcasting of the following meetings earlier this year:

- Development Management Committee
 - Executive Committee
 - Full Council
3. As part of the implementation plan we committed to review webcasting after six months and report recommendations to General Purposes Committee.

Review summary

4. In conducting the review, feedback was sought from the following key audiences/ exercises:
- All Members of the Council
 - The public (who have viewed previous webcasts)
 - Central Bedfordshire Council staff
 - Officers directly involved with the implementation and operation of webcasting including officers from Facilities Management, Committee Services, IT and the Communications Team.
5. Generally, the feedback received has been positive. Since launch, more than 1,200 views of webcasts have taken place and some members of the public have suggested that the Council should consider extending the range of meetings that are webcast. A range of suggestions for improvement of the service have also been proposed.
6. The stability of the webcasting equipment has been an issue at times. However, as part of a more comprehensive upgrade of the Council's audio/visual facilities, this will be improved.
7. During the initial phase of webcasting, meetings have been broadcast from venues other than the Council chamber and these have worked well. In order to extend the range of venues from which webcasting is possible the council will need to ensure that such facilities have good enough internet connections to enable webcasting.
8. Members have raised concerns about how they are perceived by the public. In particular, because the filming is not intrusive, it is easy for Members to forget they are being filmed. This is particularly true when Members feature in the webcast because they are sitting close to a speaker, rather than contributing directly to a debate. To address this, some amendments to the scope of the image recorded have been made. Some Members have also suggested that the Council provide further awareness raising sessions on webcasting.
9. It is proposed that such sessions are arranged and resourced through the Member training budget.
10. In view of the fact that members of the public who have watched a webcast have found it useful, it is proposed that more proactive

marketing and promotion of the service is now undertaken to increase public involvement with it.

11. There is general support from the public and Members to for extending webcasting to other meetings.
12. It is therefore proposed to extend webcasting to all Overview and Scrutiny Committee meetings.

Council Priorities

13. Increasing webcasting will increase transparency and participation in our decision making.

Corporate Implications

14. As with all technologies, there are risks for potential failure. These are mitigated as much as possible through contract arrangements with a third party supplier which address contingency and recovery arrangements. Also, plans to upgrade the conferencing equipment in the Council Chamber at Priory House will also reduce the risk of technical failure as webcasting and conferencing equipment are linked.
15. The council has already been through a competitive tender exercise to select the provider.
16. If the recommendation to extend webcasting to all Overview and Scrutiny Committee meetings is agreed, the Overview and Scrutiny/ Corporate Policy Officers who support these committees will need to be trained to operate the webcasting system and may need additional support for the first few meetings.

Legal Implications

17. Whilst there is no statutory requirement to webcast Council meetings, it is recommended best practice by the Department for Communities and Local Government.
18. Last year Central Government published new regulations; Openness of Local Government Bodies Regulations 2014, which strengthened the rights of the public and press to film, audio record, photograph, blog, tweet or use any other type of social media to report any public meetings of their councils, including committees, sub-committees and joint committees. In this context, it is beneficial for the Council to have and make available its own complete and accurate record of meetings via webcasting.
19. The minutes of meetings continue to be the formal record of the meeting.

20. Protocols are already in place to protect the Council from potential legal challenges relating to the Human Rights Act and/or Data Protection requirements.

Financial Implications

21. The cost associated with the recommendations in this report are covered by existing revenue budgets.

Equalities Implications

22. Central Bedfordshire Council has a statutory duty to promote equality of opportunity, eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment and victimisation and foster good relations in respect of nine protected characteristics; age disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex and sexual orientation.
23. The proposal to extend webcasting to all Overview and Scrutiny Committee meetings is likely to increase access to and awareness of and involvement in our democratic processes to all members of our community.

Conclusion and next Steps

24. Subject to the approval of the recommendation to extend webcasting to Overview and Scrutiny Committees arrangements will be put in place to:
 - Support Democratic Services colleagues to operate the webcasting equipment
 - Brief and train Chairmen of the meetings
 - Update the agenda front sheets and signage at meetings to include a note about being filmed
 - Ensure all public speakers are aware they will be filmed
 - Promote the webcasts

Appendices

None.

Background Papers

None.

Central Bedfordshire Council

General Purposes Committee

17 December 2015

REVIEW OF PETITIONS SCHEME

Report of Cllr Richard Wenham, Executive Member for Corporate Resources
(richard.wenham@centralbedfordshire.gov.uk)

Advising Officers: Deb Broadbent-Clarke, Director of Improvement and
Corporate Services
(deb.broadbent-clarke@centralbedfordshire.gov.uk)

Drafting Officer: Mel Peaston, Committee Services Manager
(mel.peaston@centralbedfordshire.gov.uk)

Purpose of this report

1. This report enables a review of the Council's Petitions Scheme, which is set out in the Council's constitution.

RECOMMENDATIONS

General Purposes Committee is asked to consider whether:

- a) Petitions to the Council should be acceptable even if signatories cannot be verified as living, working or studying in the area; or
- b) The current provisions of the Council's Petitions Scheme should remain in place providing that signatories to e-petitions must be verifiable as living, working or studying in the area

Overview and Scrutiny Comments/Recommendations

This matter falls within the remit of General Purposes Committee as it relates to the Council's constitution.

Introduction

2. The Council's Petition Scheme was last amended in 2011 when there was a Government requirement that every local authority should have a scheme providing for electronic petitions.

3. The requirement for an electronic petitions scheme was subsequently revoked but the Council's Scheme nonetheless remained in place. Since that time, smartphones and tablets have become widely used, including for setting up and signing petitions. Awareness of petitions is often spread through social media.
4. Petitions have been submitted to the Council on a regular basis, both as paper-based and as e-petitions. It remains appropriate for a scheme to be in place to enable people who live, work or study in the area to bring matters of concern to the Council's attention.
5. This report enables the Committee to consider how petitions are currently used and whether the Petition Scheme should be updated.

What is the role of a petition?

6. Petitions are used by residents and organisations as a means of bringing issues to the attention of decision makers and demonstrating the strength of feeling a group may have. Some petitions may either challenge or support a general statement of principle, whilst others, and particularly those created about a local issue, may be more detailed and specific.
7. Petitions offer a means through which signatories can express a view, although levels of knowledge, understanding and commitment to the issue by signatories may vary. When considering a petition, decision-makers should always consider the facts on their own merits as well as acknowledging the scale of interest shown by petition-signatories.

CBC's Current Petition Scheme

8. The Council's Petition Scheme sets out certain requirements:
 - a. Petitions must contain a clear and concise statement covering the subject of the petition and the action the petitioner wishes the Council to take, and should relate to a function of the authority.
 - b. Paper-based petitions must be validly signed by a minimum of 10 persons – this requires a signature plus provision of the signatory's name, address and date of signature.
 - c. E-petitions must be validly signed by at least 100 persons – this requires assurance that the signatory lives, works or studies in the authority's area.
9. There are no age requirements in the Petitions Scheme for signing a petition.

10. An individual's email address provides the unique signature which they can use to sign a petition on the Council's website. Although some families share an email address the system will only accept the email address once.
11. To create or sign an e-petition on the Council's website, it is necessary to provide a person's name, postcode and valid email address. On submission of this information an email will automatically be sent to the email address to confirm that it is valid. On completion of this step, the signature will be added.

Concerns with the Council's Current Petition Scheme

12. The petition scheme has not previously been particularly easy to find on the Council's website. Steps have been taken to improve this, so that residents are not deterred from using the Council's petitions facility. These include:
 - a. replacing the previous title of the page "e-petitions" with the title "petitions". More people are likely to search for the term "petitions" rather than "e-petitions"
 - b. including the term "petitions" in the titles offered in the website search facility
 - c. setting out some clear guidance on the Petitions page of the website to assist people to set up or sign petitions. The guidance is set out so that people using smartphones or tablets can see all the content.
13. There is a requirement that petitioners should live, work or study in the area (Constitution Part A4 Annex 2 paragraph 1.2.3) for their signature to be valid. A postal address is required when submitting a petition enabling an electronic check that the lead-petitioner is a local resident or that the address from which they study or work is within the area.

Schemes used by other local authorities and organisations

14. The **UK Government and Parliament** enables British citizens and UK residents to create and sign petitions. The email address is sufficient to show residency. 5 signatures are required for a valid petition. Reasonable requirements are stated for petitions, for example it must be clear what the petition is asking for, the petition may not be about a purely personal issue, etc.
15. **Edinburgh City Council** enables petitions to be created by people aged at least 16 who live in Edinburgh or who own a business that is on the valuation roll. They are required to give their name, address and email address and also verify their age and if the petition is on behalf of of a business, whether their business is on the valuation roll. Edinburgh City Council has a scale for the valid number of signatures, as shown below:

Type of petitions	Number of required signatures
Submitted by an individual	200
Petition involves a local issue	50
Petition submitted by a community of interest eg a local pressure group, parents of children at a particular school etc	50
Submitted on behalf of a business	20 (local businesses on the Valuation Roll)

16. **Cambridgeshire County Council** uses the same committee management system to host petitions on its website as used by this Council. E-petitioners are required to provide their name, address, postcode and email address, as for this Council.
17. **Epping Forest District Council** also uses the same committee management system to host petitions on its website as Cambridgeshire County Council and this Council. All its features are similar, although in its guidance Epping Forest District Council states “We do not accept emailed petitions as email systems are not secure. You must use either our paper or our e-petitions system.”

Hosting of e-petitions by a commercial site

18. A number of public bodies provide opportunities to create and sign up to petitions on their website, such as local authorities and the Government. Additionally, there are commercial organisations which offer a platform for creating petitions.
19. A particular commercial site called Change.org has been used by petitioners on several occasions to create petitions which have been signed and on completion, have been submitted to this Council’s Monitoring Officer for acceptance as a valid petition. Concerns were initially felt that it was possible for the petition-creator to amend the wording at the top of the petition whilst it was live. On investigation, assurance has been given that any change to the wording is the subject of an email to all the previous signatories advising them of the change of wording and giving them the opportunity to withdraw their signature. However, it is not possible to verify whether signatories to such a hosted petition live, work or study in the Central Bedfordshire area and in view of this, a petition to Council about the closure of the railway bridge in Biggleswade was recently rejected and the lead petitioner made a statement instead.
20. Residents who turn to the use of commercial petition hosting sites without first investigating the opportunities for using a Council website-hosted petition might feel disappointed if their petition were rejected as invalid by the Monitoring Officer. They might hold the view that quantities of people supported their petition and the Council was overly bureaucratic in rejecting it.

21. Nonetheless, if the Committee continues to hold the view that there must be an assurance that e-petitions are submitted and signed only by people who live, work or study in the area, the only means of ensuring this at the moment is by using the Council's e-petitions facility through its website.

Taking forward the Council's Petitions Scheme

22. Consideration is invited on whether petitions hosted by sites which do not enable verification of the signatories' home, work or study address should continue to be ruled as invalid by the Monitoring Officer under the terms of the Council's Petitions Scheme.

Council Priorities

23. This report supports the Council's 5 Year Plan priority to be an efficient and responsive Council, through facilitating its engagement with people who want to submit or sign petitions about matters which are of concern to them.

Corporate Implications

Legal Implications

24. While it is appropriate to facilitate the submission of petitions it is important to be assured that signatures are valid and petitioners know what they signed up for. It is reasonable for the Council to expect some basic criteria to be met if the petitioners do not use the Council's portal. Provided that criteria is clear and reasonable, the provisions will be lawful.

Financial Implications

25. There are no financial implications.

Equalities Implications

26. Public Authorities must ensure that decisions are made in such a way which minimises unfairness, and without a disproportionately negative effect on people in respect of nine protected characteristics: age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, race, religion or belief, sex and sexual orientation.
27. It is important that Councillors are aware of this duty before they take a decision.
28. Enabling petitions to be submitted both as paper documents and electronically through the Council's website enables people from all

groups and backgrounds to petition the Council about matters which concern them.

Conclusion and next Steps

29. Unless the Committee seeks changes to the Petitions Scheme the Scheme will continue to be administered as currently. If the Committee wishes to see any changes it will be necessary to recommend them to a meeting of full Council, as this will involve changes to the Constitution.

Appendices

None

Background Papers

30. The following background papers, not previously available to the public, were taken into account and are available on the Council's website:

None

Central Bedfordshire Council

GENERAL PURPOSES COMMITTEE

17 December 2015

WORK PROGRAMME

Advising Officers:

Mel Peaston, Committee Services Manager
(mel.peaston@centralbedfordshire.gov.uk)

Leslie Manning, Committee Services Officer
(leslie.manning@centralbedfordshire.gov.uk)

Purpose of this report

The purpose of this report is to assist the General Purposes Committee in discharging its responsibilities by providing a proposed work programme for consideration.

RECOMMENDATION

That the Committee considers the proposed work programme attached at Appendix A.

Overview and Scrutiny Comments/Recommendations

1. This report is not scheduled to be considered by Overview and Scrutiny because the General Purposes Committee has full delegated powers to deal with all non-Executive functions which are not reserved to the full Council or are not otherwise delegated.

Background

2. To assist the General Purposes Committee a work programme is attached at Appendix A to this report. The work programme contains the known agenda items that the Committee will need to consider.
3. Additional items will be identified as the municipal year progresses. The work programme is therefore subject to change.

Council Priorities

4. The activities of the General Purposes Committee are crucial to the governance arrangements of the organisation.

Corporate Implications

Legal Implications

5. There are no legal implications.

Financial Implications

6. There are no financial implications.

Equalities Implications

7. There are no equalities implications.

Conclusion and next Steps

8. This report will assist the General Purposes Committee in discharging its responsibilities. Any amendments approved by the Committee will be incorporated in the work programme.

Appendices

Appendix A – General Purposes Committee Work Programme

Background Papers

None

Appendix A

General Purposes Committee Work Programme

2015/16 Municipal Year	
25 June 2015	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Role of the Independent Person etc (IA) • Constitution Update (MC/MP) • Market Rate Supplement Payments – Annual Update (CJ) • Local Government Pension Scheme Update (RG) • Work Programme (LM)
27 August 2015 CANCELLED	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Standards Complaints – Annual Report (MC) • Work Programme (LM)
5 November 2015 CANCELLED	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work Programme (LM)
17 December 2015	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pay Policy Statement 2016/17 (CJ) • Virtual Attendance at Meetings (JP) • Annual Report on Ethical Standards (QB) • Webcasting Review (KA) • Review of Petitions Scheme (MP) • Proposed Amendment to the Constitution – Officer Decision Making (QB) • Work Programme (LM)
24 March 2016	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Standards Matters – Six Month Update (QB) • Update on Amendments to the Constitution Carried out under the Monitoring Officer’s Delegated Powers (MP) • Proposed Amendment to the Constitution – Rights of Way • Work Programme (LM)

This page is intentionally left blank