

Governance, Risk and Best Value Committee

2.00pm, Monday, 19 October 2015

Committee report process

Item number	7.5
Report number	
Executive/routine	
Wards	All

Executive summary

The committee report process can often be complex involving officials and a range of internal and external partners. This long process is often a requirement due to the subject matter or the Council's statutory duties. However, efficiencies to this process have been explored and actions are set out in the report which explores long and short term improvements.

Links

Coalition pledges	
Council outcomes	CO25
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Committee report process

Recommendations

- 1.1 To note the efficiencies and more consistent committee report process established across the Council outlined in paragraphs 3.12 to 3.18 of the report.
- 1.2 To note that discussions would be taking place with the ICT service to explore new technology and how this could improve the committee report process on a long term basis.

Background

- 2.1 On 23 April 2015, the Governance, Risk and Best Value Committee requested a report on the committee reports process and whether there were any opportunities to accelerate the process.

Main report

- 3.1 The Council operates an executive committee model. This includes seven decision making executive committees, the Corporate Policy and Strategy Committee and a single scrutiny committee in Governance, Risk and Best Value Committee. Additionally, there are a number of committees dealing with applications on subjects such as planning and licensing and a selection of other committees such as appeal committees which occur when needed.
- 3.2 The Council's committees consider a significant number of reports meaning an efficient, effective and robust reporting process is essential to the decision making of the Council. A wide range of reports are produced that require considerable staff time to complete depending on the subject. The complexity of a report can also be determined by the level of engagement required with internal or external partners.
- 3.3 There is generally a common process in place for the approval of a committee report although there are differences for each service area depending on the complexity of the report. The report workflow process is set out in appendix 1.
- 3.4 Many reports are required to be considered by the Council's Leadership Group (CLG), chaired by the Chief Executive. This group considers all strategic reports prior to circulation to a committee's agenda planning meeting. This additional step provides essential corporate control and avoids silo working.

- 3.5 As is evident by the process highlighted in appendix 1 of this report, the journey a report takes before it is approved and submitted to committee can be long with the input of several officers. This process and the number of staff involved can seem unwieldy and inefficient but it is often essential to ensure the committee is provided with sufficient accurate information to make an informed decision and that the Council meets its statutory duties.
- 3.6 Audit Scotland in their follow up report on Scotland's Public Finances highlighted that all public bodies, including Councils, needed to improve the level and consistency of information provided for scrutiny and decision making. Examples included limited financial information, unclear actions, responsibilities and measurable outcomes and scrutiny taking place in private rather than in public.
- 3.7 The Council has attempted to address many of these concerns with an added focus and guidance on the financial implications section, the creation of a 'measures of success' section and a risk section, and guidance on report writing generally. The consequence has been more complex committee reports but it has also resulted in an improvement to the quality of reporting. Audit Scotland's Best Value (2) Audit Report 2014 stated that the Council had made good progress in developing its approach to scrutiny and risk management. The report highlighted that the Council needed to maintain this progress and ensure the improvements to governance, scrutiny and risk management was firmly in place across the Council.
- 3.8 Other areas of the report such as the 'sustainability impact' and the 'equalities impact' require the Council to consider its statutory duties and policy aims. For some reports this can be extremely time consuming, although it is an essential activity and results in a higher quality report.
- 3.9 How the Council engages with its partners has also changed over the years. This has been reflected in reports which now include a section on consultation and engagement. This also means an increase in the work necessary to report but a superior output in terms of service.
- 3.10 The report process in appendix 1 describes input from various internal services. This advice is often essential to ensuring a competent and high quality report but it can often lead to delays especially if consultation takes place at a late stage.
- 3.11 As outlined in the paragraphs above, writing a report is often complex, includes the involvement of numerous officials, engagement internally and externally and a thorough approval process. However, some avoidable delays do occur in the submission of reports. This can be down a variety of reasons such as poor knowledge of the report's purpose, problems with formatting, non-compliance with the report template or its mandatory sections and insufficient engagement with key internal and external partners. These delays are resolvable if processes and training are improved.

3.12 In addition to the complexity of reports there are a significant number of reports written. Between June 2014 and June 2015, 970 reports were considered by the Corporate Policy and Strategy Committee, the executive committees and the Governance, Risk and Best Value Committee. A breakdown of this by committee is outlined in the table below.

Committee	Number of Reports
Corporate Policy and Strategy	87
Communities and Neighbourhoods	32
Culture and Sport	38
Economy	75
Education, Children and Families	70
Finance and Resources	319
Health, Social Care and Housing	102
Transport and Environment	144
Governance, Risk and Best Value	103
Total	970

3.13 The number of reports can be compared to Glasgow City Council who in the same period considered 682 reports. Glasgow City Council have a cabinet and scrutiny model but Aberdeen and Dundee City Councils operate executive committee models and averaged between 500-650 reports in this time period. Aberdeen and Dundee City Councils have also recently looked to reduce their number of executive committees in an attempt to modernise and streamline their structures and decision making system. The City of Edinburgh Council's larger workload and committee structures, compared to these authorities, mean a considerable additional resource in terms of time spent by report authors.

Working Group

3.14 Following the request by the Governance, Risk and Best Value Committee for a report on the committee report process, a cross service area working group was established to examine the issues and explore immediate efficiencies and improvements. The group met a number of times, identified a number of reasons for delays and developed a series of low cost improvements.

3.15 It was noted that information could be shared more effectively across the services notably outstanding reports following committee decisions. Sharing the

information as early as possible enables increased monitoring of outstanding reports by service areas and cuts out unnecessary delays.

- 3.16 Feedback from the working group was that the mandatory sections of reports were sometimes incomplete when presented to a director for agreement. While not a common occurrence, delay at this stage can result in a report being withdrawn from a committee's agenda. Good practice in Services for Communities requires all report authors to complete a report checklist covering all areas of the report, the need to discuss with colleagues in other service areas and ensuring that statutory sections are not incomplete as well as signposting the author to the relevant area for advice. This report checklist was amended by the working group to enable it to be used across all service areas and rolled out across all report authors.
- 3.17 The working group examined duplication in the report process and explored whether this could be removed. It became clear that the report schedule used by all service areas to plan committee business is not fit for purpose and some service areas using an alternative document as well as the Council wide document. A single document was developed that can be used throughout the Council. This document will produce management information allowing each service area to track business and identify why and where delays were occurring.
- 3.18 An improved report template is currently in development. This aims to assist report authors avoid unnecessary formatting issues. Work has been undertaken to simplify the formatting of the template so authors have less manual work and removing unnecessary delays and duplication.
- 3.19 A link to the webcast has been added to committee action sheets. This helps report authors to identify all matters needing to be taken into consideration and avoid incomplete reports.
- 3.20 These improvements are all low cost and improve the report process incrementally, with often the time saved been at the crucial stages before publication. The consistent approach now taken across all directorates will also help the report process maintain its robustness through the transition to new service areas. Despite these improvements though the process remains resource heavy with little automation. Following the appointment of CGI as the Council's ICT provider further discussion will be undertaken with ICT Solutions to explore long term options for improving the technology supporting the report workflow and ascertain if there are any efficiencies and improvements to the process that could be built in.
- 3.21 Training of report authors also needs to be considered and work will be undertaken with the HR service to build on the report writing e-learning module. This will be pursued as the Council transitions to its new structure.

Measures of success

- 4.1 Improved reports submitted to committee within required timescales.

Financial impact

- 5.1 The costs of the officer working group were contained within the relevant service area budgets. Any costs of improved ICT have yet to be scoped.

Risk, policy, compliance and governance impact

- 6.1 The Council's decision making should be based on informative and thorough reporting that meets the Council's statutory duties whilst ensuring that the process is efficient and streamlined.

Equalities impact

- 7.1 There are no direct equalities impacts as a result of this report.

Sustainability impact

- 8.1 There is no direct sustainability impact as a result of this report.

Consultation and engagement

- 9.1 The officer working group involved directorate representatives from each service area to ensure that individual service needs were considered. Officers from across all service areas were involved in designing and producing the new documentation. The ICT service will also be worked with closely to explore long term solutions.

Background reading/external references

[Governance Risk and Best Value Committee 23 April 2015 Minute](#)

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Links

Coalition pledges

Council outcomes CO25 - The Council has efficient and effective services that deliver on objectives.

Single Outcome Agreement Appendices

Council and Committee Report Workflow

