



Tuesday 30 August 2016

Kingston-Upon Thames Visit – Re Factors considered in moving to a Committee System of Governance

Present: Councillor Kevin Davies (Leader – Kingston-Upon-Thames), Councillor Andrew Marchington, Councillor Cathy Scott, Councillor Fazila Fadia and Richard Farnhill

Summary of Key Issues Raised during Discussion

- Kingston-Upon-Thames had initially opted to adopt a Cabinet model of decision making in 2000
- The model had been in place for a period of 12 years but there was a growing feeling amongst backbench Councillors that they were not engaged and involved in decision making.
- To address this Kingston had initially moved to a hybrid system of Cabinet, which comprised of Cabinet and 4 Neighbourhood Committees. The Council subsequently, after a decision at Council, moved to a Committee system of decision making, with 4 Strategic Committees: People, Place, Treasury and Growth, along with the 4 Neighbourhood Committees.
- Kingston had a particular issue in terms of population growth, with a predicted 11% increase in population in the next 10 years, which had placed pressure on its housing/infrastructure/transport arrangements.
- Kingston anticipated that, by 2020 it would employ 250 people, in contrast to its current number of employees of 120.
- The large reduction in numbers was due to both a reduction in budgets- it was anticipated that there would be a 48% reduction in budget at Kingston- and a move to a commissioned approach to service provision, whereby arrangements would be put in place for external organisations to undertake work commissioned by the Council.
- Work was underway to adopt a more multi-agency partnership approach to service delivery within the Kingston, area across a number of agencies. A current example of this was the job centre moving into the Guild Hall (the Council's main office)
- There had been an increase in officer delegation at Kingston during the period of a Cabinet decision making model, which had led to less need for Councillor decision making, a factor which was impacting on decision making under the new Committee system.

- Another factor influencing the reduced volume of decisions taken by the Council was the transfer of operational issues to outside organisations via commissioning arrangements, whereby the Council was taking budget decisions to allocate money and day to day decision making on expenditure to the organisations undertaking the commissioned activity.
- The Council were looking at introducing a more participatory system of setting budgets under which the public were asked for their views on options for different models of service delivery.
- Under the new arrangements there was more opportunity at Council meetings for the questioning of Chairs of Committees on activity within their areas of responsibility.
- Chairs of Committees are required to write a report on the decision making at the Committees for which they are responsible, which is submitted to Council meetings and which provides an opportunity for discussion/questions/debate.
- The Council were looking at introducing a themed approach to meetings of Neighbourhoods Committees, whereby meetings would focus on a particular topic rather than having a traditional agenda of items for discussion. Quite often discussions under these arrangements were led directly by the Leader.
- The Council have introduced a 2 phased process for decision making on Planning Applications (in relation to major applications (large applications)) there are now 2 meetings, first is a pre-decision meeting at which both the applicant and objectors are allowed to put their views forward and on which the Committee could ask questions after which, a week later, a meeting of a Planning Committee takes place at which the decision on the application is taken. This is considered to be a better process in that it gives applicants the opportunity to listen to comments of the public and, in some instances, change proposals to accommodate local wishes.
- The Council has just restructured its communications team with a view to improving public engagement, with an increased emphasis on the use of social media/website access.
- The Council uses public meetings to discuss key issues and has trialled the use of street stalls and stands at community events to increase engagement.
- The Council has 48 Councillors and, due to population shifts and growth in the area, there is a large discrepancy between the size of Wards - some Wards having 12,000 electors and some having 3,500.