NORTH HERTFORDSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

**Overview and Scrutiny Committee
Task and Finish Group Report**

THE QUALITY OF COUNCIL REPORTS

March 2016

Cllr Sal Jarvis (Chair)
Cllr Steve Hemingway
Cllr Cathryn Henry
Cllr Ian Mantle
Cllr Gerald Morris

1. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

1.1   Reports should allow councils to make good decisions in an open and transparent way. How individual councils structure their reports to achieve this is a matter of individual choice. Some choose a shorter, more selective style of report, using fewer headings or putting what they believe is non-essential material into appendices and background material. These are easier to read, but may leave that council vulnerable to a challenge on the grounds that relevant information was not considered when a decision was taken.

1.2   This Council chooses to provide the decision maker with what it believes is all the relevant information needed in the main body of the report itself. Such reports are lengthier but the Council believes it protects the Council from challenges that material considerations have been omitted from the decision making process. There are some statutory requirements that the Council must be aware of in its decisions, but there is no prescribed way of demonstrating that consideration. It is doubtful that reports need lengthy passages of text to confirm that statutory considerations have been taken into account.

1.3   Protecting the Council's decisions against legal challenges is important but anxieties about legal challenges should not be the sole driver of the report's structure and content and detract from the other important aspects of reports like relevance, clarity and brevity. A check box approach, which also allows the author to elaborate where necessary, is both neater and sufficient.

1.4   Whether reports are short or long, there is good practice in other authorities which the Council should consider adopting. These include putting recommendations, summaries and other key messages in boxes, and tidier handling of supplementary and background material. The Task and Finish Group has produced an alternative template with some of these features which is attached at Annex 1.

Recommendation 1: The Council should review its report template and consider adopting the features of the alternative report template in Annex 1.

1.5   The Council's preference for longer reports can emphasise history and processes more than the outcome. It would be useful for members to understand more clearly what the purpose of the report is and for reports on certain subject - like projects - to include the original and latest budget and timetable.

Recommendation 2: Reports should clearly state their purpose.

Recommendation 3: Reports should include timelines showing financial and timetable changes for projects.

1.6   Some officers found the process of producing reports and taking them through the Committee process burdensome. In particular, some said too many reports were used for briefing purposes when this could be handled more informally and efficiently by other means. Only reports which require a decision should go to Committee, and the nature of that decision should be clearly stated at the outset. Having a clear reason for the report might help authors to decide whether the report is necessary.

Recommendation 4: The Council should be mindful of the burden of producing reports and consider doing so only when decisions are required. Reports should not be used to brief members unless there is a compelling reason for it.

1.7   Authors, contributors and proof readers need a more efficient way to manage the process of drafting, commenting on and editing reports. A proper document management system would provide many more benefits to the Council than having basic writeable folders on the G: Drive which some contributors have suggested.

Recommendation 5: The Council should introduce a document management system to enable proper tracking, management and storage of documents.

1.8   Many considered that reports were too long and had too much jargon. There were concerns too about the quality of financial, risk and other information in some reports. This was not due to the current template or the guidance notes. Training for authors would encourage plainer English and remind them of the purpose of reports.

Recommendation 6: There is a need for training to encourage both plainer English and for officers to better understand the purpose of reports.

1.9   There is widespread support for paperless reports. This could save the Council up to £52,000 in printing and postage costs, before any IT costs are considered. There will be environmental benefits too. The refurbishment of the district council offices will enable faster broadband and charging points in the council meeting rooms. Not every councillor will need a tablet as some will prefer to use their own equipment supported by Good Technology. It will be important though, that the Council irons out any IT problems before paperless reports are introduced.

Recommendation 7: The Council should trial the introduction of paperless reports with a view to introducing paperless reports for all 49 councillors.

1.10   A number of the Council's officers raised concerns about whether the Council's arrangements for taking decisions were fit for purpose. This is outside the scope of the review, but it is something that the Overview and Scrutiny Committee will consider in future.

2.   SUMMARY OF EVIDENCE

2.1   The aim of the review was to improve the quality of the Council's reports by making them shorter, clearer, jargon-free and more focussed on key areas whilst ensuring significant information is provided to allow decisions to be made. In keeping with the aim of producing shorter reports, this report summarises the evidence and places the original background material and revised scope on the Council's website.

2.2   The Origin, Purpose and Style of the Council's Reports

2.2.1   The purpose of the Council's reports is to ensure that the Council makes good decisions in an open and transparent way.

2.2.2   Timing of reports is usually determined by the need to make a decision or because something significant has happened which warrants an information report.

2.2.3   The Council provides a template for its officers to use, accompanied by guidance notes which explain what information is needed under each heading and which department should be consulted by the author before the report is finalised.

2.2.4   It is understood that NHDC's report format originated with the Strategic Director of Customer Services' (John Robinson's) previous authority. There was a major review of reports at the end of 2012 which was considered by SMT, PLB and Group Leaders which led to the current structure of reports coming into effect in early 2013. There are also ongoing reviews which adapt the report format as and when needed. The information note template was introduced from February 2015.

2.2.5   There is no legislative or other requirement for council reports to be in a particular format, or to address specific considerations. There is no right or wrong style of report: each council chooses its own style which reflects its wishes and concerns.

2.2.6   That said, councils do have certain obligations such as the need to consider the equalities impact of a proposed decision. By adding a section on equalities to its reports, NHDC believes it can demonstrate it has done so for the issue under consideration.

2.2.7   NHDC, like a number of other councils, chooses to provide the decision maker with all the relevant information they need in the main body of the report itself. The advantage of this is that the relevant information is presented to the decision maker which protects the Council from the charge that material considerations have been omitted from the decision making process. The disadvantage is that reports are lengthier which may be off-putting to readers.

2.2.8   Some councils have chosen a shorter, more selective style of report, using fewer headings or putting what they believe is non-essential material into appendices and background material. This produces shorter reports which can be easier and quicker to read, but may leave that council vulnerable to a challenge on the grounds that relevant information was not considered when a decision was taken.

2.2.9   Whatever style of reports councils use, the final product depends on the drafting ability of the author and the care which he or she takes over it. Circulation of draft reports to the Council's legal department and other consultees may allow

reports to be improved or polished to a degree before publication. There may also be a need for training for report writers.

2.3 Results of Councillors' Survey

2.3.1 A survey of councillors in NHDC received 11 responses. The results were mixed and suggestions for changes outnumbered those who were satisfied with the existing arrangements.

2.3.2 Some of the good points identified by some members were:
- Reports were thorough and comprehensive
- The standard structure helped accessibility;
- The report headings covering the necessary legal, financial and other requirements
- The background was useful
- They keep members informed.
- Some reports were well written and cover the required ground adequately.

2.3.3 Some issues identified were:
- Length - Some reports are too long, too wordy and clumsily drafted, with too much history.
- Style – a formulaic, box ticking approach and long pages of prose make it difficult to find the important information easily.
- Language – can be complicated, bureaucratic and legalistic in nature.
- Access – difficulty in, and lack of information about how to accessing background documents. Material should be available to members online, not just on the G drive. There can be difficulties with access via non-NHDC addresses.
- Changes – Sometimes made at meetings on the night, and tracked changes are not use consistently to aid understanding.
- Colour attachments not in colour.
- Supporting headings often have standard text providing little or no value.
- Alternative options section too often reveals that no real effort was put into considering alternatives.
- Thorough treatment of legal and statutory background but there is not always a statement of facts pertaining to North Herts eg how many premises in North Herts currently hold a gambling or alcohol licence?

2.3.4 Suggested changes were:
- shorter reports;
- better executive summaries to orient the reader before tackling the full report;
- no report if no decision is needed;
- tracked changes on revised policy documents;
- easier access to papers online;
- hypertext links to internet documents for complex and convoluted matters;
- less history and repetition on familiar topics e.g. Hitchin Town Hall;
- reports to be sent in advance of meetings so the proper discussion will take place;
- simpler clear English and less legalese;
- headings and bullets, no abbreviations (or explain them), use the active voice where possible, short sentences, cross-references and hyperlinks.
- less paper / paperless reports, more use of multimedia;
- tables of numbers should be provided as spreadsheets with visible formulae.

2.3.5   There were some specific comments on Planning Committee reports:
- They make good use of referrals to planning policies.
- Brief histories should be included.
- Reports should always include the postcode of the address in question.
- Maps are often of such large-scale it is hard to be sure whether a site fits in a town or village. Could a large and medium scale photocopied map be provided to councillors?

2.4   Feedback from the Council's Officers

2.4.1   Around 50 Council officers who draft or contribute to reports were asked to comment on a number of areas highlighted by the Scrutiny Officer. 12 individuals responded, and there was also a consolidated response from the Council's Planning Department.

2.4.2   The results were mixed, and suggestions for changes outnumbered those who were satisfied with the existing arrangements.

2.4.3   A number of issues emerged:
- Writing reports is very time consuming;
- A desire for a better signing off process and more use of shared drives;
- Many reports are unnecessary, particularly those used for briefing purposes;
- One decision may require two or more reports;
- There is inconsistency in the production of reports compared to the importance of decisions;
- More decisions should be taken by Executive Members and Officers;
- Concerns about the quality of financial and risk advice;
- Length, language and style of report;
- Better briefing of members;
- Training for more junior officers stepping up to management;
- Area Committees can commission reports from officers without first seeking advice on its necessity or the capacity of the author.

2.4.4   Some respondents took the opportunity to highlight issues which were outside the scope of the task and finish group namely:
- Policy and operation changes being slipped though in other documents;
- Unsuitability of the decision making process for faster moving environments
- Use of reports to avoid making decisions and taking responsibility for them;
- The process of bringing reports to Cabinet is very time consuming;
The Overview and Scrutiny Committee will consider these at a future date.

2.4.5   The Planning Department sent a consolidated return and had no comments on the format of the standard reports that are presented to Cabinet and committees. They said that putting the recommendations at the beginning following the summary was useful and focused the discussion and debate.

2.4.6   As for reports to the Planning Committee, they said that the format of planning reports was structured differently to other reports to allow officers to present the case to members drawing on planning considerations, and officers would not wish to amend the format.

2.4.7   The Group noted the suggestions for a facility to edit documents on a shared drive, but considered that a proper document management system would be more useful to the Council than just having writeable folders on the G: Drive. Such a system should support:

- check-in/check-out and locking, to coordinate the simultaneous editing of a document so one person's changes don't overwrite another's;
- version control, so tabs can be kept on how the current document came to be, and how it differs from the versions that came before;
- roll-back, to "activate" a prior version in case of an error or premature release;
- audit trail, to permit the reconstruction of who did what to a document during the course of its life in the system;
- annotation and stamps,
- workflow control, that is the automated movement of documents or items through a sequence of actions or tasks that are related to a business process, e.g. review and multi-level approvals.

2.5   The Community's Views

2.5.1   There had been very little community feedback.

2.5.2   Comments had been received from both Radwell Village Meeting and St Ippolyts Parish Council. Both supported the current approach to reports.

2.5.3   NHDC's Planning Department reported that they have a quarterly Customer Panel meeting where they discuss planning and other building control matters and the format of reports was not something that has been raised. Nor were they aware of any external views from members of the public or planning agents regarding the format of these reports.

2.5.4   There had been no comments received from the press.

2.6   The Legal Perspective

2.6.1   The Monitoring Officer, Anthony Roche explained that the functions of the Authority fell into two categories: Council functions and Executive functions.

2.6.2   **Council functions** were functions that could not be the responsibility of Cabinet for example adopting the annual budget. In other cases, the responsibility for undertaking the function could be delegated by Council to a committee or an officer. These were shown in the terms of reference of the relevant committee or the scheme of delegation to officers. There were also a number of "local choice functions" which Council can allocate to the Executive or retain for its own determination.

2.6.3   All other functions were **Executive functions**. Decisions about these functions could be taken by the Leader, the Cabinet, individual Cabinet members, Cabinet sub-Committees, Area Committees, by joint Executive arrangements with other authorities or by officers.

2.6.4   Anthony said that the Government was keen to promote transparency in the public sector and changing the existing decision making arrangements, as some had suggested, to allow officers to make more decisions was not necessarily consistent with that. He was content with the current report format from a decision making point

of view. There had never been a legal challenge against an NHDC decision which was a good indication that the present system was working well.

2.7   The Report Template

2.7.1   The Council's report template had 17 headings covering a variety of areas:

- Summary
- Recommendations
- Reasons For Recommendations
- Alternative Options Considered
- Consultation With Relevant Members And External Organisations
- Forward Plan
- Background
- Issues
- Legal Implications

- Financial Implications
- Risk Implications
- Equalities Implications
- Social Value Implications
- Human Resource Implications
- Appendices
- Contact Officers
- Background Papers

2.7.2   The Council had produced a guidance note to steer authors on what they needed to cover under each individual heading. Feedback on the guidance note from officers was mixed.

2.7.3   The group noted that there was no legislative or other requirement for any council's reports to be in a particular format, or to address specific considerations. NHDC preferred to provide a broader range of relevant information to the decision maker, taking the view that this protected the Council from legal challenges.

2.7.4   The Group was not convinced that the Council could rely on standard report headings and standard text to demonstrate that it had met its legal obligations. For example, the Council was obliged to consider the equalities impact of a proposed decision but simply putting a section on equalities in its reports, usually saying there were no equalities implications, did not mean that the required assessment had been carried out properly (or at all).

2.7.5   Some councils had chosen a shorter, more selective style of report, using fewer headings or putting what they believe is non-essential material into appendices and background material. The Group looked at the reports of a number of other Councils namely Colchester, Kent, East Herts, Westminster and Milton Keynes.

2.7.6   The Group considered that putting lots of (often standard) material in reports under headings like social value, equalities, HR etc could make the reports cluttered and harder to read, particularly if there was nothing substantial to say about them. The Group was impressed by the way Milton Keynes Council handled this material by putting it into a neat box and dispensing with lots of superfluous text.

2.7.7   They were impressed too by the use of boxes by several councils to highlight important text like recommendations so these stood out clearly from the rest of the text.

2.7.8   The Group considered that the purpose of reports was not always clear enough, and thought this could be remedied by have a statement of purpose at the beginning of the report.

2.7.9   Members noted that it was easy to lose sight of how long projects had taken and how much they had cost compared to their original timetable and costs. They suggested that reports on projects should include both the original start date of a project and its original budget as a yardstick to assess progress.

2.7.10 A revised report template drafted by the Group is attached at Annex 1. This is not meant to be definitive but to indicate the kind of changes the Council might consider making.

2.7.11 Whatever style of reports councils use, the final product depends on the drafting ability of the author. Given the variation in quality, the Group considered there was a need for training for report writers.

2.8   Going Paperless

<u>The Cost of Printing Reports</u>

2.8.1   The Task and Finish Group received a report from Committee Services which suggested it could be possible for the Council to save £52,000 in printing and postage costs by going paperless. Local budgets for printing of committee agendas and reports have ceased. Instead, printing costs were assigned to service areas via recharges from the print room. In 2014/15 approx. £46,000 was charged to the Committee Services budget for printing of reports. Some of these costs were fixed costs (like printing equipment) and not all of these savings might be realised. Furthermore, if paper reports were discontinued, the Council would need to ensure that as much of the £46,000 as possible was saved within the print room: otherwise the effect of ceasing printing would be a general increase in re-charges for everyone else.

2.8.2   Committee Services does control a local postage budget. Should printing cease the Council would save £6,000 a year by stopping the weekly hand delivery to all councillors.

<u>IT Support and Costs</u>

2.8.3   There would be an increase in IT support to councillors which would need to be taken into account. The Council uses Dell Venue 10 tablets which cost £300 each and had a life span of 3 years, thus costing the Council £100 a year. Some, perhaps many, members would wish to use their own equipment supported by Good Technology which would be cheaper for the Council. The cost of supplying tablets to 40 councillors would be an average of £4,000 a year.

2.8.4   There may be additional costs if the Council chooses to provide members with a data card for their tablet to enable full mobile working, although this is not strictly necessary for Council business. Members could use the free Wi-Fi in the Council Offices and their own Wi-Fi at home. If the Council did provide data cards, these cost £12.50 a month which is £150 a year per tablet. This would be £6,000 for 40 members, bumping the total cost of IT support to £10,000 a year overall.

2.8.5   The Group heard there would be environmental benefits too. It would also help with data protection issues, as many members still did not use a NHDC e mail address.

2.8.6   The IT Department supported the concept, but had no budget to implement it. The refurbishment of the district council offices will also see faster broadband and charging points in the council meeting rooms. Not every councillor will need a tablet as some will prefer to use their own equipment supported by Good technology. The Group considered It would be important that the Council irons out any IT problems before paperless reports are introduced. There could be other issues such as the practicality in off-site venues, member resistance, and who would help members with problems during meetings. It might be useful to carry out a pilot using the existing four members who had been supplied with the technology along with other members and officers.

3. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

3.1 The group would like to thank those who contributed to and attended the review:

Cllr Lynda Needham	Leader of the Council
Cllr Julian Cunningham	Executive member for Policy, Transport & Green Issues
Cllr Jane Gray	Executive Member for Leisure
Anthony Roche	Acting Corporate Legal Manager and Monitoring Officer, NHDC
James Ellis	Advisory and Litigation Lawyer
Brendan Sullivan	Scrutiny Officer, NHDC
Radwell Village Meeting	
St Ippolyts Parish Council	

REVISED TEMPLATE REPORT

PART 1 – PUBLIC DOCUMENT

ITEM **13**

COMMITTEE NAME

19 JANUARY 2016

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE WORK PROGRAMME

Executive Member: Not applicable – Council Function

Report Author: Brendan Sullivan, Scrutiny Officer 01462 474612,
brendan.sullivan@north-herts.gov.uk

PURPOSE OF REPORT
Information and discussion item

RECOMMENDATIONS
None

1. Summary

1.1   The Committee's work programme for 2015/16.

2. Detail

Task and Finish groups

2.1   The Task and Finish Group on the **Quality of Council Reports** met on 10 December and will meet again on 1 February. A report should be ready for the Committee's meeting in March.

2.2   The membership of the Task and Finish Group on the **Council's Approach to Managing Larger Projects** has been finalised. Its members are Cllrs Michael Weeks (Chairman), Judi Billing, Steve Jarvis, Paul Marment and Gerald Morris. It will begin in February or March. A report should be ready for the Committee's meeting in July or September.

2.3   The Task and Finish Group after this will look at **Recharges and Value for Money**.

2.4   In previous meetings, the Committee has also indicated that it may wish to look at the following topics as future task and finish groups:
   - a review of NHDC's Document Centre;
   - keeping North Herts tidy;

- balancing cost savings against possible environmental impacts;
- Section 106 Agreements.

Overview And Scrutiny Committee Meetings

2.5   The schedule for Executive Members to attend is:
- 22 March – Cllr Needham
- 14 June – Cllr Lovewell

2.6   The work programme for the Committee's meetings is attached at **Appendix A**. The Committee is invited to consider this in conjunction with the Forward Plan at **Appendix B**.

3. Other Considerations

Legal	N
Finance	N
Risk	N
HR	N
Equalities	N

Alternative Options	N
Consultation	N
Forward Plan	N
Social value	N
Background Papers	N

3.1   Timeline

Review	Meeting dates	OSC	Cabinet
Council Reports	Dec 15 - Feb16	22 March 16	14 June 16
Larger Projects	Apr – June 16	July/Sept 16	July/Sept 16
Recharges & VFM	To be confirmed		

3.1   Financial History and Progress (for Projects)

	Original Decision	Current Position	Slippage
Completion Date			
Capital Budget			
Revenue Budget			

4. Appendices (NB not included here)

4.1   Appendix A– Committee Work Programme
4.1   Appendix B – Forward Plan for 4 January 2016