

Committee Model Review Group

24 April 2025



Report of: Director – Legal and Democratic Services

Title: Public Forum - Update

Ward: All

Recommendations:

That the Committee Model Review Group considers the matters set out in this report.

The significant issues in the report are:

This report provides an update on Public Forum arrangements.



1. Summary

At its meeting on 27 March 2025, the Committee Model Review Group considered the arrangements for Public Forum. The Review Group identified a number of matters relating to Public Forum for further consideration. This report provides an update on specific matters relating to Public Forum.

2. Public Forum arrangements

The arrangements for Public Forum for public meetings of Full Council and Committees are set out in the rules of procedure in Part 4 of the Council's constitution. Part 4.1 includes the Public Forum arrangements for Full Council and Part 4.5 includes the Public Forum arrangements for committees.

The Council encourages members of the public to submit petitions, statements and questions to all of our public meetings. Bristol City Council is fortunate that it has high levels of public engagement at many of its public meetings. However, for some meetings, the volume of public forum is significant and can be challenging to administer, particularly in respect of answers to public forum questions. As part of providing clarity around the public forum arrangements, guidance will be prepared for Committee Chairs.

3. Matters raised at the Working Group on 27 March 2025

The following matters relating to Public Forum were raised at the Working Group on 27 March 2025 Council.

a. Grounds for ruling out statements and questions

It is recommended that the word frivolous should no longer be one of the grounds for ruling out public forum and the Full Council Procedure Rules and the Committee Procedure Rules in the Council's Constitution will be updated to reflect this.

For completeness, it is recommended that the grounds for ruling out public forum will be as follows:

- (i) in the case of Full Council, it is not about a matter for which the local authority has a responsibility or which affects the City; or, in the case of a committee, it is not about a matter which the committee has a responsibility;
- (ii) it is defamatory or offensive; or
- (iii) it requires the disclosure of confidential or exempt information.

An administrative record of when public forum is ruled out and the grounds for doing so will be kept by Democratic Services.

b. Number of questions and supplementary questions

The current approach to answering questions and supplementary questions does not maximise the number of people able to ask their questions. For example, could a written response be provided to up to 3 questions and then questions are asked on rotation to maximise public participation.

c. Chair's discretion to extend the time for public forum

The custom and practice for the Chair of a meeting to have the ability to extend the time for public forum should be set out in the Council's Constitution.

d. Managing the time allocation for public forum

The Chair of a meeting has the discretion to manage a meeting in a way that uses the time allocated for public forum in an equitable way to maximise public participation. This can include, for example, rotating the speakers, prioritising public participation from those members of the public who have public forum relating to items on the agenda for a meeting and asking members of the public to summarise their statements. However, this is not explicitly stated in the procedure rules and the Council's Constitution could be updated to reflect this.

e. Councillor petitions

It is recommended that the lower limit for a councillor to present a petition should be removed.

f. Publication of written responses for Public Forum

The written responses to Public Forum at Full Council meetings are currently provided up to 10 working days following the meeting. This could be amended to provide for the publication of written responses for Public Forum for Full Council in line with the publication requirements for other committees.

4. Summary of matters for consideration by the Committee Model Review Group

To summarise, the Committee Model Review Group could consider whether the arrangements for the following matters are effective and whether any changes are required:

- a. Removing the 'frivolous' ground for ruling out public forum.
- b. Answering public forum questions on rotation to maximise public participation.
- c. Updating the Council's Constitution to give the Chair of a meeting the discretion to extend the time for public forum.
- d. Updating the Council's Constitution to give the Chair the discretion to manage public forum equitably to maximise public participation.
- e. Removing the lower threshold for a councillor to submit a petition.
- f. Providing written replies to public forum questions in advance of a Full Council meeting, to align with the practice for committees.

5. Recommendation

That the Committee Model Review Group considers the matters set out in this report.

LOCAL GOVERNMENT (ACCESS TO INFORMATION) ACT 1985

Background Papers:

None

Appendices

None