



REPORT FOR DECISION

Item No:- FC23/063

Committee:-	Finance and Governance Committee
Date:-	24 th January 2024
Author:-	Martin Hammond, Clerk
Report Title:-	Review of Town Meetings
Wards Affected:-	All

1. Purpose of Report

To seek views on how Town Meetings might be improved

2. Recommendations

That members consider the options for changing the format, frequency and profile of Town Meetings.

3. Information

- 3.1. Members have asked for a review of the format and frequency of town meetings, The Council has four town meetings a year. This frequency was set in early 2022, when the number of full Council meetings was reduced from eleven to eight times a year. The Council has a statutory duty to hold at least one town meeting per year, before the end of May in each year.
- 3.2. The current format has evolved from that statutory meeting, which is primarily an opportunity for local people to set out how they want to see the town develop and what challenges needs to be addressed. The statutory meetings are therefore built on an invitation for local people (primarily local organisations) to address councillors. Attendance at these has varied between 17-25 people, plus between 12 and 18 members, with 8-13 presentations by local groups across the three years to date.
- 3.3. The other three meetings in the year (September, November and February) are themed, and relevant groups and agencies are contacted and invited to make presentations on their activities. The November meeting is largely an opportunity to consult on the Council's own plans for the coming year as part of its council tax consultation. The themed meetings in the last two years have been on

- The work of community groups (eg Lions, Rotary, W.I.s etc)
- Environmental concerns and opportunities
- Mental health support

3.4. Attendance has usually been fairly good at these themed meetings with between 5-7 presentations at each and 20-25 attendees, plus members. Member numbers have been between 9 and 14. The November meetings have been less well attended, with an average of 12 members, and 8 public attenders. (There was also a meeting in September 2021, before the current arrangements were in place, which attracted 17 presentations and about 30 public attenders).

4. Pros and Cons of the current arrangements

4.1. The current meetings seem to be well received by those attending. By their very nature, these are people engaged in the topic and willing to learn from others, and the feedback has been that the meetings have raised awareness amongst participants about what others are doing and how they could work more closely – bi-laterally or multi-laterally - amongst themselves. Members too have benefited from the insights that attenders have provided.

4.2. Some of the key themes which have arisen from the themed meetings (and the Council's response to them) have been:-

- The difficulty in attracting volunteers into local groups – this has influenced the Council's grants programmes in terms of looking for ways to support people attract volunteering – a grant to Citizens Advice as a consequence helped them attract and train over 20 new volunteer advisers and the Midsummer Market was another way to help the sector attract more volunteers
- The importance of small environmental projects to raise awareness of bio-diversity and how it can be supported – this has helped influence the Council's Love Wildlife grants programme and support other projects through the lottery.
- The mental health meeting in September 23 generated a workstream to bring together information about local MH services which is supporting the LAP in its endeavours to communicate and improves access to services on this subject.

4.3. The statutory meetings have also enabled local groups to elicit support from the Council for their objectives – sustainable travel options, a new swimming pool, the conversion of the former Gala bingo hall - being some obvious examples.

4.4. What the meetings do not achieve is a wider connection with the population of Kettering beyond the 50 or so individuals active in local groups who have given their time to engage with the Council. Nor do the meetings themselves generate a great

deal of debate or problem solving, although, as set out above, this does happen afterwards.

- 4.5. At the Town Meeting in November 23 those present were asked if they would support a change in format to the meetings in order to create more of a problem solving outcome. It was agreed that meetings should continue to be themed, but that their focus should be more on interactive problem resolution than simply relying on a series of presentations followed by networking. The size of attendance was likely to be crucial to their success, so there needed to be a limit on numbers coming. Alternative venues round the town were also proposed. The Mayor demonstrated a tool (Slido) which might help enable group discussion, and people present were shown how it could be used. The meeting also identified a wide range of themes for future meetings.
- 4.6. The difficulty in attracting a wider set of attendees is inherently one of relevance. For people to give up an evening for an uncertain outcome means that only committed and engaged individuals, with a (semi) professional or campaigning interest in a topic are likely to attend. Wider public involvement is invariably generated by a local crisis and often the solutions to those lie with statutory agencies more than the Town Council. The Town Council has some convening power to bring groups together and this has been effective in getting reasonable attendance at meetings. A more general (and widely advertised) meeting might raise expectations about what is possible.
- 4.7. Arrangements are in hand for the February meeting, with a theme of activities for young people.

5. Consultation and Engagement

- 5.1. The Town Meeting in November was asked for tis views on the format of town meetings.
- 5.2. The Town meetings themselves are a good way of engaging with a wider audience on local issues. The clerk is unaware of any other town or parish council which goes beyond the statutory minimum of holding one town meeting a year.

6. Finance, Legal and Resource Implications

- 6.1. The cost of town meetings is minimal. Advertising more widely would increase the costs. The total budget for consultation activities and facilities is £500. The cost of meeting venues has been met from the accommodation budget.
- 6.2. The 1972 Local Government Act requires a parish council to convene one such meeting a year.

7. Climate change implications

None particularly,
8. Policy Implications

The Council's policy is to seek to represent the interests of the Town and to engage with local people in doing so..

Background Papers

Minutes of Town meetings since May 2021

Council's grants policy and decisions

Citizens Advice project report on new volunteers.
