

Review of Executive Advisory Boards (EABs) – Councillor Questionnaire 2020
Summary of Responses

Although there were 19 separate responses to the Councillor Questionnaire, two of them expressed the views of more than one councillor and the responses are therefore representative of 21 councillors. A summary of the responses is set out below.

	Question	Responses
1.	<p><u>Effectiveness</u> - Do you feel that the EABs are currently operating effectively? If not, please give reasons and enter suggestions for improvement.</p>	<p>Two respondents expressed the view that the EABs were broadly operating effectively and allowing back benchers to be involved in the Council’s decision-making process. However, this was dependent on the EABs receiving topics in sufficient time to discuss and debate them effectively before they were submitted to the Executive for determination, on having a balanced workload and on the appropriate timing and amount of meetings. Careful planning with officers and discussing the Forward Plan were felt to be key to their success.</p> <p>Eight councillors felt that the EABs could operate more effectively whilst a further seven councillors thought EABs were not operating effectively. The reasons for lack of effectiveness included:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> (a) Cancellation of meetings, particularly the Community EAB, owing to a ‘lack of business’; (b) An imbalance in the level of business between the two Boards; (c) EABs were seen to lack authority; (d) As the EABs were only advisory they had limited weight to affect decision-making, and it often felt that the decision had been made before the matter was reported to the EAB; (e) The primary purpose of the EABs to provide an opportunity for lead members to take soundings from a broad spectrum of councillors before bringing policies forward had been forgotten; (f) There was little scope for immediacy; there was too much control and emphasis on the content of the EAB agendas based on the Forward Plan; (g) Difficulties were experienced owing to a lack of clear outcomes and clarity on how advice from EABs consisting of many varied comments was presented to, and received by, the Executive, and the role the minutes played in this. However, some steps had been taken in the latest Place-Making and Innovation EAB meeting to make clearer the specific views and advice of the

EAB. There was a lack of feedback from the Executive.

- (h) The concept behind the EABs was for them to consider subjects far in advance of their consideration by the Executive. The idea was for them to make a broad conceptual review of an item. However, gradually the time between EABs meeting and their thoughts going to the Executive shrank so that now they considered subjects at the last minute and in insufficient detail being seen as more of a tick box exercise than a proper board to inform decision-making.
- (i) The quality of chairing could often be poor and most of the time the EABs seemed to function in a retrospective scrutiny role rather than in a proactive advisory role. There also seemed to be poor understanding of the advisory role of the EABs amongst councillors.
- (j) Task groups called for in minutes of a meeting were not set up or operated as required, working with officers on SPDs was an example. An EAB considered SPDs as prepared documents already sent out for public consultation in disregard to EAB minutes and contrary to protocol 5. A recent issue showed that the wishes of the EAB (Placemaking) were disregarded and overruled by officers.

Areas for suggested improvement were:

- (1) Early consideration of items at a draft stage would enable EABs to be involved in shaping policy before a full report was drafted.
- (2) As agendas could be lengthy containing large documents and items at the end may get insufficient attention, the amount of business should be managed and extra meetings scheduled as appropriate.
- (3) The minutes should be sent to the chair and officers first, then the EAB members (via email) for approval and then to the Executive meeting.
- (4) The EABs could take on more in terms of working on specific projects.
- (5) In the case of planning documents, it would be beneficial for EABs to be briefed by the Local Plan Panel at an early stage of policy development.
- (6) 'Advisory' should be dropped from the Boards' titles and replaced by 'Consultative'.
- (7) EABs needed to be more proactive, working with the Executive to identify areas of policy where they could provide in-depth research to make sure that there was a strong evidence base for either new policies or expansion of existing policies.
- (8) When deciding views to go forward to the Executive, after a brief statement, the Chair should ask for a seconder then have a vote on whether the comment was valid or not. This vote should be recorded so the Executive knew how popular the comment was. If a councillor did not follow the above process, then what they said would not necessarily be minuted.

		<p>(9) The EABs would be effective when driven productively by the Chair. Chairmen should undertake training / refresh training on managing meetings in an orderly fashion and summarising at regular intervals.</p> <p>(10) Members need to understand the remit as well as the limitations of their brief and the chairs must support the members in keeping to this. If that happened then there would be Boards that could take some of the weight off of the Executive and contribute meaningfully to the activities of the Council.</p> <p>(11) All decisions made by EABs, shown through approved minutes, should be taken on board by officers and relayed to the Executive as advice to them from that EAB. Therefore time was needed for meetings to occur and minutes to be approved prior to advice being conveyed to the Executive. Draft minutes should not be used for this purpose and if more urgent advice was required, this must be made clear to EABs and arrangements made to send a key point summary to officers and the Executive prior to full minutes being ready.</p> <p>(12) In terms of EABs receiving feedback from the Executive in respect of the views they had put forward, this could be achieved by the presence of an Executive member at EAB meetings to explain the response to EAB advice when the minutes of the last meeting were signed off.</p> <p>(13) Officers and the Executive should give their reasons for agreeing or not agreeing advice from the EABs.</p>
2.	<p><u>Structure and Frequency</u> - Do you think that the current structure of the EABs (Community EAB, Place-making & Innovation EAB, typically meeting collectively as the Joint EAB on two occasions per annum to review budgetary matters) is the correct structure and frequency? (Timetable of meetings attached for ease of reference.) If not, please suggest alternatives.</p> <p>With this in mind, would a single EAB with a Council-wide remit and larger membership meeting</p>	<p><u>Structure</u></p> <p>(a) The majority of respondents supported the current structure of two separate EABs meeting collectively as the Joint EAB when necessary to discuss the budget and other significant or Council-wide topics.</p> <p>(b) It was broadly felt that a single EAB with a larger membership would be unwieldy with lengthy agendas whereas two EABs would enable members to develop expertise in a particular area of Council activity and to use that expertise in policy development.</p> <p>(c) There was some support for establishing EAB task groups when required to allow members to delve deeper into specific topics.</p> <p>(d) As an alternative to the existing EABs, two Council-wide EABs were proposed as they would ensure a regular equal workload covering all areas of Council activity. The possibility of interchangeable membership between such EABs would enable councillors to follow their interests and expertise.</p> <p><u>Frequency and timing of meetings</u></p>

	<p>on a more frequent basis (i.e. monthly) be a more effective approach?</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> (1) Several respondents indicated a wish for flexibility to meet demand, enable topics to be considered in a timely fashion and maintain a balanced workload. (2) It was felt that EAB meetings should be more closely linked to, and precede, the Executive's meetings to give an opportunity for the EABs to discuss Executive agenda items and for the Executive to receive the EABs' views. (3) In order to have early input into policy and act as sounding boards, the EABs would need to consider Executive items several months in advance of determination. (4) As the two Joint EAB meetings created a gap between regular EAB meetings, it was suggested that the Joint EAB should meet in addition to the other EABs. <p><u>Membership</u></p> <p>The number of EAB members was considered to be appropriate. Two respondents felt that there were too many substitutes and that one substitute per EAB member was adequate.</p>
3.	<p><u>Remit</u> – notwithstanding the above, should the remit of EABs continue to align with the fundamental themes within the Corporate Plan (currently awaiting review), or with the directorates of the Council, or with other community / service themes (if the latter, please give examples)?</p>	<p>The views expressed by respondents in respect of the remit of EABs were varied.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> (a) Five respondents favoured alignment with the Corporate Plan themes, one of whom stated that this should be a focus but not to the exclusion of other topics, at least for the interim period whilst the Council's new administration became established and the authority responded to the impact of the Coronavirus threat. (b) A remit aligned purely to the Council's new Directorates was sought by four respondents as it was felt that the Directorates were less likely to change than the Corporate Plan, which was frequently reviewed, and because this would give a greater opportunity for EABs to act in an advisory role to the relevant Executive portfolios. (c) Two respondents felt that the remit should jointly reflect the Corporate Plan themes and the Directorates of the Council. (d) A further two respondents favoured remit alignment with the Council's service delivery areas. (e) Two more respondents felt that the EABs' remit should mirror the Executive portfolios. (f) The EABs having a free hand in setting their agendas was welcomed by two respondents.

		<p>(g) A focus on the Forward Plan, on the Corporate Plan and the Forward Plan, and on a Council-wide basis, were each favoured by one respondent.</p> <p>(h) One further respondent felt that alignment with the Corporate Plan could lead to a workload imbalance affecting the efficiency of the EABs and suggested that the number of meetings and workload be divided equally between two Boards with interchangeable Council-wide remits enabling them collectively to meet as frequently as the Executive.</p> <p>(i) Related comments were that the Place-Making and Innovation EAB should focus on the planning and climate change agenda and that it was likely that the Corporate Plan would be reviewed again following the implementation of the next phase of the Future Guildford programme, the reorganisation of the Executive and post-COVID 19 outcomes leading to a further review of the remit of the EABs.</p>
4.	<p><u>Interface with Overview and Scrutiny</u> – Parallels between the role and function of O&S and EABs have been drawn – do you feel that the current balance is correct or should there be a greater emphasis on either one, or both?</p>	<p>(a) The responses to this question indicated that the differing roles and functions of O&S and EABs were largely appreciated by respondents who were generally of the view that EABs were intended to be the vehicle for influencing and shaping decisions before they were made, and possibly reviewing policy as it developed where appropriate, whilst the main purpose of O&S was to undertake post-decision overview and scrutiny in order to hold the Executive to account. However, some councillors felt that more emphasis should be placed on clearer demarcation between the roles of O&S and the EABs as there sometimes appeared to be some misunderstanding by members of the roles and powers of the O&S Committee and EABs.</p> <p>(b) Whilst some respondents felt that the roles of both O&S and EABs were very important and there was no reason to place greater emphasis on one or the other, another stated that O&S was a more effective body and should remain a priority. However, it was thought that attaching greater weight to EABs and clarifying their role may raise their profile and increase members' confidence that EABs' recommendations to the Executive were given appropriate attention and priority.</p> <p>(c) As EABs were felt to be under-utilised at times by comparison to O&S, it was suggested that their roles, apart from the scrutiny aspect, could be linked to increase capacity and coverage. As the Chairmen and Vice-Chairmen of the O&S Committee and EABs met to discuss their work programmes, it was felt that the work balance could be adjusted as required. However,</p>

		<p>one respondent thought that, at present, the balance was weighted too much towards scrutiny and insufficiently towards offering advice to the Executive, with the latter being the main role of the EABs. Another view was that if EABs were more consultative in nature, they would have a better interface with O&S than at present. A further view was that both EABs and O&S could only operate successfully if councillors committed to making them work through means including examination of robust evidence in an effort to increase the Council's effectiveness without seeking political gain.</p> <p>(d) Suggestions for improving the EAB process were the Executive anticipating the need for, and inviting, advice from EABs at the agenda setting stage. It was felt that the early provision of complex and lengthy information in advance of EAB meetings would facilitate consideration of issues and formulation of advice.</p>
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