

County Council

11 December 2024

Questions and Responses

Question from Mr M Clarke

Meetings of the Durham County Council Cabinet sees the leader and cabinet portfolio holders rise within a structured agenda and read out pre-prepared statements. This has been standard practise for many years, not limited to the current administration and, just to reassure members this is not politically motivated, was certainly the method used by Labour when I sat on the council between 2017 and 2021.

The meetings currently mimic a read-through of a TV script and, whilst appreciating the need for preparation and that officers will almost always prepare a worded statement in advance, the meetings are over-staged.

All councillors should be concerned with connecting the public to politics. Cabinet meetings give important information but they are not meetings, they are read-throughs. Currently, everyone's time could be saved by simply collating the responses in a scripted format and publishing them on the councils website.

Can the cabinet meeting format be reviewed with consideration given on how a better balance can be struck so the meetings at least appear more organic and natural?

If any changes are implemented, I hope full council can agree to retain any improvements beyond the current council term.

Response from Cllr Amanda Hoggood, Leader of the Council

I would like to thank Mr Clarke for his question.

Cabinet meetings operate in accordance with the Executive Procedure Rules as set out in the Council's Constitution and the format has remained unchanged for many years.

Given the proximity to the elections in May 2025, the Director of Legal and Democratic Services will review the format of Cabinet meetings with whoever is elected Leader of the Council at the annual meeting of Council on 21 May 2025 and a report will be presented to the first meeting of the Constitution Working Group in the new municipal year.

Question from Professor M Tallerman

Since the Council last considered the issue of fluoridation, there have been three developments. A US Federal Court ruled that water fluoridation poses an unreasonable risk to the IQ of children, and the US National Toxicology Program found a large body of evidence to support this. In the UK, the Cochrane Report found that any reduction in tooth decay in fluoridated areas was so tiny – or possibly non-existent – that the continuation of fluoridation programs is of questionable clinical or public health value.

In light of these new findings, will Council reconsider its support for fluoridation, return the matter to the Scrutiny Committee and the Health and Wellbeing Board for debate, and allow representations to these committees from all viewpoints, including opponents of fluoridation?

Response from Cllr C Hood, Cabinet Portfolio Holder for Adults, Wellbeing and Health.

Thank you Professor Tallerman for your question.

The Department for Health and Social Care (DHSC) consultation on the community water fluoridation expansion in the north east of England has been considered by the appropriate committees of the Council; the Health and Wellbeing Board and both the Children and Young People and Adults and Health Overview and Scrutiny Committees. We received several representations which were considered, and responses were provided.

The responses of both these committees to the consultation were submitted to the DHSC. The consultation closed on 31st July 2024.

Existing fluoridation schemes in the United Kingdom are the responsibility of the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care who is required by legislation to monitor the effects of water fluoridation schemes on health, and to produce reports at no greater than 4-yearly intervals.

County Durham has an oral health promotion strategy which includes a range of interventions to improve oral health and reduce dental decay, including fluoridation and supervised toothbrushing schemes. An update on this strategy, including any new evidence, will be provided to the Adults Health and Wellbeing Overview and Scrutiny Committee in January 2025.

This will also include an update on the outcome of the DHSC consultation on the expansion of community water fluoridation in the north east if available. Members of the public will be able to attend the Scrutiny Committee in the usual way.