

I'd first of all like to say thank you for allowing me to be here today to make this statement, and to Patrick particularly who told me about the process of engaging with the cabinet in this way and who encouraged me to come along and to speak on this.

I've been delighted to see the council promoting the webcasts of these Cabinet meetings online, via their website and on twitter, and clearly trying to reach out to people so that meetings are opened up to the residents of Bath and North East Somerset to whom the council and its cabinet are accountable.

The effort to move the meeting around to different locations within the area is also an admirable one, given the necessity of giving local people the opportunity to engage in democracy and challenge the decisions made by the council's supreme decision making body.

However, I think there is more that could, and should, be done to improve accessibility at these Cabinet meetings, not least to enable the participation of people and perspectives that seem currently underrepresented within the cabinet, as well as amongst our elected councillors, of whom 70% are male.

In an age of supposed equal(ish) opportunity, it is both disappointing and, frankly, not acceptable that steps are being taken which make it LESS easy for women to participate with cabinet activity rather than the other way round. While I understand entirely the rationale behind the earlier time of , and sympathise with the cabinet members themselves who often find the meetings lasting well into the evenings with no-one turning up, it seems that an undeniably problematic idea given the disproportionate number of women who, at this time, are more likely than their male counterparts to be engaged in school-run related childcare. In terms of engagement from the younger generations who are also woefully underrepresented at meetings, the 4pm start time is an immediate barrier considering the fact that anyone wishing to attend, like myself, is required to take holiday leave in order to be present.

I would suggest that measures which could counterbalance this shift in start time might include giving people the opportunity to make 'general' statements and questions like this one later in the meeting as well (or instead of) at the start, so that those who are trying to juggle a working life and/or a family can still have their voice heard and directly engage if arriving later.

It seems vital, too, that publicity for these meetings is extended beyond just the reach of the council's website (the footfall on which I'd be interested to hear, particularly in terms of the breakdown of demographics) which, in itself, is difficult to navigate. Actively inviting relevant groups/representatives/individuals to attend seems a potential avenue into improving the transparency of cabinet activity, as would basic creative promotion using more social media platforms which are less likely to put people off learning about the democratic process.

I am in sympathy with much of what I've been told about how many are actually 'interested' enough to come along, but I can't help but feel that there is more to it than that, and that that reasoning is a convenient justification for not making an attempt to improve accessibility, regardless of if what truth there might be to it. Speaking only for myself, as one individual, I am interested. Despite being young, despite being female, despite not wanting to spend my whole night trying to make sense of discussions that may well go over my head, I'm interested. At least in as far as I want to see how this decision making body is operating, how we can hold them to account if we feel the need to, and how residents of B&NES can have their voice heard by those with the power to enact change.

As far as the cabinet's remit on the website suggests, their primary legal duty to consider when making decisions, is 'Equalities', which comes first in a list that includes 'crime and disorder', 'human rights' and 'public health'. No matter how practical a decision the rescheduling of these meetings might have been, I struggle to see how the consideration of equal access has been adequately factored in, and I would like to see it done soon.