

Taking scrutiny forward

Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee – 23 January 2019

At the last meeting of the committee on November 2018, a report was presented on the outcome of the scrutiny workshops. A meeting of lead members was subsequently been held to consider the themes emerging from the workshops and to identify next steps. The key points were:

Scrutiny culture

- a) 'Parity of esteem' between executive and scrutiny members. The executive should be open to scrutiny, recognising that this relies upon effective working relationships and trust on both sides.
- b) Scrutiny committees should be non-political and constructively challenge the 'issues' rather than be seen as a mechanism for scoring political points.
- c) Scrutiny should set its own agenda and not be influenced by the executive.
- d) Members have a personal responsibility to ensure that they are adequately prepared for meetings. Where necessary, this includes undertaking background research.
- e) Ask probing questions and do not abandon issues in the face of vague answers. Ask follow-up questions seeking more information, including timelines.
- f) Wider awareness of national issues. For example, considering the Local Government Ombudsman national report on complaints to identify emerging concerns.

Scrutiny structure and working practices

- a) Appoint scrutiny committee vice-chairs from opposition groups, recognising that the chairs are likely to be drawn from the majority group. This is already the case for some scrutiny committees.
- b) Member development – Scrutiny to take ownership of the programme through a Member Development Group.

- c) Effective work programming is integral to ensuring that scrutiny is effective. A good work programme is more likely to result in effective and timely work that affects local people and adds value. The list of forthcoming executive decisions, formerly the 'cabinet forward plan' is a key source of information for scrutiny members. Use resources wisely and recognise that it is not possible to scrutinise everything. Each committee should follow a consistent approach to work planning with the involvement of lead members.
- d) The quality of officer reports needs to be improved by ensuring that they are written in Plain English and follow a standard format including an executive summary.
- e) The practice of submitting reports for noting should be avoided. Scrutiny should not become a 'talking shop' with no tangible outcomes. There is an important role for the chair, vice-chair and support officer in ensuring that there is an outcome for each item.
- f) Recognise the role of the Statutory Scrutiny Officer in promoting the scrutiny function and acting as a source of independent advice to non-executive members. Steps are being taken to document the role including the relationship with the Corporate Management Team and Statutory Officers.
- g) The committee structure needs to be adjusted to make the workload manageable.

Questions

- 1) How should scrutiny engage with the public? What is the best mechanism to do this - public question time, holding meetings outside Shire Hall, webcasting meetings, petitions, social media?
- 2) What is the right level of officer support for scrutiny committees?
- 3) How can scrutiny agendas, including work planning, be managed better – more focused with a maximum of three items at each meeting?
- 4) How should performance and financial information be reported? Could this involve a wider role for the Audit and Governance Committee?
- 5) How should member development be taken forward? Would it be helpful to hold a workshop to explore this in more detail?
- 6) Should the appointment of scrutiny vice-chairs from opposition groups be formalised in the constitution?

- 7) What changes are needed to the current scrutiny committee structure to facilitate a new approach? How can the breadth of Health and Care Scrutiny and Environment and Communities Scrutiny be managed effectively? How should Vision 2050 including the Council's Strategy be scrutinised?

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Current committee structure below:

Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee

Health and Care (with district representation)

Children's

Environment and Communities

Economic Growth (with district representation)

Audit and Governance