

**MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY
COORDINATING GROUP HELD ON 19 JULY 2006**

Present:

Members of the Group:

Councillors: David Booth
Ken Browne (Chair appointed at this meeting)
Alan Cockburn
Richard Grant
Mick Jones
Frank McCarney
Jerry Roodhouse
Bob Stevens

Officers: Jim Graham, Chief Executive
David Carter, Strategic Director of Performance and
Development
Victoria Cook, Assistant to the Labour Group
Louise Denton, Assistant to the Liberal Democrat Group
Nicole North, Assistant to the Conservative Group
Jane Pollard, Overview and Scrutiny Manager
Janet Purcell, Member Services Manager

1. Appointment of Chair

Councillor Jerry Roodhouse proposed that Councillor Ken Browne be appointed Chair. There were no other nominations.

Resolved

That Councillor Ken Browne be appointed Chair of the Co-Ordinating Group.

2. General

(1) Apologies for absence

Councillor Richard Chattaway.

(2) Members' Disclosures of Personal and Prejudicial Interests

None.

(3) Minutes of the meeting held on 3 May 2006

The minutes of the meeting held on 3 May 2006 were agreed as a correct record.

3. Review of Overview and Scrutiny

Jane Pollard presented the findings from her review of overview and scrutiny, as shown on the enclosed copy of overheads. The views from Members are summarised in the first three overheads and are based on the return of questionnaires from 36 Members. Jane outlined some examples from authorities identified by the Centre for Public Scrutiny as having effective approach to (see overheads) but emphasised that there is no one 'ideal model' for how scrutiny should be done.

The review had also shown that many authorities were looking at their scrutiny arrangements in the light of developing their Local Area Agreements. Some authorities had realigned their scrutiny committees to reflect their LAA and their Council's corporate plan (e.g. Doncaster MBC) whilst others were looking at the creation of joint committees with partners. Shropshire had identified 27 natural communities – each having an annual public meeting at which to identify issues of concern to the area. Pre-meetings, led by the local member, were held with interested parties. The outcome of the discussion could result in a topic being identified for scrutiny, possibly by the establishment of a panel involving the local borough council. Jane stressed that her review had revealed that there was growing recognition of the need to build relationships with those outside of the local authority in order to do effective scrutiny.

The following points were raised by members during the discussion of the findings:

Information Gathering

- It is helpful to talk to those 'on the ground' – including staff and users involved in a service.
- Hold meetings outside of Shire Hall where appropriate and speak to users on their home ground.
- Members need to have the 'core' monitoring/performance information in their work programme.
- There could be recognised points throughout the corporate calendar when it is appropriate to challenge certain aspects – e.g. for portfolio holders to be demonstrating progress through performance reporting.
- Need to ensure information is independent (e.g. use external sources such as Warwick University).

Approach to investigations

- We should take advantage of opportunities for partnership working e.g. economic development issues needs input of partners in industry.
- We need to make sure we have capacity to see investigations through and to deliver changes where they are found to be needed.
- We should prioritise the areas we wish to investigate and ensure investigations add value to services services.
- Some 'back office' issues need to be investigated in-house rather than try to engage the public who will not be interested.
- The style of scrutiny should be selected according to the issue. Various approaches are possible e.g. a sub-group, individual member, select committee. A toolkit should be used to select the most appropriate approach.
- Consultation documents could be considered by scrutiny but there is a need to be selective as there are so many.
- Performance monitoring is a job of Cabinet, and Overview and Scrutiny should ensure it is done.

Structure

- Current structure of overview and scrutiny committees should remain at present.
- Structure does need to be simple and understandable.
- Should consider whether or not to incorporate the LAAs into existing structure.

Branding of Scrutiny

- Outcomes of scrutiny should be clearly branded and made easily accessible as public documents (rather than just in committee papers on the website).

Support for scrutiny

- More work is needed to support members on training and practising skills required for undertaking scrutiny.

Jim Graham made the following observations:

- Performance management was getting better in Warwickshire but was not moving quickly enough. Scrutiny had a role to play as internal regulator.
- Is it important to engage with the public – as some members did with the group of young people who shared their experiences of being in care, at the Council day event.
- There is a need to raise public awareness and profile of the County Council.
- We will have powers to scrutinise other bodies and members will be taking the lead in local foras so there is a growing need to look outside of the authority and work in partnerships.
- The focus for overview and scrutiny should be on practise and outcomes rather than structure.
- To be a strong organisation both Cabinet and overview and scrutiny need to be effective.
- There may be some areas of pre-decision work that could have an O&S input.
- Scrutineers have a role in ensuring performance targets are rigorous enough.

The Group discussed how the corporate business plan, LAAs and members objectives for improving services linked together. The Group

was assured that the policy and performance framework was being revised to ensure objectives are set by members.

Members considered a series of questions. The questions and summary of responses are given below:

Questions

1. *How can we deliver effective scrutiny in a politically balanced Council environment?*

Effective working relies on building relationships. Effective scrutiny is still possible in a politically balanced council but there is ultimately a need to build consensus.

2. *How should we ensure that overview and scrutiny adds value and makes a positive difference to the delivery of public services?*
 - The outcome of reviews should be publicised – and suitably badged. A communication strategy is needed. Information on the website needs to be easily reached through effective search engine.
 - Greater emphasis should be put on ensuring the public's views are known. The six citizens panels could be used for this (plus consultation with districts and boroughs on common issues). Area Committees can also be used to obtain the views of the public.
 - Press monitoring should be used more effectively – e.g. Leamington parade improvements scheme led to media coverage but the concerns of public were not properly explored to assess degree of concern.
3. *Should each Overview and Scrutiny body be allowed to develop its own work programme or should there be a core work programme based on the Council's priorities?*
 - There should be a balance of both – a core programme but with committees developing own work programmes.
4. *What should be the key characteristics of the relationship between Cabinet and Overview and Scrutiny bodies in any new arrangements?*
 - There needs to be trust – ultimate aim being to ensure good services.

- When policy panels are established, membership should include appropriate O&S representation.
 - Some policy development is not party political – e.g. speed limit policy, whilst others are political issues which should be developed by the administration.
5. *Should we use scrutiny as a vehicle to hold each part of the organisation to account in an equitable fashion or should we deploy and focus our scrutiny resources and activities on those areas where we need to do better?*
- Focus should be on both.
 - It may be helpful, in terms of member development and to have input of fresh ideas, to rotate members amongst O&S every few years.
6. *How can we influence officers and others to view scrutiny as a critical friend?*
- There needs to be joint working between members and officers with focus on improvement.
 - Back-benchers need to be and feel empowered
 - Policy panels are useful in involving members.
7. *What skills do members need to display/develop to be seen as critical friends?*
- Tact; diplomacy, humour.
8. *What changes do we need to make to enable scrutiny to have effective oversight of partnerships, the LAA and public services generally?*
- Look at re-alignment with LAA blocks.
 - Consider a greater sharing of power with partners and of relinquishing of Council control in some cases.
9. *What would be the best way of enhancing the overview and scrutiny function at local area or neighbourhood level?*
- Engage with districts at their area committees
 - Look at engagement on more local area – e.g. Warwick

10. *Do we want to develop joint scrutiny arrangements with other bodies and if so in what circumstances?*

- This should be on an ad hoc basis –depending on the subject matter

11. *What should be the role of elected members in terms of engaging the community to facilitate the identification of community issues/concerns?*

- Identifying concerns is the role of the elected member
- Information that is around about community concerns needs to be used more effectively (possibly using a database)

4 Date of Next Meeting

The Group noted that the next meeting would be a seminar and would be held on Wednesday 13 September (with buffet lunch). The next meeting of the Group was agreed for 11.00 a.m. on Thursday 21 September.

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Chair