

SCRUTINY COMMISSION – 22ND JUNE 2005

REPORT OF THE CHIEF EXECUTIVE

IMPROVING SCRUTINY PRACTICE

Purpose

1. The purpose of this report is to advise the Commission of the discussions at the Scrutiny Reference Group and with Chairmen of Scrutiny Committees and subsequent developments.

Meeting of the Scrutiny Reference Group

2. At its meeting on 1st June, the Scrutiny Reference Group considered a briefing paper from the Chief Executive concerning the operation of the Scrutiny process and how it might be improved. A copy of the briefing note is attached at Appendix 1. The key points emerging from the discussions were as follows:-

Role and approach of Scrutiny

- Need to identify issues of specific interest/concern to the public where scrutiny can add value and make a difference
- Need to ensure that all members of scrutiny are interested and fully engaged
- All scrutiny recommendations should be supported by well-argued reasons

Scrutiny of Plans

- Need to be selective about scrutinising and commenting on plans
- Chairmen and Spokesmen should meet regularly between Scrutiny Committee meetings to consider work programmes and how best to comment or whether to comment on plans
- Need to be aware of on-going or planned officer reviews of service delivery
- Paper to be produced on plans in the Policy Framework and which Scrutiny Committees are responsible for commenting on them

Review Panels

- Review Panels are seen as a productive way forward for scrutiny
- Need to be focused and time-limited

- Membership of panels needs to be considered carefully – it was felt that this need not reflect membership of the appointing scrutiny committee
- Need to consider more carefully the use to be made of external expertise/experience, including the views of stakeholders and expert witnesses and practice in other (eg Beacon) local authorities
- Individual scrutiny members need to take responsibility for familiarising themselves with key issues as part of the work of five-member panels (rather than relying solely upon officer advice)
- Could be a case for allowing individual members to undertake some research, as agreed by the relevant scrutiny committee and subject to reporting to the Scrutiny Reference Group

Review Panel Topics (Scrutiny Commission)

- Community Safety
- Access to and provision of services in rural areas

Scrutiny Committees

- Aim to meet no more than quarterly, unless workload requires otherwise
- Chairmen and Spokesmen of Scrutiny Committees should meet with the appropriate Chief Officer(s) to develop proposals for further consideration before the first meeting of their scrutiny committee
- Consider inviting Cabinet Lead Member(s) to submit quarterly position statements

Training for Members

- Members would benefit from training on scrutiny skills and techniques – plans were already being made to do this
- It was noted that a series of briefings on the key issues would be held to which all County Councillors would be invited. For convenience, these would be held on the same day as the relevant Scrutiny Committee
- Further briefings looking to the challenges which the Authority will be facing over a longer time period should be considered

Meeting between the Scrutiny Reference Group and Chairmen of Scrutiny Committees

3. On 3rd June the Scrutiny Reference Group met with the Chairmen elect for each of the Scrutiny Committees. At that meeting the outcome of the discussion at the Scrutiny Reference Group was circulated. There was agreement at that meeting to adopt the approach agreed at the Reference Group. Such an approach would result in fewer formal Committee meetings and would enable members to pursue issues through five member panels. Chairmen and Spokesmen would be expected to play a more proactive role in terms of regular meetings to keep abreast of developments in their service area and to plan the

scrutiny work programme so that scrutiny is focussing less on plans and more on issues of specific interest/concern to the public where scrutiny can add value and make a difference which will also be of interest to all members.

Subsequent Developments

4. Following these meetings the Chairman of the Commission met with the Leader to discuss various issues including the proposed approach to be adopted by scrutiny. As a result it has been agreed that:-
 - a) there could be a relaxation in the practice of having politically balanced review panels on the condition that each party would have at least one representative;
 - b) the current arrangements for nominating Chairmen could also be relaxed and that it would be a matter for each Committee to decide on who could chair the Panel;
 - c) Cabinet Lead Members will attend Scrutiny Committee meetings in accordance with current arrangements and also, if invited, could attend briefing sessions involving the Chairman, Spokesmen and the relevant Chief Officers;
 - d) these arrangements should be kept under review.

Recommendations

5. The Commission is asked to note the proposals now outlined to seek to improve the scrutiny process.

Background Papers

6. Attached report of the Chief Executive

Notes of the following meetings:-

- Scrutiny Reference Group – 1st June 2005
- Scrutiny Reference Group and Chairmen elect of Scrutiny Committees.

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