

## **SCRUTINY COMMISSION – 7 JANUARY 2004**

### **REPORT OF THE CHIEF EXECUTIVE**

#### **DISTRICT AUDIT STUDY OF THE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY FUNCTION IN LEICESTERSHIRE – ACTION PLAN**

##### **Purpose**

1. The purpose of this report is to set out a draft Action Plan (attached as Appendix A) prepared in response to the District Audit findings in relation to the Overview and Scrutiny function in Leicestershire. [A copy of the Audit report which was considered by the Commission at its last meeting is attached for the information of members only. Copies are available on request.]

##### **Background**

2. As part of its annual programme of audit work at the Council the Audit Commission conducted a study of Leicestershire's Scrutiny arrangements. The study took place between May and September 2003. The approach to the study involved:
  - (i) a review of relevant documents;
  - (ii) observation of the Scrutiny Commission and Scrutiny Committees;
  - (iii) interviews with elected members and officers;
  - (iv) letter to all members inviting comments.

##### **Findings of the Study**

3. The Scrutiny Commission at its meeting on 5 November received the final report. The findings of the study painted a generally positive picture of scrutiny in Leicestershire recognising that appropriate procedures were in place and commended the guidance notes issued to members. The report identified a number of areas for improvement in practice, principally in relation to:-
  - a) members taking a more proactive role in setting work programmes;
  - b) placing greater emphasis on the scrutiny of external bodies;
  - c) involving external stakeholders and experts in scrutiny activity.

4. The Commission noted the report and requested the Scrutiny Reference Group to consider and develop an Action Plan in response to the findings. The Commission also asked the Reference Group to involve the Leader of the Council, at an appropriate stage, in the preparation of the Action Plan. At the meeting on 5<sup>th</sup> November the Commission also noted that the Reference Group had already begun to address some of the issues arising from the report and to that end had prepared a draft job description of Chairmen and Spokesmen of Scrutiny Committees.

### **Draft Action Plan**

5. The Scrutiny Reference Group has met on two occasions since to consider and prepare an Action Plan. A copy of the draft Action Plan is attached as Appendix A to this report. The Leader of the Council attended the second meeting to discuss the draft Action Plan and in particular consider how the Executive might assist in addressing the issues raised in the Audit report. The following actions are proposed in relation to each of the key themes in the Audit report:-
6. a) Members taking a more proactive role in setting work programmes
  - (i) The agreed job description for Chairmen and Spokesmen emphasises the need for a more proactive approach to the management of scrutiny. This will require Chairmen and Spokesmen to meet regularly with Chief Officers and Lead Members to keep abreast of issues affecting their service area.
  - (ii) Greater use to be made of performance data, outcomes of external examinations and best practice elsewhere to judge the effectiveness of service provision and identify areas of concern which may warrant further scrutiny.
  - (iii) Consideration to be given to views expressed by service users, providers and others as well as any recurring issues raised with members in their representational role to identify areas of concern which may warrant further scrutiny.
  - (iv) Adopt a more rigorous and selective approval to scrutiny of plans and strategies which form the Policy Framework.
- b) Placing greater emphasis on the scrutiny of external bodies
  - (i) Scrutiny Committees will be provided with an analysis of the information gathered from the current mapping exercise of partnership bodies. This will assist the Committees to identify those external bodies they wish to scrutinise.
  - (ii) Recognising the need to handle scrutiny of external bodies sensitively to ensure that the bodies concerned will remain willing to submit themselves to future scrutiny, the Scrutiny Reference Group will consider the lessons learnt from the first tranche of scrutiny of external bodies. (This is likely to be an

examination of the role and responsibilities of sub-regional economic partnerships conducted through the Commission.)

- c) Involving of external stakeholders and experts in scrutiny activity
- (i) Work is in hand to involve the voluntary sector in identifying appropriate persons to assist scrutiny bodies. In addition, on a case by case basis work will be undertaken to identify outside 'experts' who may also be able to assist.
  - (ii) Earlier notification of major issues to be considered by the Cabinet should enable Committees to plan better the scrutiny process. This would enable Committees to seek the views of external bodies and experts and to obtain information about the way in which other authorities have addressed the issue. It would also enable Committees to seek the views of the public, for example, by giving publicity to the issue in the local media, Internet and the County Council publication, Leicestershire Matters.
7. It is proposed that a meeting should be held involving Scrutiny Committee Chairmen and Spokesmen to consider the issues raised in the Action Plan.

### **Equal Opportunities Implications**

8. None.



### **Recommendation**

9. The Commission is asked to:-
- a) approve the draft Action Plan set out in Appendix 1 prepared in response to the District Audit review of Scrutiny arrangements in Leicestershire;
  - b) note the actions set out in paragraph 6 and 7 of the report which set out proposed actions in response to the key themes emerging in the Audit report.

### **Background Papers**

Attached Audit Report and Action Plan.  
Job Description for Chairmen and Spokesmen of Scrutiny Committees.

### **Officers to contact**

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