

Greater public involvement in Overview and Scrutiny

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Recommendation: that the committee considers the issues raised in the report and advises how many of the different options it would wish to be pursued.

1. Background

The Committee at its meeting on 16 December 2008 considered a report on a number of possible changes to the role of Overview and Scrutiny at the council. Of the recommendations that the committee agreed the outstanding one that has yet to be reported back to the committee on is developing a strategy for greater public involvement in scrutiny.

This report details a possible strategy and seeks a formal decision from the committee on how to proceed.

2. Key Issues

Representing the community by ensuring that the council (and its partners and external authorities and agencies) act in the best interest of local people should be a key role for the Overview and Scrutiny Committees. However, this role needs to be further developed at the council, though there have been some excellent examples of where the Scrutiny Committees have helped the council and members provide community leadership by focusing on issues of community concern. Examples of this include the Closer to Home consultation, removal of phone boxes, post office consultation and the Johnson House Call In.

Other authorities across the country have sought ways of attracting public engagement to Overview and Scrutiny meetings with varying degrees of success. Despite the fact that meetings are held in public and information is freely available, it can be extremely difficult to excite and engage the public.

However, the best approaches show that the following ideas should be considered:

A. Holding meetings away from the Copeland Centre.

This will mean

- Holding meetings at times that are more accessible for members of the public – i.e. in the evening
- Holding meetings in venues that are more accessible for members of the public – i.e. local community centres, especially when geographically relevant issues are being discussed
- Selecting less formal language when appropriate i.e. be called as a witness to give evidence could be seen as daunting
- Selecting the right topics for discussion, attention should be paid to public priorities and issues of local concern
- Considering having meetings which are less formal than traditional committee meetings so that they are designed to encourage public engagement in an open, non political debate
- Having refreshments for members of the public
- Trailing the meeting in local newsletters or parish magazines
- Inviting comments through such means as flyers with response cards in public libraries, a page on the Council's website or a column in Copeland Matters

The over-riding concern should be to engage local people in a style that is fit for purpose and is adding an additional element into the evidence gathering process. Members may therefore, initially, wish to be selective about targeting scrutiny items that may be of higher public interest as part of a concerted effort to involve local people.

B. Seek to develop relations with the press and media

Information on council meetings, agenda papers, reports and minutes is currently available on the council's website but there is a need to further improve the image and knowledge of overview and scrutiny, and the council more widely, through the local media.

This could be done by:

- Attracting publicity, such as launch events for reports or taking journalists on site visits
- Holding regular press breakfast meetings or open evenings with journalists
- Getting a better understanding of the media's needs
- Press releases announcing inquiries could be sent out inviting written evidence or attendance at meetings
- Letters and articles submitted for publication from local newspaper
- Use of letter drops, posters and any local networks

C. **What outcomes are wanted?**

Being clear at the start of the process what role is envisaged for the public is key. There may be different levels expected at different times but if public participation is to be a success clear outcomes need to be set. For example, does the committee want the public to hold a central place in the public scrutiny process?

There will also be expectations of what scrutiny can achieve (as an influencing body rather than decision-making forum) that will need to be managed.

It will also need a commitment from the whole council to address issues raised at the meetings or there will become a risk that they will become “talking shops”.

This could mean changing how the committee operates so that it:

- **Incorporates an open ‘Question and Answer’ session for members of the public**

At Lambeth Council there is a facility for members of the public and stakeholders to ask scrutiny questions. It is seen as a key mechanism to encourage public participation in scrutiny. The question can be about any matter related to the Council. The questioner can expect a response within 10 working days and they will be invited to attend the scrutiny meeting where they can further quiz members and officers.

- **Allows members of the public to put items onto the agenda but not be involved in the investigation**

This could be achieved by holding a meeting in a locality with just two items on the agenda. One from the council on a key local priority and one invited from a local body that they wanted to raise with the council on a policy issue.

- **Allows members of the public and parish council members to be co-opted on to Scrutiny Committees**

Scrutiny is likely to benefit from a greater involvement of people with specific expertise on key issues. This expertise could either be deployed through the co-opting of people onto the committee, or through asking for their attendance at committee meetings.

Co-optees can be members of the public, representatives of the community/voluntary sector or other partner agencies (in a non-voting capacity).

The most marked example of the use of co-option is at Bristol, which has had 54 co-optees involved in its six scrutiny commissions, a far higher degree of co-option than is usual.

- **Invites members of the public to raise subjects on an agenda and then being co-opted onto the Task and Finish group that explores the issue. This approach is likely to be particularly effective with broadly - based groups.**

At Gateshead as part of its review of services for older people two members of the Gateshead Older Persons Forum participated throughout the review and were seen to provide a valuable perspective.

Outside of the committee process it could mean other opportunities such as:

- What level of input from local people into the process for developing the Committees work programmes in future years. More use could be made of formal council consultations with the public as well as opportunities for 'piggy-backing' on other meetings, events or consultations where appropriate, such as area forums, parish council meetings, civic surveys, etc.
- Ensuring that the work programmes of the Scrutiny Committees are linked to the priorities of local communities.

The relationship between scrutiny and the council's emerging priorities will need to be strengthened to ensure that scrutiny reflects the priorities of both local people and partners. Scrutiny must ensure it takes a strong approach to monitoring the delivery of the council's priorities, by establishing regular monitoring of the community and corporate plan goals/milestones throughout the year.

- Task and Finish groups actively consider the most appropriate external agencies and witnesses for involvement in each review. It may be possible to develop a network of local experts/organisations in various fields this might usefully be done in partnership with our neighbouring authorities.
- Directly contacting relevant voluntary groups in order to encourage participation in their work and visiting statutory and/or voluntary organisations or projects run by them or by inviting specific groups to carry out research on our behalf.

3. CONCLUSION

The experience from other authorities shows that this can be hard work. In particular, it was clear that where there is a solid commitment in terms of time and resources, and public engagement was given a high priority the participants managed to engage the public with some success.

Public engagement in the scrutiny process could also be included as a fundamental part of the overall terms of reference of the council's scrutiny function.

Opening up the overview and scrutiny process to the public, partners and co-optees places a support pressure on the council. To get the best out of external inputs will require the council providing briefings and guidance which explains the scrutiny process and how the work of Scrutiny Committees impact on the local decision-making and democratic processes. Guidance and briefings should also be provided for external witnesses who might be called to Scrutiny Committees to give evidence.

Co-opting members of the public and/or partners would also mean the council making any member induction and training programme available for newly appointed co-optees. Furthermore, it will be important for the council to ensure that co-optees are involved in the further development of the scrutiny function, and that there is a clear response to the issues they raise.

It may also be more appropriate for this process to be started by the three "service" committees as they deal with those services that are more public facing rather than the Management Committee which to some extent is an internally focused committee.

The Committee is invited to consider the issues raised in this report and make appropriate recommendations on the way forward.

List of Appendices

Appendix "A" - Dates and Venues for the Council Overview and Scrutiny Meetings 2009/10

List of Background Documents:

Centre for Public Scrutiny report *Guidance for district councils*

Office of the Deputy Prime Minister - *The Development of Overview and Scrutiny in Local Government (2002)*

