

Relationship of Overview and Scrutiny to Comprehensive Area Assessment

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Recommendation: that the report be received.

1. BACKGROUND

At the last meeting of this Committee, during the Modern Councillor training, questions were raised about the effect Overview and Scrutiny can have on the overall performance of the council particularly in relation to the Comprehensive Area Assessment (CAA).

At Appendix "A" is a report from the Centre of Public Scrutiny (CfPS) entitled Scrutiny, performance and improvement: the road to excellence. This report examines a sample of Audit Commission Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA), which is to be replaced by CAA, reports in order to extract common themes and trends relating to the overview and scrutiny function in local government, and how it impacts on performance.

It was compiled by analysing all information contained in a sample of authorities' CPA reports relating to the scrutiny function. CfPS separated this information into positive and negative comments and examined how the balance of such comments relates to council performance scores.

2. RESULTS

The results show that, across all types of council, authorities with a strong scrutiny function tend to score more highly in CPA results.

For District Councils there was a very clear relationship between the quality of the scrutiny function and the overall level of performance as assessed by the Audit Commission – although this may not be a causal link.

This Council received a fair score in its 2004 CPA and the comments in this section of the report resonate here in Copeland.

FOCUS

The CfPS report suggests that this is a strong area for 'fair' councils. One of the comments is that:

“Backbench members are actively engaged in the work of scrutiny and there is a track record of recommendations from scrutiny reviews being implemented by the executive.”

Whilst it is true that at Copeland task and finish groups have worked particularly well there are remaining issues that need work on ensuring that all members are actively engaged in the process and that recommendations from scrutiny are implemented by the Executive. The recently considered Protocol aims to help address this.

The most striking comments in the CfPS report about those councils who are improving well is that the cabinet tends to accept recommendations made by the scrutiny function, which indicates maturity in the decision-making and political culture of the council. It could also reflect a greater confidence in the executive that could arise from having strong performance overall and a focus on improvement suggested by their ‘direction of travel’ rating.

CAPACITY

‘Capacity’ is by far the weakest area for scrutiny in ‘fair’ councils, reflecting the fact that a key challenge for councils on an improvement journey is a lack of capacity.

However, the comments demonstrate that where scrutiny is planned and has a clear work programme it can in fact enhance capacity and help the council improve.

This is effective where scrutiny work is planned appropriately, relates its activity to corporate priorities and through doing so offers a useful element of challenge.

The CfPS report states that one of the most significant strengths of the scrutiny function in the councils that are ‘improving well’ and ‘improving strongly’ is that there is a higher quality of challenge to the executive, more clarity about the scrutiny role itself and more innovative procedures have been introduced.

The reintroduction of a main liaison from Corporate Team and the Portfolio Holder at committee briefings is one attempt to address this and make the Overview and Scrutiny work plan more relevant to the overall strategy of the council so that the Committees focus less on operational matters and more on the strategic management of the council.

It is though worth reminding the committee that Copeland has the lowest amount of officer support for Overview and Scrutiny of the authorities in Cumbria that run an overview and scrutiny system.

PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT

The CfPS report states that the key weakness in relation to scrutiny and 'performance management' in 'fair' councils is around a lack of clarity of purpose. This is something that the officers would like to see addressed this year and will be providing external training to the committee on how to analyse/interpret performance management information. The Council will be made stronger by a scrutiny function that is effective at challenging the decision-making process.

INVESTMENT AND LEARNING

The CfPS report suggests that investment in scrutiny should be viewed as 'invest to save' since it can then contribute to further improvement.

The Modern Councillor training from the last meeting was one element of this as will be the training on performance management mentioned above. It is also intended to provide training on taking a more budgetary/strategic level approach.

3. POLITICAL MAKEUP

The Committee also enquired as to what research there was on the effects of the political makeup of a council on the overview and scrutiny function.

This has been much harder to find. The closest research is another CfPS report entitled The Life of the Party How do party political groups impact on scrutiny?

The aim of this CfPS report was to discover to what extent the level of political party group involvement in overview and scrutiny has changed over time.

The report which is at Appendix "B" has a number of key conclusions.

These are that:

- Although the headline figures of political party group involvement is significantly down since 2004, there are other new areas of evidence that clearly show that party group involvement in overview and scrutiny has certainly not faded away.

- This involvement was that members of a political party sit together as a 'party group' either always or most of the time. Furthermore, the majority of call-ins were made by members from a single (non-administration) party group and are almost never fully successful.
- Cross party, consensual and evidence-based overview and scrutiny has definitely been on the increase.
- The usage of pre-decision scrutiny of issues and small, issue-based 'task-and-finish' groups were almost completely free from political party group involvement.
- There seemed to be difficulty in establishing a consensus as to whether it was acceptable to maintain a level of political party group involvement in overview and scrutiny.

The report's final comment is that the tension between party loyalty and objective policy review and challenge remains a key challenge facing overview and scrutiny today.

At Copeland the increasing value of evidence based task and finish groups, the willingness to have more pre –scrutiny particularly on policy items and a more outward and upwards approach to overview and scrutiny this year will help to maintain the largely non partisan nature of the Overview and Scrutiny Committees.

4. CONCLUSION

The Committee is asked to consider this report and comment accordingly.

List of Appendices

Appendix "A" – CfPS Report - Scrutiny, performance and improvement: the road to excellence

Appendix "B" - CfPS Report - The Life of the Party
How do party political groups impact on scrutiny?

List of Background Documents

None