

Greater public involvement in Overview and Scrutiny

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Recommendation: that the committee confirms the details that it wishes to be implemented and makes a recommendation to the council asking for the council to confirm its support for the proposed changes.

1. Background

The Committee at its meetings on 6 July, 28 September and 26 October 2009 considered a report on a number of principles for better public engagement for Overview and Scrutiny at the council.

2. Proposals

(A) Holding meetings away from the Copeland Centre

The previous report stated that 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.

It is suggested that when appropriate a meeting of the Management Committee could be held to consider a local issue. The meetings would be held in a local venue rotated around the main towns of Whitehaven, Egremont, Cleator Moor, Millom, Mid Copeland (Seascale, Gosforth etc) and North Copeland (Distington). The venue could also be chosen on the basis of the local relevance of the topic to be discussed.

The meeting would be held on a date and time to be agreed in a local community centre with refreshments made available for members of the public.

The agenda would comprise of 3 items.

1. A 'Question and Answer' session for members of the public.

Any resident could ask 2 questions with usually no more than 6 questions being allowed at each meeting. However, it will be up to the Chairman to decide how questions are dealt with.

The question must be written and delivered to the Member Services no later than a set number of days prior to the start of the meeting and a written copy of the answer provided to the questioner within 10 working days after the meeting.

2. An item of specific concern raised by the locality.

In advance of the meeting the local Parish/Town Council could be asked for items of interest. An invitation would be put in the local media asking for items of interest from members of the public and making them aware of the opportunity to come and ask questions.

Furthermore, selected key local organisations could be formally written to asking them what items they may want to put forward and encouraging them to attend.

Where an item put forward is considered by the committee and they want it to be investigated by a Task and Finish Group the person(s) who raised the issue should be asked if they wish to be co-opted on to the Task and Finish Group.

3. An item brought by the council.

This could include policy items where we are asking how the public would like us to deal with a specific item or items where actions have been reviewed asking what went well and what went wrong.

It would need to be an item that resonated in the area which would be open to public comment.

This item could be suggested by the local members or by Corporate Team.

(B) Seek to develop relations with the press and media

The previous report stated that 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.

A leaflet and guidance for members of the public should also be prepared on the same basis.

(C) Task and Finish Groups

A greater profile for all Task and Finish Group reports should be achieved through publishing their final report with a press release and an invitation for local media to interview the Chair of the Task and Finish Group on the report.

A similar event should be arranged after the six months and twelve months review of the recommendations has been undertaken so that any changes and improvements to the services as a result of the recommendations can be publicly identified.

Furthermore, all Task and Finish Groups should now as a matter of course look to have relevant co-optees from the community on the groups. Similarly meetings should be held in local community venues, as appropriate, with the opportunity to hear relevant local views with a press release advertising inquiries and evidence sessions.

Similarly relevant voluntary groups should be encouraged to participate in the work and be asked to carry out specific research where appropriate.

Management Committee

The Management Committee could seek to co-opt expertise onto the committee as and when required, or through asking for their attendance at committee meetings as advisors.

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

This could include a representative from any of our leading partners such as CALC, the PCT or Acute Trust Board, Police Authority or Lake District National Park authority.

Co-option could either be for a particular project or review or longer-term. The advantage of co-option is that the people co-opted bring with them particular knowledge or expertise which will benefit the panel over time. The role of co-optees is to assist Panels in gathering and

assessing evidence. Generally speaking they should have knowledge and interest in a significant proportion of the Committee's remit and should be able to give the Committee dispassionate advice. The purpose of cooption is not to provide groups with a platform to pursue particular agendas but rather to add knowledge and expertise to the Committee.

Coooption though requires considerable time and commitment from co-optees, and that it may be more for more flexible and informal arrangements for involving outside people, for example as advisers or witnesses. There might also be a training requirement for co-optees.

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

A result from this work will be to see how much the work programmes of the Scrutiny Committees are linked to the priorities of local communities. It would be appropriate once the profile and understanding of Overview and Scrutiny has been raised in the local communities to seek their views on what items should be in the annual work plan. This may occur naturally from the meetings held in the local venues or may need to be a more formal process.

Resources

There will be an effect on the resources in Member Services and Communications Departments with the extra promotional work suggested in some of these options. Both of these areas are lightly resourced and it is suggested that the proposals in this report be run as a pilot for 6 months to see what effect they have on resources.

Any co-opted members onto a committee or a Task and Finish Group will be able to claim their expenses under the Members Allowances Scheme.

Conclusion

The Committee is asked to consider the changes to how Overview and Scrutiny is operated at the council and to make recommendations to council to change the council's constitution where it is needed.