

## OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY BOARD

6 MAY 2008

### NEW APPROACHES TO THE OPERATION OF THE SCRUTINY FUNCTION

#### PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

1. To present to members of the Overview and Scrutiny Board the results of the recent review of the scrutiny function.

#### BACKGROUND

2. A thorough review of the scrutiny process has been undertaken which has involved discussions with non-executive members and the scrutiny team. Non-executive members were given the opportunity to air their views and comments at a meeting with the Chair of the Overview and Scrutiny Board and their comments have been collated and used to develop the suggestions that are contained within this report.

#### MEMBER QUESTIONNAIRE

3. As part of the current process of reviewing the operation of overview and scrutiny, a questionnaire was circulated to all Members of the Council to gauge and evaluate Members' views of the process.
4. A similar questionnaire exercise was undertaken at the end of 2007 as part of an evaluation which was made using the national Centre for Public Scrutiny's Self Evaluation Framework. The results of the evaluation exercise were reported to OSB in April 2007 as part of an action plan that was approved to strengthen and improve scrutiny processes.
5. A summary of the latest questionnaire results is attached at **Appendix 1**.
6. The low response rate to the questionnaire (9 responses ie 17% of Councillors) means it is difficult to draw firm conclusions from the exercise. However, analysis of the results shows that most respondents appear to be satisfied with the majority of work areas covered by the questionnaire. Results are summarised below.
7. In the majority of question areas, respondents answered "Yes" and indicated that they are satisfied that:
  - scrutiny provides an effective challenge to the Executive (55%)
  - challenge is constructive and purposeful (55%)
  - scrutiny operates entirely independently of the Executive (55%)

- scrutiny influences organisational objectives (66%)
- scrutiny process reflects the concerns of the public (77%)
- Members have the opportunity to communicate their views on the development and operation of the scrutiny process (88%)
- scrutiny makes an important contribution to the work of the authority (88%)
- scrutiny's work makes a difference for local communities (55%)
- there is sufficient and adequate training for Members (77%)

8. In the following areas, the majority of respondents answered "No", indicating that they are not satisfied that:

- Existing arrangements allow meaningful challenge of the authority's corporate strategy (55% "No")
- Existing arrangements allow meaningful challenge of the authority's budget (55% "No")
- Scrutiny question and influence financial priorities (55% "No")

9. Responses in the following question area were inconclusive in that the majority of respondents answered neither "Yes" or "No", or the response was unclear:

- The scrutiny programme is influenced by partner organisations (55% neither "Yes" or "No" or unclear response)

## **NEW WAYS OF WORKING**

### **The Work of OSB and the Panels**

10. The review of the scrutiny function considered the current role of OSB and the panels and it was agreed that the core role of OSB should be as follows

- Co-ordination of the work programme
- Co-ordination of the call-in process
- Mayoral Accountability
- Executive Member accountability
- Approval of Final Reports
- Establishing Ad Hoc panels
- Monitoring budget and policy framework documents

11. Panel chairs will continue to sit on the Board, however in order to be a Chair of a panel a commitment to attend OSB would be necessary. This would ensure a close link between the work of the scrutiny panels and OSB.

12. The rest of the Board's current work will now be undertaken by a new 'corporate' panel which will be established to undertake reviews of corporate issues, budget monitoring, analysis of performance indicators, consideration of the LAA and the Strategic Plan.

13. A greater emphasis should be placed on the OSB update reports by the panels. The panel chair should present the report and in doing so this would ensure that there is a link between OSB and the panels and ensure that councillors are aware of the work of the Board and other panels.

14. The panels would continue to undertake the following

- Policy review

- Policy development
- Service/operational improvements
- Examine policy documents
- Monitor the Strategic Plan
- Monitor previous recommendations and their impact

15. Consideration was given to the scrutiny structure changing to a solely 'task & finish' based approach rather than the existing panel structure. The proposal is to maintain the current panel structure and to introduce the 'task & finish' approach within panels along with the new additional ways of working.

### **Gathering Evidence**

16. Members highlighted that meetings can be too long, contain long power point presentations, too many speakers and not enough interaction from the panel. Therefore one of the new approaches will be in the way evidence is gathered. It is important to vary the style of evidence gathering in order to accommodate the different learning styles of the Members and to move away, at least in part, from the current style of presentations and town hall based meetings. Examples of new evidence styles are as follows

- Organising more visits
- Mystery shopping
- Going 'back to the floor' (eg going on patrol with street wardens)
- Inviting panel members to go and speak to officers in smaller 'task & finish' groups or on a one-to-one basis. (Although this would have to reported back to the panel to maintain scrutiny's open and accountable approach).
- Involving panel members in gathering evidence directly from service users, residents and key stakeholders

### **Officer Briefings**

17. Officers will be asked to prepare more reader-friendly reports and briefings that introduce the subject and which set out the issues the officer intends to cover. Large and complex documents should be avoided as they can be off-putting and hinder preparation by some Members.

### **Format of Meetings**

18. Members also suggested the introduction of pre-meetings in order for the panel to refresh their memory about the terms of reference and discuss what they would like to get out of the meeting. A copy of the terms of reference would be given to Members at each meeting. Panel members could also use this time to agree questions or areas for discussion in advance of the meeting. A post-meeting would also be useful which would give panel members time to gather their thoughts, agree their next course of action and discuss the issues after the officers have left.

### **Chairing Skills**

19. The importance of strong chairing skills was discussed and training will be provided. It was noted that Chairs must follow the agenda, that they must remind Members that questions must be pertinent to the subject being discussed and that Members should not make personal statements. It was suggested that Chairs should introduce each meeting by reiterating this approach.

### **Shorter Reviews**

20. There will be an introduction of shorter reviews that could take 1 of 3 different approaches.

- i) Short, sharp reviews conducted by a panel where a topic could be investigated over a period of a few meetings.
- ii) The holding of one-off day or afternoon sessions to deal with emerging issues where speakers could all be invited to attend and a short final report and recommendations is produced. This could be done by an ad hoc panel of interested Members or by panels in addition to their established work programme.
- iii) Establishing 'task & finish' groups to 'home in' on a particular issue over a short period of time.

### **Forward Work Programme**

21. A more thorough approach to the analysis of the Forward Work Programme by OSB will be implemented. Reports on the content of the FWP will continue to be submitted to OSB, on a quarterly basis, for Members' awareness and the report format has been revised to add additional information. Any clarification on the topics that are contained within the FWP will be sought from the Executive. Discussions have been held with the Executive Office to ensure that they encourage officers to put items on to the FWP at the earliest opportunity to enable scrutiny involvement where applicable.

### **Policy Framework and Consultation with Members**

22. In order to give a more meaningful involvement for Members in the consultation process for policy framework documents, such as the strategic plan, and other performance information, it was suggested that discussions on the presentation of information by officers to panels should take place with the appropriate officers. For policy framework documents officers should be asked to present information to Members at an earlier stage in the process rather than present a draft final strategy. This would enable scrutiny to have a greater input into policy development. For performance information officers would be asked to highlight issues (either positive or negative). The full performance tables should be available to members on request.

### **Meetings of Panel Chairs**

23. Meetings with panel chairs will be diaried in advance. There will be a quarterly meeting that will involve the Chair of OSB and all panel chairs. In addition to the quarterly meeting, bi-annual one-to-ones between the Chair of OSB and the individual panel chairs will be scheduled, possibly to take place at the beginning of the municipal year and then half way through the year.

### **Reporting to the Executive**

24. A more structured approach to reporting OSB's views to the Executive will be developed. The Board's views will be attached alongside the officer's report that is submitted to the Executive. This process will enable the views of OSB to be taken into account when the item is discussed at the Executive. The process will also include feedback from any of the panels where they had received any information on service issues and where the panels consider it appropriate to make a comment/recommendation.

## **Developing the Work Programme**

25. In order to speed up the annual process of developing the work programme and to enable panels to begin undertaking their reviews as soon as possible at the beginning of the municipal year, the following process will be introduced

- All Members will be given the opportunity to submit their ideas for review topics
- Service areas will be consulted
- OSB will take all of those suggestions into account and develop and agree a work programme for the panels (This process includes the Chairs of the panels)
- Panels will have the opportunity to undertake reviews on ad hoc issues when and if they arise during the year. They should keep OSB informed of any changes to their work programme.

## **Training and Development**

26. The Council's Planning and Licensing Committees require that their Members undertake compulsory training to equip them to be able to fulfil their role on those committees. In order to professionalise the scrutiny function it would be a necessity that all Chairs and Vice Chairs of scrutiny panels undertake a short training course (which could be scheduled to take place at the first Chairs' meeting of the year). More experienced Chairs will also be able use this session to provide support and advice to the newer Chairs where applicable.

27. Training will be provided on a number of topics such as questioning skills, note taking, report writing, project management and any other topics that Members request which they think might assist them in their role.

28. All scrutiny members should endeavour to attend the training provided and, as a minimum, would be expected to attend a session on questioning skills.

## **The Scrutiny Team**

29. Panel members will be reminded of the support that the scrutiny support team offers. Some Members were not aware that they were able to go to the scrutiny officers for information, advice and queries regarding scrutiny in general and with any questions resulting from the evidence gathering. Informal meetings with scrutiny officers could be scheduled at any Members' request.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

30. The Board is asked to support the new ways of working.

**COUNCILLOR MICHAEL CARR  
CHAIR OF THE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY BOARD**

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