

## The Borough Council of King's Lynn and West Norfolk

### SCRUTINY WORKSHOP NOTES

Thursday, 8<sup>th</sup> October 2015

#### Introduction

On 8 October 2015 a workshop was held with councillors and senior officers within the Borough Council of King's Lynn and West Norfolk to consider the report and recommendations made by the Centre for Public Scrutiny (CfPS) following its review of the scrutiny function. The workshop was facilitated by Brenda Cook, an Expert Adviser from CfPS. These notes provide a summary of the workshop discussions and aim to help move the recommendations forward. The discussions focussed on the 3 themes referred to in the CfPS report, i.e.:

- Ways of working
- Structure, and
- Relationships

The next step will be for the report, recommendations, and these notes to be considered by the Task Group to develop proposals for developing the scrutiny practice and structures within the Borough Council.

#### Feedback from the participants

Many of the workshop participants recognised the need to refocus and develop current scrutiny practice and structures to ensure that scrutiny is effective in influencing the work of the Council as a whole. There was also some discussion about the opportunities that might arise for scrutiny of external services that impact upon the communities within King's Lynn and West Norfolk, and which would benefit from scrutiny if the structures, policies and resources allow.

#### **a) *Recommendations on Ways of Working***

The discussion groups focussed on the need to improve ways of working to ensure best use of the skills, methods and resources within the committees and panels. The

following bullet points should be read in conjunction with the section in the report on *Ways of Working* and with recommendations 1-3.

- Clearly state the purpose and principles of overview and scrutiny and ensure that all Members and officers are aware of them.
- Recommendation 1 proposing an annual work plan needs to build in flexibility to take account of changes and new initiatives during the year and enable the committee and panels to be reactive to new priorities.
- Bring reports to Panels earlier, before Cabinet report to allow more input and to influence Cabinet's decisions. This might help to address the issues about time frames from CSC to make recommendation to Council/Cabinet. Want to have early consideration of matters in order to have meaningful input into something prior to coming to Cabinet for decisions and allow for scrutiny before decision is finalised.
- It is important to ensure that all Scrutiny Members have effective scrutiny skills, e.g. listening and questioning skills, and are clear about how scrutiny fits into the broader remit of the local authority. A number of comments were made about the need for training to achieve this, both for Chairmen and other Members. It was suggested that a Skills Audit of Scrutiny Members should be undertaken to identify training needs before any training is implemented.
- Use clearer English and reduce the use of acronyms in reports.
- One group discussed and identified a list of actions for the Task Group to consider:
  - Identify what is expected from scrutiny
  - Identify how scrutineers can demonstrate independence and leadership.
  - Clarify how the role of scrutiny is communicated to witnesses and the wider public.
  - Identify the most effective scrutiny process
  - Focus on outcomes
  - Content
  - Criteria & Standards
  - Feedback.

- The proposal to open up 'sifting meetings' to all scrutiny members led to a large amount of discussion. There was some consensus that enabling members with a specific interest in an issue to attend the meeting might be helpful. However, sifting meetings must remain focussed on their task.
- Panel pre-meetings should be held to plan scrutiny and to prepare, identify lines of inquiry, types of questions and need to be clear what want out of process.
- Focus on being critical friend
  - All members to meet to put together annual work programme
  - Less reports/updates for noting focus on what we can influence
  - Top-line main issues – present main points – no long reports
  - Single issue groups focus
  - Progress reports on decisions
  - Influence the future big issues and external issues, e.g. devolution.
- Define purpose and principles.
- Up-front scrutiny is important.
- Need to develop more trust between Scrutiny and Cabinet and ensure that there is a more robust method of Cabinet responding to Scrutiny recommendations with proposed actions and/or reasons for no action.

***b) Recommendations on structures***

The discussions about structures considered the current committees and panels and the proposals in recommendations 4-6. There was recognition that the current model doesn't enable early scrutiny of issues through the Cabinet Scrutiny Committee (CSC). It was suggested that the Task Group should look at the proposals in the recommendations and should also look at how other authorities with structures reflecting the proposals work. The following points were made in the discussions

- CSC – Current role not always effective. Recommendations have sometimes been accepted by Cabinet but individual Councillor recommendations to CSC not often adopted by the Committee
- Corporate performance – strategic role for scrutiny, potential for duplication (with Audit & Risk) – check implementation of policies previously agreed
- Call-ins – Go back to Panel
- In relation to recommendation 7, read alongside SO refer back to Cabinet
- Emerging issues – unscheduled meetings called to deal with these. If there was capacity in the work plan these might not be needed.
- Numbers of panels – 3 plus A+ risk
  - Separate Audit & Risk from R&P
  - Specific training for Audit & Risk councillors (specialist role incl. corporate governance)
  - Proposed Independent chair – unelected – not sure whether this would work and need more information about how it might.
- Agree with Rec 4 but needs to meet more regularly (e.g. 6-weekly cycle) including Cabinet decisions and wider scrutiny role – invited reps.
- Task Groups don't have sufficient 'respect' in structure as panels, but they are important when they work effectively. Should they be proportional?
- CSC doesn't work effectively so must be deleted and replaced.
- Panels need decoupling from Cabinet and to become more independent.

**c) Recommendations on relationships**

The final discussion focussed on the relationship between scrutiny and other member functions and took place as a whole group discussion focussing on recommendations 7-9. A number of issues had already been identified in the previous discussions including the issues of Member training (recommendation 9). Further suggestions to be considered by the Task Group were as follows:

- The need to ensure that Member induction for new councillors explains the different aspects of the council, including Cabinet and Scrutiny Committees/Panels and how they relate to each other.
- The need for briefings by officers on key issues instead of reports for information appearing on scrutiny agenda's.
- Considering how key external stakeholders might brief Members on their priorities as part of the work programme setting process.
- There was support to implement a process for Members to raise issues for scrutiny to consider, using the Gloucester 'scrutiny on a page' approach (Appendix 1 of report). However, it was suggested that the Gloucester approach would need to be adapted to suit King's Lynn and West Norfolk.

### **Next steps**

The previous report and this note from the workshops will be used by the Task Group to help focus its work on developing the scrutiny function within the Borough Council.

We look forward to continuing to work with you to help improve overview and scrutiny in King's Lynn and West Norfolk and we hope that the work so far can be used as a positive step towards improvement.

**Centre for Public Scrutiny**  
**October 2015**

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