

		AGENDA ITEM 9
		PSEG/25/16
Committee:	Place Services and Economic Growth Scrutiny Committee	
Date:	22 September 2016	
COMMITTEE WORKSHOP 30 JUNE		
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Introduction

On 30 June 2016 a workshop was held to enable the Committee's membership to discuss their impressions of scrutiny activity and how the Committee's effectiveness could be improved.

While this report summarises Members' feedback based on their discussion, a couple of key conclusions that arose from the workshop was the need to focus on the most important issues in a review first, and to have a clear timetable to deliver reports and recommendations in a timescale that could influence thinking before a final decision was made.

Background

The review of the Committee's activities and ways of working was initiated to consider further improvements to the way that the Committee manages its work programme and review processes. It co-incided with changes in the Committee's membership following full Council in May 2016, and the need to review its work programme in light of the County Council's elections in May 2017.

On the day Councillors Derrick Louis (Chairman), Keith Bobbin, Tony Hedley, Malcom Maddocks, Chris Pond, and Stephen Robinson attended the workshop. Alex Polak, Scrutiny and Corporate Governance Manager, and Christine Sharland, Scrutiny Officer were in support.

Objectives

Two broad objectives were identified for the session:

- To identify existing good scrutiny practice and areas for improvement and
- propose how to achieve those improvements.

Initially Members reflected on various reviews and activity undertaken by the Committee that that they considered had been worthwhile, and in turn those that had

been disappointing. Discussion then turned to lessons learned and steps that could be taken to improve the way the Committee handles individual reviews and how scrutiny is taken forward.

General impressions and working practices

In summary, those Members present reached consensus around the following messages:

- **Background paperwork.** At the workshop emphasis was placed on preparation for meetings and reviews. Councillors stressed the importance of being provided with briefing papers in advance of meetings, both formal and informal, together with clear reasons for the Committee's engagement in particular pieces of activity.

Attention was drawn to various situations where councillors have not had background information prior to a briefing. In practice, they felt that the ability of the Committee as a whole to identify key lines of enquiry, conduct effective questioning, reach conclusions and, ultimately deliver positive outcomes has been very restricted on some occasions. Consequently the outcomes of such briefings are undermined as Members' participation is totally based on the presentation of new information, which is in itself reliant upon the quality and effectiveness of its delivery, together with whatever existing knowledge an individual councillor may have. Where Members have had no opportunity to do any personal research beforehand then the Committee is less able to conduct more in depth consideration of the particular issues that contributors may require feedback upon.

This is an important message as it confirms that Members believe that the Scrutiny Committee's ability to lead in the development of its working practice and co-ordinate its own work programme is being compromised where there they are not fully engaged beforehand with pertinent briefing papers.

In some situations the onus is on the Committee itself to identify its key lines of enquiry, and the types of outcome it is seeking. On other occasions it may receive a request for the inclusion of a briefing in its work programme to inform Members on a topic and to get 'scrutiny feedback', but such requests are not always backed up with clear objectives and supporting background information. It was felt that there is insufficient information and planning in both of these scenarios then the Committee and those seeking its feedback may be left disappointed with what is achieved in practice.

Overall Members acknowledged that briefings and site visits can fulfil an important role in improving their knowledge of topics. However, such activity may be more aligned to member development rather than being promoted as a part of the scrutiny function except where there is a clear link to a scrutiny project where the Committee may be able to influence decisions being made.

- **Timeliness.** Based upon Members' reflections of past and current scrutiny reviews, the timeliness of any work undertaken is crucial to the ability of the

Committee to have an impact upon what may happen as a result of an investigation. It is vital that the Committee's recommendations are published before decisions are taken so that they can be taken into proper account in the way that a relevant decision is made, not after ideas have been fully developed by the Executive for final approval.

This requires more effective dialogue with the Council's Executive not only to identify those issues where scrutiny might play a valuable role in pre-decision and policy development, but to acquire sufficient information to enable the Committee to plan its own work programme taking into account competing demands, available resources, and ultimately what outcomes it could achieve.

By way of example the Jobs, Skills and Welfare Scrutiny Review will have taken over two years to conclude, and it was unclear if its impact had been diminished through the passage of time and changing national picture. Following the workshop a briefing on the Local Highways Panels (LHPs) had been organised as a pre cursor to the start of a scrutiny review, in the event it was discovered that the Executive had begun its own review of the LHP terms of reference, and guidance. Consequently it was imperative that the Committee adopt a more responsive approach to its own involvement in any review of LHP activity so that it can contribute without further delay to the consultation that was underway. This matter is referred to in more detail elsewhere in this agenda.

While reference was made to pre decision scrutiny, Members were more concerned about taking measures to ensure that the Committee's activity overall was adding value to the Council's consideration of issues, and to shaping the way that action is implemented in practice rather than investigating issues where its outcomes could be ineffective.

- **Capturing outcomes.** A difficulty associated with some scrutiny reviews and committee activity in general is the ability to demonstrate what impact it may have had in practice. There was support for the need to develop an effective means to capture and showcase the outcomes of Scrutiny Committee involvement across the Council. It was hoped that by doing so scrutineers could build upon the evidence of experience to develop the value and effectiveness of scrutiny, and promote the scrutiny function as an important asset to the Council.

It was suggested that an audit trail/ tracking system could provide the means to understand how an issue had been tackled together with the response to any recommendations.

A good recommendation should be factual, evidence based, mindful of its financial impact if implemented, and targeted at those particular issues where positive differences could be made.

- **Relationship with the Cabinet.** From experience Committee Members reflected that scrutiny activity had been more worthwhile where there is positive co-operation between the executive and non-executive parts of the Council.

It was noted that part night lighting had been considered at two different stages by scrutiny committees: Pre decision in 2010, and then via a number of call ins between August 2013 and February 2014. The example highlighted that the pre decision engagement of scrutiny members had produced a more constructive investigation and outcomes than the later post decision challenge.

Members agreed that ongoing dialogue must be fostered with Cabinet Members across the Committee's work programme, regardless of the recognition that financial challenges will have an impact across the Council's activities and could make scrutiny harder to do collaboratively.

- **Member engagement and accountability.** Aside from the processes that are being implemented to underpin good practice, Members also discussed their own role and involvement in the way that scrutiny could evolve. Councillors acknowledged that they themselves were responsible for the way that they engaged in and contributed to scrutiny work, and the operation of a committee. Some faced difficulties associated with the demands upon their own time and attention, which were sometimes associated with the demands of being a councillor on another local authority.

Conclusions

The workshop had been intended as an opportunity for Members to reflect with colleagues their personal impressions of participation in committee activity, what they felt had been achieved via various working practices, and how to improve scrutiny practice.

Although the attendance for the workshop exercise was low, those present felt that the session had been provided a useful forum for reflection and identification of some those key issues set out above for further consideration to enhance the way that the Committee managed its work. There will be further sessions organised over the coming months for the Committee to develop ideas for taking forward the role of scrutiny with the County Council.

Action required by the Committee:

That the report be noted, and any further observations be invited by way of contribution to a review of the Scrutiny Committee's work programme and aim to improve good scrutiny practice.
