

		AGENDA ITEM 7
		PSEG/17/14
Committee:	Place Services and Economic Growth Scrutiny Committee	
Date:	29 May 2014	
WORK PROGRAMME		
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Purpose of report

In Essex there is a need for the Scrutiny Committees to plan and manage their activities more effectively in order to ensure that there is ongoing development of the overview and scrutiny function. A key tenet of making improvements is to focus upon topic selection and produce more robust work programmes to underpin improved ways of working taking a realistic account of the resources available. Ultimately Scrutiny Members want to be in the position of exerting a proactive and positive influence upon what the Council does in practice.

Background

Over the past year this Committee's work programme and resource have been dominated to some extent by consideration of the calling in of Cabinet Member decisions, and a steady stream of briefings to ensure that Members have had an opportunity to develop their knowledge about issues within the Committee's remit rather than in more depth reviews. While this reflects to some extent a more traditional approach to committee activity that some Members may prefer, others have expressed a wish to move towards the consideration of more strategic issues where the Committee influences outcomes rather than devoting limited time and resource to matters that have already been determined.

There is general consensus among scrutiny practitioners that topics should be carefully selected taking into account common criteria to enable objective choices to be made, and work programmes devised that reflect a committee's capacity to deliver that programme as well as officers' capacity to support it in that task. The role of topic selection and work programmes has featured in Members' Scrutiny training, and good practice is reflected in the Council's Overview and Scrutiny Handbook that is published on its website.

Analysis

On 27 February 2014 the Chairman, Vice Chairmen, and Group representatives met to discuss the Committee's work programme going forward, and the process for prioritising potential topics. A further meeting of those Members will take place to consider the information that has been collated with the intention that a draft work programme for the period 2014- 2016 is presented to the Committee on 26 June for its consideration and approval. The Programme will comprise a mixture of activity.

An important part of gathering information has been to focus upon identifying how a committee might influence and add value to Council activity, related work, and the timescales for any known activity and decision making in order that any scrutiny work occurs at the most appropriate point. It is also notable that the County Council is undergoing a lot of change both in terms of its organisational structure and the delivery of services, and a certain amount of time may need to elapse to maximise the benefits of any review particularly if pre scrutiny opportunities have been identified where longer term service improvements or changes can be influenced through the scrutiny mechanism.

Given the need that will arise to select a more limited number of topics for in depth consideration, the information is proving useful in identifying different types of scrutiny engagement that will enable Members to be engaged in a broader range of topics albeit in varying depths. While it is suggested that resources necessitate that a limited number of in depth reviews be undertaken, there is scope for briefings, fact finding visits, and limited round table discussions to ensure that Members are well informed about what is happening across the services covered by the Committee's remit. Such activity will also be planned to inform Members on subjects that will be the focus of more in depth investigation in the future. Members will be involved in the planning of projects.

The Committee work programme will be made up of a mixture of work undertaken using different methods for their consideration, and in different scenarios. While committee activity days will continue to be scheduled on a monthly basis, in depth reviews will require Members to be more proactive and engage in more frequent meetings as and when required. Furthermore it is likely that formal committee meetings will not be held on a monthly basis in order to accommodate the overall mixture of topics and identification of the best way of handling each one, together with the need to direct resources more effectively. A number of activity days will comprise briefings where a wider range of contributors from outside the organisation could be invited to enhance understanding and debate on a topic

A list of topics has been drawn up on the basis of ideas raised by the Committee itself as well as others identified by Cabinet Members and Officers. The topics being investigated include:

- Local Bus Service Strategy

- Future of the Recycling Centres for Household Waste
- Flood Management and Third Party Responsibilities
- Local Transport Plan Strategy to Support Economic Growth
- DWP Work Programme and Help to Work
- Skills Agency Board
- Partnership Working
- Parking Partnerships
- Local Highways Panels
- Ringway Jacobs Contract
- Cressing Temple
- Highways Maintenance and Potholes
- COMAH Communications Protocol

It is acknowledged that the list is made up primarily of more strategic issues that have wider implications for the whole community and are likely to have greater impact in the longer run, rather than directing scrutiny resources to more specific local issues.

To provide a framework for the consideration of topics, the scoping document template is being utilised to collate information. Reference has also been made to the criteria and methods set out in the chapter on the 'Selection of Topics' in the Council's Overview and Scrutiny Handbook, and featured in the Scrutiny Training that Members' took part in last summer.

While an agreed work programme will assist in managing committee activity, it is recognised that unforeseen matters will arise from time to time that will affect Members' ability to achieve the goals published in the programme. However, it is hoped that by devising a more robust work programme the Committee will become more effective in managing its potential workload and producing positive results.

The next steps...

Moving forward once the new work programme is agreed, it is suggested that in future it could be reviewed on a bi annual basis, and any topics highlighted for more in depth consideration be considered at that time against the topic selection criteria. It is also proposed that where suggestions are made at meetings for more in depth work to be undertaken that has not been highlighted already in the work programme eg the setting up of a task and finish group, then any decision on its inclusion or otherwise be deferred until a future committee meeting. This will enable the background necessary to be collated for a more objective view to be made of whether or not to pursue a project in light of its impact upon the programme as a whole.

Action required by the Committee at this meeting:

Members are invited to comment on the topics being investigated for prioritisation for the Committee's work programme going forward. A report setting out a draft work programme for the Committee's consideration will be submitted to its next formal meeting.
