

Report to: Scrutiny Committee

Date: 3 February 2020

Title: The role of scrutiny in the community and improving resident engagement

Report of: Deputy Chief Executive

Ward(s): All

Purpose of report: To consider how local residents can be more engaged in scrutiny.

Officer recommendation(s): That the Committee consider the report and agree any actions they wish to take, or recommend to the Cabinet.

Reasons for recommendations: To enable the Committee to consider how it might wish to further engage local residents in the activities of scrutiny.

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1 Introduction

- 1.1 The Committee agreed, as part of its work programme for 2019/20, to receive a report on the role of scrutiny in the community and looking at what opportunities there might be to develop resident engagement in scrutiny. In the development of this report the activities of other councils have been investigated in order to learn from best practice.
- 1.2 The report has drawn on 'Statutory Guidance on Overview and Scrutiny in Local and Combined Authorities' published by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government in May 2019. The Centre for Public Scrutiny (CfPS) and Local Government Association (LGA) have also provided very useful sources of guidance and best practice examples.
- 1.3 The purpose of scrutiny is to discuss and make recommendations on the development of policies and to hold the Executive to account for their actions. Scrutiny committees can also investigate any issues which affect the local area or the area's inhabitants.
- 1.4 Guidance encourages scrutiny committees to 'tackles issues of direct relevance to local people' (LGA Councillors Workbook on Scrutiny). The same guidance also notes that 'the involvement of the public provides a unique perspective on how well public services are being delivered and how they could be improved,

from the point of view of those receiving and using the services.’

- 1.5 There are three main ways in which Scrutiny Committees can engage local residents in their work; by keeping them informed, by seeking their input into the development of the Committee’s work programme, and through specific engagement activities within Scrutiny Reviews. This report explores each of these areas in turn, for Members’ consideration.

2 Informing residents

- 2.1 It is helpful to let local people know about what the scrutiny committee is doing. Many councils have a ‘scrutiny area’ on their websites where they explain clearly scrutiny’s role and provide information about recent reviews and their outcomes. Such an area could easily be added to the EBC website.
- 2.2 In addition, the outcome of a successful piece of scrutiny – such as one which has resulted in tangible benefits for local people – can be publicised through press releases or other media statements (including social media). As well as letting people know about the positive improvement, such communication can help to raise the profile of scrutiny and stimulate more interest in future reviews.

3 Resident involvement in work planning

- 3.1 The CfPS, in their Guide to Scrutiny observes that, “in a way, asking how to engage the public in scrutiny’s work is the wrong question. Meaningful public engagement starts with ensuring that the public has a clear stake in scrutiny and its work programme, and that there is a transparent opportunity for the public to use a variety of means to influence that work programme.” Giving local people the opportunity to put forward their ideas about what the committee should be scrutinising is a good way to ensure the committee’s work is relevant and well focused.
- 3.2 One way of doing this could be to have an on-line form on the council’s website where people can submit their ideas for scrutiny. These ideas could then be considered as part of the work programme item at the next scrutiny meeting. Further to this, at the start of each new council year, the committee could publicise this process to actively seek contributions ahead of setting their work plan for the year.
- 3.3 It is important to be aware, however, that the subject of scrutiny reviews should be in line with corporate objectives and make good use of council and council officer time. As a result of public engagement, or indeed a member proposal, it may be that a suggestion is made for a scrutiny review which could be deemed to be not in line with council objectives or not good use of officer time. This could be because the subject matter has already been recently reviewed, where there is no prospect of a tangible outcome, or where it is clearly politically motivated. In these instances the committee will be advised by the proper officer regarding the appropriateness of the proposed review’s inclusion in the work programme.

4 Resident engagement in scrutiny reviews

- 4.1 Depending on the subject of a scrutiny review, it may be appropriate to seek the views of local residents. MHCLG Statutory Guidance states; “it is likely that formal ‘consultation’ with the public on the scrutiny work programme will be ineffective. Asking individual scrutiny member to have conversations with individuals and groups in their own local areas can work better....Listening to and participating in conversations in places where local people come together, including in online forums, can help authorities engage people on their own terms and yield more positive results.”
- 4.2 When agreeing the scope of any scrutiny review, the committee should consider who relevant stakeholders would be, and if this would include local residents. If so, it would be helpful to agree how to engage with residents and seek their views, at an early stage of the review process. The council’s Business Planning and Performance Team have considerable experience and expertise in this area which the committee could call on in these circumstances.

5 Financial appraisal

- 5.1 The recommendation is to enable the Committee to consider how it might wish to further engage local residents in the activities of scrutiny. There are no direct immediate financial implications arising from the recommendation in this report. Staffing and any other costs associated with the report’s recommendation are to be contained within existing department revenue budgets.

6 Legal implications

- 6.1 There are no legal implications arising directly from this report.

Lawyer consulted 30.12.19

Legal ref: 8834-EBC-OD

7 Risk management implications

- 7.1 Any public engagement carries the risk of raising expectations which may not then be met by the committee or the council. Members should bear this in mind when undertaking engagement activities, and make sure expectations are managed carefully through clear communications. It should also be borne in mind that engagement activities can be time-consuming to do well. The limitations of officer time should therefore always be a consideration when planning such activities.

8 Equality analysis

- 8.1 An Equality analysis has been undertaken on these proposals. This has concluded that;

With meaningful engagement around public participation in scrutiny, the proposals in the corresponding report have the potential to positively impact all protected groups, as well as supporting the council in its regard to the equality aims, as set out in the Public Sector Equality Duty. A consistent offer around reasonable adjustments and alternative formats will help the council to meet the

equality aims, and encourage participation in democratic processes from protected groups.

9 Sustainability and/or carbon reduction implications

- 9.1 This report contains no direct sustainability or carbon reduction implications. Should the Scrutiny Committee decide to undertake engagement activities, consideration should be given to ensuring the methods used are mindful of the carbon impact. Examples of this could be; not producing paper unnecessarily when electronic methods could be used instead, and minimising the need for travel by producing videos or holding video conferences to enable engagement.

10 Appendices

None

11 Background papers

- Centre for Public Scrutiny - Good Scrutiny Guide
<http://www.cfps.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/CfPS-Good-Scrutiny-Guide-v3-WEB-SINGLE-PAGES.pdf>
- Local Government Association – A Councillors Workbook on Scrutiny
<https://www.local.gov.uk/councillors-workbook-scrutiny>
- MHCLG Statutory Guidance on Overview and Scrutiny in Local and Combined Authorities
https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/800048/Statutory_Guidance_on_Overview_and_Scrutiny_in_Local_and_Combined_Authorities.pdf