

STEVENAGE BOROUGH COUNCIL

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE - SITTING AS A SELECT COMMITTEE MINUTES

Date: Monday, 23 September 2019

Time: 6.00pm

Place: Shimkent Room - Daneshill House, Danestrete

Present: Councillors: Lin Martin-Haugh (Chair), Philip Bibby CC (Vice-Chair), Jim Brown, Laurie Chester, Michael Downing, Michelle Gardner, John Mead, Sarah Mead and Adam Mitchell CC

Start / End Start Time: 6.00pm
Time: End Time: 7.55pm

1 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Apologies for absence were received on behalf of Councillors S Barr, S-J McDonough, A McGuinness, R Parker and C Parris.

There were no declarations of interest.

2 DRAFT SCOPING DOCUMENT - SCRUTINY REVIEW OF THE COUNCIL'S SCRUTINY ARRANGEMENTS

The Committee considered the scoping document for the Scrutiny Review of the Council's Scrutiny arrangements. The Scrutiny Officer provided background information on Overview and Scrutiny (O & S) including the legal framework. Overview and scrutiny was introduced by the Local Government Act 2000 to enable a more streamlined structure for decision-making. The new role of Overview and Scrutiny was designed to act as a check and balance, holding the Cabinet to account and contributing to policy development. It was noted that in addition to scrutinising local issues, local authorities also managed the processes of external scrutiny for health bodies, community safety partnerships and Police and Crime Commissioners.

The Scrutiny Officer indicated that Members had raised the issue of reviewing the Council's Scrutiny arrangements for the last two years. The scheduling of this review came after the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) had published new statutory guidance on overview and scrutiny in local and combined authorities. The guidance was a response to a key recommendation made by the (then) Communities and Local Government Select Committee following its 2016-17 inquiry into the effectiveness of Overview and Scrutiny. Members were informed that the SBC Scrutiny report would be submitted to the Centre for Public Scrutiny for comments to be fed back to the Committee.

The Scrutiny Officer highlighted a number of recent reviews such as Damp & Mould, Sickness Absence, Indoor Market and Business Technology Centre. It was reported

that the Damp & Mould Scrutiny Review led to the Council changing its approach to damp & mould and an allocation of more resources to the issue.

Members highlighted a number of constraints including the lack of clarity on the links between the areas of responsibilities of Executive Portfolio Holders, Select Committees and responsibilities of Assistant Directors. Members cited the Community Centres Review and Local Neighbourhoods Review. The Community Centres Review involved Executive Portfolio Holders for Community & Community Safety and Neighbourhoods & Co-operative Working. The Local Neighbourhoods Review involved aspects of Stevenage Direct Services and Communities and Neighbourhoods. The Committee also raised questions on the role of the Executive Portfolio Holder at Portfolio Holder Advisory Group (PHAG) meetings and the policy development responsibilities of Select Committees and PHAGs.

It was **RESOLVED**:

1. That the following be added to the Aims/Outcomes: "To get relevant Portfolio Holder/Leader to respond to the recommendations of the Scrutiny Review of the Council's Scrutiny Arrangements"
2. That a Member/Officer from at least one new town such as Harlow Council be added to the list of external witnesses for the Review
3. That Councillor S Mead be the Lead Member for final reports/recommendations
4. That Councillor M Gardner be the Lead Member for Equality and Diversity issues
5. That other Lead Members be identified at the next O & S meeting
6. That the SBC response to the Parliamentary Select Committee's inquiry into Overview & Scrutiny be added to the list of background documents
7. That clarity be provided on the links between the areas of responsibilities of Executive Portfolio Holders, Select Committees and responsibilities of Assistant Directors

3 **PRESENTATION ON CURRENT SCRUTINY ARRANGEMENTS**

The Scrutiny Officer gave a presentation on the current scrutiny arrangements for Stevenage Borough Council. The presentation covered work programming, scoping, evidence gathering/site visits/interviews, final reports & recommendations, monitoring outcomes and Council priorities.

Work Programming – The Scrutiny Officer indicated that work programming started in January and the first draft of the Scrutiny Work Programme was agreed at a round of meetings in March. This was to enable the Scrutiny Officer to prepare documents and liaise with Lead Officers. The Work Programme reports were brought back to the Committee in June each year for Members to give further comments. The

Scrutiny Work Programme was based on Member responses to a survey and any submissions by the public. It was pointed out that residents were engaged via the Council's website and residents meetings. Members expressed concerns about the level of involvement of local residents in shaping the scrutiny work programme.

Scoping – The Scrutiny Officer informed the Committee that the template scoping document had been used in previews reviews. Members indicated that the objective of some reviews were not always clear to some Members and the public. Members commented that a scoping document should be flexible to allow for expansion of objectives of the review if justified.

Evidence Gathering/site visits/interviews – Members noted that the Overview and Scrutiny Committee did not do as many site visits as the other Select Committees. It was pointed out that there should be flexibility on timings for site visits to cater for Members' work and ward commitments. The Committee highlighted the O & S Committee's primary role of holding the Executive to account and agreed that there were also benefits in O & S Members attending regular meetings of the Executive. Members also discussed issues relating to Portfolio Holder Advisory Group meetings.

Final reports and recommendations – The Committee noted that some secondary recommendations did not add much value to reviews. In some cases, secondary recommendations had the effect of reducing the value of a review.

Monitoring outcomes – The Scrutiny Officer reminded the Committee that the Executive is required by law to respond to a scrutiny report within two months. This response should, for each recommendation, set out how and when the recommendation would be implemented. Reasons should be given for the non-acceptance of any recommendation. It was pointed out that this was an improvement from the arrangement prior to the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007. The Scrutiny Officer also stated that the Committee had the option to revisit any review to monitor the extent to which recommendations had been implemented.

The Strategic Director informed Members that Executive Portfolio Holders liaised with Lead Officers on responses to scrutiny reports. Members were welcome to request more information if initial Executive responses were felt to be unsatisfactory.

Council Priorities – The Committee noted that Council priorities were not always aligned with the expectations of some sections of the Town. Members cited issues relating to the Committee's review on damp and mould. It was reported that Members had received numerous complaints on damp and mould in properties. However, there was resistance to accepting that this was not solely caused by the lifestyle of residents but rather issues with the design of the buildings. The disconnect between some core Council priorities and resident expectations underscored the importance of effective resident engagement.

It was **RESOLVED**:

1. That the context of the review be added to the Scoping Document

2. That the Scoping Document be updated as soon as amendments were made to any aspects of the review
3. That more work be done to engage the public in shaping the Scrutiny Work Programme
4. That the Scrutiny Work Programme be made available at resident group meetings

4 **SBC SCRUTINY - SELF EVALUATION FRAMEWORK**

The Scrutiny Officer invited the Committee to complete the Scrutiny Self Evaluation Framework Scoring Matrix. The matrix was broadly based on the Centre for Public Scrutiny (CfPS) Scrutiny Evaluation Framework. Members were advised to score relevant sections of the form and add commentary to the scores if required. The Scrutiny Officer recommended that Members familiarise themselves with the CfPS guide and the Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government's Overview and scrutiny: statutory guidance for councils and combined authorities (published May 2019). The Scrutiny Officer agreed to collate the forms that Members completed at the meeting and provide an average score and summary document including Member comments.

It was **RESOLVED** that Overview & Scrutiny Members who were not be at the meeting be given the opportunity to complete the Scrutiny Self Evaluation Framework Scoring Matrix.

5 **URGENT PART 1 BUSINESS**

None.

6 **EXCLUSION OF PUBLIC AND PRESS**

Not required.

7 **URGENT PART II BUSINESS**

None.

CHAIR