

STEVENAGE BOROUGH COUNCIL

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE - SITTING AS A SELECT COMMITTEE MINUTES

Date: Monday, 11 November 2019

Time: 6.00pm

Place: Shimkent Room - Daneshill House, Danestrete

Present: Councillors: Lin Martin-Haugh (Chair), Philip Bibby CC (Vice-Chair), Sandra Barr, Jim Brown, Michael Downing, Andy McGuinness, John Mead, Sarah Mead, Adam Mitchell CC, Robin Parker CC and Claire Parris

Start / End Time: Start Time: 6.00pm
End Time: 8.00pm

1 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Laurie Chester and Michelle Gardner.

There were no declarations of interest.

2 COLLATED MEMBER RESPONSE TO SELF-EVALUATION SCORING MATRIX

Members considered the collated response to the self-evaluation scoring matrix.

The following points were raised particularly in relation to work programming:

- Timing of site visits should be looked at and evening visits carried out on some occasions to ensure all Members were able to attend;
- Customer Services data was useful but should not be relied upon as a complete picture;
- In terms of the role of Executive Members, although not directly involved in work planning for Scrutiny, it was suggested that it could be useful to ask what topics they feel could benefit from the input of scrutiny;
- The Communications Team should be asked to advise on what is trending on social media;
- In relation to those topics that were not the direct responsibility of the Council eg buses and post offices, it was agreed that this continued previous work by the Council to ensure local monitoring of public services and the role of Members as community leaders;
- Website visits could be an indication of what is important to local residents;
- It was felt that the Portfolio Holder Advisory Groups were working well but the possibility of the Groups being chaired by scrutiny members and not executive members should be investigated.

The Scrutiny Officer advised that he would review the content within the matrix in relation to opportunities for improvement and group those comments where there was commonality and identify possible recommendations for consideration by the Committee. Members asked that the scoring system be looked at to make it as transparent as possible.

It was **RESOLVED**:

1. That the Scoring Matrix be noted and that the Scrutiny Officer be requested to look at the scoring mechanism to ensure that it was as transparent as possible;
2. That the Scrutiny Officer report back to the next meeting with possible recommendations for opportunities for improvement.

3 **INTERVIEW WITH FOURTH TIER MANAGERS**

Members received responses from 4th tier managers regarding their experience of supporting Scrutiny Reviews. Three of those 4th tier Managers were in attendance at the meeting including the Council's HR Manager, Leisure Services Manager and Environmental Policy and Services Manager. The Strategic Director advised that other senior managers across the Council would also be consulted for their views and responses would be reported back in due course. He stressed that officers welcomed forensic and deep scrutiny and that it was appropriate for Members to challenge how things were working and the status quo.

A number of issues and questions were raised and responses given by the officers including:

- Scrutiny was a Member led process, although often a presentation was given at the beginning of a review to ensure Members received a briefing on the matter of the review;
- The timing of involving the Service officers in the scrutiny reviews, ie during or after the scoping process of a review;
- As officers were aware of what was working and what was not in their service area they could be a source of suggestions for future scrutiny reviews;
- It was important for Members to have a base knowledge of information relating to an area to be scrutinised to ensure a review was effective. The more Councillors knew about a topic the better;
- Some recommendations from reviews were difficult to implement without having the resources available to support them, although it was agreed that resources would potentially not be forthcoming without these recommendations;
- There were a limited number of officers around the Council who had direct experience of scrutiny due to the involvement of mainly tier 4 managers and above;
- The original view of scrutiny was that it should be equal in importance to the Executive. In reality, this was not the case and could be frustrating if the Executive did not appear to give much importance to review outcomes. The process had now changed however and Executive Members were required to

provide a response to scrutiny recommendations within a 2 month period. Recommendations were also now followed up after a longer period of time had elapsed;

- The question was asked regarding a possible return to the pre 2000 Committee system and if decision making would be more effective;
- Some recent scrutiny reviews had been effective and resulted in substantial changes to a service eg the review into damp and condensation where it had been a real struggle to move away from the assumption that the issues were caused by lifestyles rather than inadequate buildings;
- The issue of the Chairs of scrutiny committees being appointed from opposition groups was discussed. It was agreed that it would be more obviously independent if scrutiny Chairs were opposition Members, however the importance of the Chairs being independently minded whatever group they were from was paramount. The outcomes from a review should reflect this independence;
- Previously an all-day session with partners and voluntary and community groups had been arranged to come up with suggestions for subjects to review but this had proved to be time consuming and resource intensive. Now Members were encouraged to engage with these groups and bring back ideas during the work programming process;

In response to a question, the Scrutiny Officer agreed to recirculate his paper which summarised and addressed the main issues on the new Government Scrutiny Guidance. This would form part of an agenda for a future meeting.

It was **RESOLVED**:

1. That the 4th tier officers be thanked for their attendance at the meeting;
2. That the responses circulated and the comments above be noted and form part of the evidence gathering for the review;
3. That the Scrutiny Officer recirculate his paper summarising and addressing the main issues on the new Government Scrutiny Guidance to Members of the Committee and that the paper form part of the agenda for the next meeting of the Committee.

4 **INPUT FROM SCRUTINY OFFICERS AT OTHER AUTHORITIES**

The Scrutiny Officer reported that he had contacted a number of other local authorities with a view to obtaining a view on the Council's scrutiny arrangements. Unfortunately due to work pressures including the recent calling of the General Election, which most officers were now involved with, no responses had yet been received.

The Centre for Public Scrutiny conference and another scrutiny networking event which were both coming up could provide opportunities to receive feedback and he hoped to be able to feedback further at the next meeting of this Committee.

It was **RESOLVED** that the update be noted.

5 **URGENT PART 1 BUSINESS**

None.

6 **EXCLUSION OF PUBLIC AND PRESS**

Not required.

7 **URGENT PART II BUSINESS**

None.

CHAIR