



Council

23 March 2023

Report of the Chair of Customer & Corporate Services Scrutiny Management Committee

As this will more than likely be my final report to Council as Chair of the Customer & Corporate Services and Scrutiny Management Committee I felt it would be appropriate to reflect on my tenure and look ahead to the next municipal year. It has certainly been an eventful four years and, having faced some unprecedented challenges, has not been entirely what I was anticipating when I took up the role in May 2019. Despite a promising start, I think it has ultimately been as frustrating as it has been fulfilling; I am proud to have helped shine a light on some hugely important issues facing the city – Devolution, Planning Reforms, Staff Recruitment & Well-being, Digital Inclusion, City Centre Access – but leave questioning how many people value, or see the potential of, Scrutiny in the same way that I have come to.

The key tenets of good Scrutiny - to act as critical friends, to have independent minds, to amplify the voice of the public, to always drive improvement in public services – are easy enough to say, but have frequently felt elusive in practice. There has too often been a tendency to present everything as wonderful or the best it could possibly be, whilst genuine enquiry has at times been met with suspicion. “Pre-decision Scrutiny” has frequently come too late in the process for meaningful input beyond perhaps some minor tweaking, and has often felt as though it is more about stage management or deflecting criticism than a true exploration of how to deliver a policy goal or service improvement. Further, I have often felt that I am operating with one hand tied behind my back, forever caught up in internal political wrangles that sap energy and enthusiasm from the good work or common cause that Scrutiny can deliver.

Of course some challenges have been out-with all of our control; when I took on this role no one was anticipating that we would witness a worldwide pandemic and I certainly didn't expect to be chairing public meetings from my kitchen table! It is to Democratic Services' - and the Committee's - credit that in a relatively short period of time we were able

to get up and running online, constructively scrutinising the city's response during those early days of lockdown. I feel we genuinely helped improve communications with residents – particularly those without internet access – and I believe we were effective in assisting the cross-Council approach to an unprecedented situation. Whilst there was understandable frustration that other Committees were effectively moth-balled – and continue to have a reduced schedule of meetings - I would like to particularly thank those members of CSMC who undertook a disproportionate amount of Scrutiny work throughout this period, sometimes under quite difficult personal circumstances.

Sadly, since returning to some amount of normality following the end of lockdown, it is my view that the Scrutiny Function in York has not been enabled to reach its full potential, largely as a result of factors that *are* within our control. A lack of dedicated Scrutiny Officer support, stretched resources across the Council leading to a low prioritisation from some quarters and the ongoing toxicity of the allocation and appointments arrangements - particularly on CSMC – have been key contributing factors. These issues have been raised on multiple occasions both privately and publicly at the highest levels and there has been ample time to address them if there had been any will to do so from the current administration. It is now approaching three years since we had dedicated scrutiny officer support and almost as long since the controversial substitution arrangements - that our own flimsy legal advice suggests are contrary to the spirit and purpose of proportionality legislation - have been in place. That these situations have been allowed to persist for so long has been to all our detriment.

Robust checks and balances are an important part of any healthy democracy, but not only that; a well-resourced Scrutiny function can be so much more, offering constructive 'critical friend' support to Executive, exploring and bottoming out 'thorny' issues and providing opportunities to find common cause and all-party engagement on a wide range of policy areas.

I hope that, following May's elections and the overdue publication of updated legal advice, there will be opportunity to redress these issues and that all Members – both newly elected and returning - will engage with the Scrutiny training packages that are currently being put together in cooperation with the Centre for Governance and Scrutiny. Increasing our collective knowledge and understanding can only be a good thing.

Similarly, there will be opportunities to look again at the Scrutiny Committee structures, processes, and work plans – particularly if there are changes to the structure of any future Executive – allowing future Chairs to help ensure that the areas of Council business that can be best assisted through Scrutiny are appropriately reflected and given due attention.

I remain resolute in my belief that, when properly embraced and appropriately resourced, Scrutiny can be a robust and effective driving force for good. As a Council – Executive Members, Councillors and Officers alike - we must decide whether we want to be the best that we can be or continue to frustrate one another. I look forward to assisting in any way that I can in ensuring that the Scrutiny function in York is as effective as it can be going forwards. With that in mind, I wish the next Chair of CSMC all the patience, persistence and resilience they will require.