
Scrutiny Management Committee

6th December 2010

Report of the Assistant Director – Legal, Governance & ITT

Updating Working Practices in Scrutiny

Summary

1. This report updates Members on a series of planned changes to the way scrutiny reviews are approached in York, with a view to speeding up the processes and making the scrutiny experience more engaging for Members and public alike.

Background

2. At the meeting of Full Council in October 2010, the Chair of this Committee reported on a number of initiatives aimed at improving the scrutiny experience and profile over the coming months, as follows:
 - Chairing regional scrutiny member events, held in York on 29th September and 18 October 2010 (see separate report on agenda);
 - Establishing lead directorate officers to support scrutiny throughout the Council, at Chief Officer level;
 - meeting with other Scrutiny Chairs and Vice-Chairs to establish what needs improving;
 - a simple one-step approach to assessing potential scrutiny topics
3. In addition, since Full Council in October, the following improvements to practices have been introduced:
 - a new, simpler and more digestible format for final scrutiny review reports will be ‘trialled’ for some reviews (e.g. School Travel Plans, Newgate Market);
 - former topic registration form replaced by simpler topic assessment;
 - informal meetings in private have been reinstated to allow for researching and gathering of evidence flexibly and quickly
4. These initiatives are part of a ‘rolling plan’ to improve interaction with scrutiny and hopefully provide a better experience for Members, officers and the public as they engage with the function. A recent training session for Members and Lead ‘Directorate’ Scrutiny Officers – upon which the Chair of this Committee reported at October Full Council – confirmed that their experiences were not always positive and somewhat confusing in terms of expectations.

Making Progress

5. In light of existing experiences, the measures identified by the Chair in his report to October Council (set out in paragraph 2 above) are being implemented in the current cycle and beyond to test their appropriateness and help sharpen the focus of what scrutiny does and how it does it.

6. **Regional Member Scrutiny Network**

The Chair of Scrutiny Management Committee has become a regular contributor at this regional network, chairing recently held meetings in York. This body is collectively committed to promoting the value of scrutiny around local authorities throughout the region. It provides a platform from which Members (and officers alike) can share experiences and learn from each other. In particular, it enables the profile of scrutiny in York to be raised regionally. A separate report on this agenda sets out recent activities at that level which have involved the Chair of this Committee.

7. **Lead 'Directorate' Officers**

These 'lead officers' have been established for some time and an outline of their role in supporting scrutiny members is attached (Annex A). The basis for formalising this relationship is to provide both a 'connection' at a senior level in the organisation for scrutiny committee chairs and Members, and to provide scrutiny officers with a channel for assisting in the gathering of information and evidence for scrutiny committees.

8. **Meeting Scrutiny Committees**

The Chair of Scrutiny Management Committee (SMC) has made arrangements to go along to all the main standing scrutiny committees in the coming months to hear about their collective experiences and talk through progress with some of the changes. These discussions are to take place over meetings in January 2011. The Chair is hoping to learn more from scrutiny members about what works, what doesn't work and what could work better. That information could further help support refining scrutiny working practices and improve performance.

9. **Revised Topic Assessment**

As referred to above, Members are currently conducting some newer scrutiny reviews using the one step approach towards setting aims and objectives, scoping and putting timescales on reviews. This alone will cut out the further necessity under the former approach for at least one additional formal meeting in the process. This is, potentially, hugely timesaving given that formal scrutiny meetings are only scheduled bi-monthly.

Equally, this approach is designed to engage Members and relevant officers alike at the very earliest stage in the pros and cons of undertaking a given review.

As a result of adopting this simpler approach, the former topic registration form (see Annex B) has been replaced with this new one step approach to topic assessment

(see Annex C). The intention is that Members will be presented with the new form at a committee meeting. The form will already have section 1 completed by the Member submitting the topic, and the committee as a whole will then complete the remainder of the form at the meeting to enable work on the review to commence quickly.

10. **Public Registration**

The Constitution currently permits the registration of topics for scrutiny by the public but this, of course, does need some management of the administration. It has been necessary to try to simplify the process for allowing public registration of potential topics. A revised public registration form is attached (Annex D). The form is again simplified and in line with the new approach.

To date, no member of the public has actually registered a topic but in all honesty, the Council has done little to raise awareness that the Constitution currently allows for this.

It is now therefore, considered pragmatic to make the new form available on the website and to ensure copies are available in Council reception areas.

11. **Presenting Final Scrutiny Review Reports**

For some new scrutiny reviews, the Scrutiny Team are working on presenting final reports in a shorter, more easily readable format to the public. The Scrutiny Team have looked at a range of alternative formats and plan to present some coming final reports in A5 booklet style. This approach is being trialled in an effort to test whether a new format would be engaging to others, inside and outside the Council. Some other local authorities and institutions do this quite successfully. The proposed format is also relatively cost effective. The first point in the process at which this new format can practically be introduced is when a scrutiny review is completed and ready for publication to the Executive. A sample template of the new format will be tabled at the meeting. It will be trialled initially for the ongoing School Travel Plan, Newgate Market and Carers reviews.

12. **Informal Meetings**

The Assistant Director ICT and Governance (Monitoring Officer) has agreed that it would be entirely appropriate for Tasks Groups or Scrutiny Committees to meet, privately, to gather evidence/information in support of a review, on the basis that no formal decisions are being made at such sessions and the information gathered will be presented to Members formally in final scrutiny reports. This approach will enable scrutiny members to meet quickly and responsively, without the constraints of formal meeting papers and deadlines.

Consultation

13. The initiatives contained within this report are based on soundings taken with Members and officers at various stages on the improvement journey and also on practices gleaned from elsewhere. Chairs of reviews which culminate in a presentation of newly formatted final reports, will be consulted.

In addition, as previously mentioned, the Chair of this Committee has planned visits to all main standing scrutiny committees to gain feedback on these ongoing initiatives.

Options

14. There are no specific options for SMC to consider and the report is for information, to demonstrate some of the key initiatives taking place to facilitate improved experiences and practices. It is suggested that this Committee may wish to receive an update on how practically successful these changes prove to be before the end of the Municipal Year.

Corporate Priorities

15. The initiatives outlined in this report, if successful, will contribute to the Councils overall aim of being an effective organisation, 'a modern Council, with high standards in all we do'.

Implications

16. There are no financial, human resources, legal or other implications associated with the contents of this report, other than a comparatively small financial cost to produce A5 format scrutiny review final reports and this will be contained from within existing budgets.

Risk Management

17. There is a potentially significant risk to the future of scrutiny within City of York Council if it does not look to its own current working practices surrounding scrutiny to make the whole experience more appealing, responsive and engaging to those who participate (including the public).

Recommendations

18. Members are asked to note the initiatives currently taking place and to request a further update on the new working practices prior to the end of the current financial year.

REASON: To improve and make more engaging current working practices

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Report Approved

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Specialist Implications Officer(s) None

Wards Affected:

All



For further information please contact the author of the report

Background Papers:

Scrutiny Procedure Rules – the Constitution.

Annexes (online only)

- Annex A** Role of Lead “Directorate” Officers
- Annex B** Current Topic Registration Form
- Annex C** New Topic Assessment Form
- Annex D** New Public Registration Form