

EFFECTIVE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY

INFORMATION

2. The roles of overview and scrutiny

We can identify five main roles of overview and scrutiny in local government:

- Holding to account
- Performance management
- Policy review
- Policy development
- External scrutiny

Some real life examples of each of these roles are given here.

Holding to account: review of executive decision using call in powers

Doncaster: Reversal of a cabinet decision to close a residential unit in a special school

The executive was proposing to close a residential unit within a special school. This was in line with a previous decision for the Council to cease maintaining residential facilities for pupils with moderate learning difficulties. The Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee identified this proposal as an issue from the forward plan and referred it to the Lifelong Learning Scrutiny Sub-Committee for further investigation. At a November meeting of the sub-committee, members considered the report and took evidence from Education officers. In a December meeting, the committee took further evidence from Education and Social Services officers as well as from the head of the school. At its January meeting, the committee debated the evidence and considered possible options. The sub-committee found that a corporate approach to the issue of residential care for children with special needs was needed, with a more integrated approach between Education and Social Services. The committee recommended reversing the original closure decision as a reflection of a need to adopt this more joined-up approach. The executive agreed and the original decision was reversed.

Holding to account: Pre-decision scrutiny of executive decisions

Approach to Pre-Decision Scrutiny in Gateshead MBC

In Gateshead, decisions which will be considered by the cabinet at future meetings are channelled in advance to the relevant Scrutiny Panel. The Scrutiny Panel considers whether it wishes to make express a review to the cabinet, in relation to each decision where it does so, the cabinet takes into account the views of the Scrutiny Panel in making a formal decision. Disagreements between cabinet and scrutiny panel are rare.

Holding to account: scrutiny of past performance or events

Dorset: Review of the impact of cuts in the allocation of grants to voluntary sector organisations.

The Dorset County Council Audit and Scrutiny Committee 'called to account' the decision making process for allocating grants to voluntary and other outside bodies. There was evidence of inconsistencies in the way in which grant decisions were taken, and also concerns about the lack of advance consultation, and the abrupt notification of grant decrease or cessation. Representatives of a sample of outside organisations were invited to the meeting to present their views to members.

As a result of the Call to Account, the executive was asked to reconsider the provisions of The Dorset Compact, which provides a framework for voluntary and public sector relationships, including the possibility of its expansion to take account of all organisations with which the County Council works in partnership. They were also requested to find alternative ways of funding the one organisation whose existence had been threatened by the withdrawal of grant.

Performance management: keeping implementation under review

Value of White Horse: A 'Traffic Light' System of Performance Indicators

The Vale of White Horse District Council produces a quarterly report which looks at progress of key programmes and projects. The performance indicator element uses a traffic light approach to indicate performance against target and also provides a comparison with the national quartiles. Providing this information in a simple to understand, consistent, format over an 18 month period has enabled Executive and Scrutiny members to gain a better appreciation of the significance of the various indicators, trends and issues that need to be explored further.

Performance management: contributing to the improvement of performance

North Tyneside: Review of the Best Value Performance Plan

The Overview and Scrutiny Committee at North Tyneside Council initiated a thorough review of the Council's Best Value Performance Plan (BVPP). This was the first and most significant piece of co-ordinated work involving the Overview and Scrutiny Committee and the Council's select committees. The purpose of the exercise was firstly to critically examine the BVPP in terms of its general content and secondly to carry out some sample reality testing in terms of the key policy priorities set out in the Plan. The exercise involved, amongst other things, Cabinet members being called to account by the

Overview and Scrutiny and Select Committees on the delivery of the key policy priorities; detailed consideration of the framing of the key priorities; and some basic reality checking to measure both the effectiveness of arrangements to achieve these key policy priorities and the impact on the community.

The exercise has proven remarkably successful. In its final report to Cabinet the Overview and Scrutiny Committee suggested, amongst other things, that there were too many stated objectives; poor wording; absence of adequate financial or supporting information and inadequate mechanisms in respect of delivery. Next year, the BVPP was radically changed to reflect the Committee's views.

Policy Review: a council-wide approach

Bristol City Council: Schools Exclusions Select Committee Project

The Learning and Culture Scrutiny commission and Equalities and Social Inclusion Scrutiny Commission received a series of reports highlighting the high levels of permanent and fixed term exclusions in Bristol schools. The Commission reports, combined with the findings/recommendations in the Education Ofsted report, resulted in the establishment of a Schools Exclusion Select Committee.

The committee's brief was to recommend a council-wide strategy to reduce the number of pupils excluded from Bristol LEA schools. It looked at the impact exclusions had on the council's services as a whole rather than regarding the 'problem' of exclusions (and selections to it) as being the responsibility of the Department of Education and Lifelong Learning.

In the light of the evidence that there was an over-representation of Black and other Ethnic Minority pupils and Special Education Needs (SEN) pupils in the exclusion data the Select Committee established two working groups to investigate these two issues in greater depth. The overall impact of the three pieces of work was greater than the sum of its parts.

Each of the three elements co-opted members representing a range of relevant interests (for example, a headteacher, Bristol Racial Equality Council, Bristol Race Forum). Each element heard evidence from a range of relevant sources (for example, two good practice authorities, various relevant agencies and key individuals). Each of the three elements assembled evidence about the nature and distribution of the problem, and made recommendations for change.

The ultimate outcome was a report which was presented to the Executive member for Education and Lifelong Learning. This member agreed to develop a strategy to implement the recommendations over the next six months.

Policy Review: an example involving partners

Road Safety in Warrington

A scrutiny review in Warrington provided a framework to work with other local organisations on reducing deaths and casualties from road collisions. The Scrutiny Committee decided to conduct an in-depth review of road safety

because:

- the Community Safety Audit (which included a survey of 8,000 households in Warrington) showed that local people are concerned about road safety – it was one of the top five issues in the survey – and believe it should be given priority.
- Warrington’s casualty figures compare very badly with Cheshire, the North West and Great Britain
- the Best Value Performance Indicator (BVPI 99) – the number of police reported casualties per 100,000 population – confirmed that Warrington is the bottom quartile of unitary councils
- the human, financial and community costs are all bad news for Warrington.

So the impact on people’s lives in Warrington, performance indicator information, public consultation, and national comparisons all contributed to the decision to prioritise this review.

The members of the Warrington Road Safety Partnership – the council, police, fire service, hospital and magistrates – all took part in the initial meeting. A later scrutiny meeting heard from the police as well as council staff involved with education, community safety, economic development and transportation. Education, enforcement of traffic laws, road design and engineering and funding were all issues discussed by the review. The recommendations covered both an improved council response and proposed changes to be made by the police, including improving the information on road incidents provided by the police to the council.

The scrutiny committee has maintained an interest in this subject and is working to raise the profile of the problems locally, and in particular the use of 20 mph zones to increase safety.

Policy development: Budget formulation

Knowsley: Involvement of scrutiny committees in the review of the executive’s draft budget.

In Knowsley Metropolitan Borough Council, the five scrutiny committees were invited to evaluate the appropriateness of the draft budget proposals drawn up by the executive. A range of modifications were proposed, which the executive considered and in several cases accepted. Members of the Liberal Democrat opposition participated fully in the process of review. As a result of the responsiveness of the executive to these representations, the revised budget proposal they presented to full council was supported unanimously.

Policy Development: Using in depth reviews

Tower Hamlets LBC : Parental Involvement in Schools

The Education and Youth Scrutiny Panel agreed to undertake an in-depth examination of 'Parental Involvement in Schools'. This was an issue initially raised within the authority through the Governors Forum. It is also a topical issue in education circles, since there is growing evidence that greater parental involvement in schools raises pupil attainment.

The Panel undertook its investigation in the following way:

- It set out clear terms of reference for the inquiry;
- It undertook a range of oral hearings in locations appropriate to the nature of the investigation, including one at Tower Hamlets Parents Centre and another at Bow Family Centre;
- The Panel took care to ensure that it took evidence from wide range of appropriate groups;
- The Panel interviewed a range of council officers;
- The Panel also considered examples of interesting practice from local and national contexts

A report from the investigation made three key recommendations: that a strategy for parental involvement is developed; that in developing the strategy a survey of parents attitudes is undertaken and further research is considered on best methods for increasing parental involvement; and that the relevant officers report back to the scrutiny panel on progress in six months time. The Panel also arranged for a display showing the range of work undertaken within the Borough relating to parental involvement to be on show near the council chamber to coincide with a meeting of the full council.

Since the publication of the report, the Council developed a strategy for parental involvement in schools, which was considered again by the Panel in May 2001; this strategy included the creation of a Parents Panel of 300 parents, which would be involved in a range of consultations. Progress on this strategy was later also considered by the Policy and Implementation Committee.

External Scrutiny: Health

Telford and Wrekin Council : Response to the Proposed Merger of two Hospital Trusts

The Telford and Wrekin Health and Social Care Scrutiny Commission carried out a comprehensive review of the proposed merger of the Princess Royal (Telford) and Royal Shrewsbury Hospitals. It recognised the strength of feeling amongst residents of Telford and Wrekin about the impact of the merger. Using academic evidence of the negative impacts of previous hospital mergers, and a range of local consultations the Commission produced a report which included a series of recommendations designed to ensure the 'public guaranteeing a visible maintaining of a fully-functioning general hospital in Telford'. The carrying out of this project does not appear to have adversely affected the constructive working relationship between the council and the NHS Trust boards involved.

External scrutiny: Issues of Public Concern

Salford : Investigation into the impact of flooding

Following up on a question raised by an individual councillor the Committee investigated incidences of flooding across Salford. Initially, Members visited the worst affected areas and gained an understanding of the often-horrendous impact of foul flooding which in some instances entered homes. They then met with United Utilities to ask what they could do to stop or at least reduce the risk and impact of flooding in specific areas. United Utilities responded quickly and comprehensively to address many of the issues raised. The result was a combination of short-term practical measures where taken and longer-term project plans shared with the committee. As well as the positive steps taken Members gained an understanding of the work of United Utilities and were able to share knowledge and plans with local residents. The scrutiny committee were also able to influence the council's own directorates and external agencies to take measures to reduce the impact of surface water flooding.

Bristol: Select Committee on Post Office closures

In Bristol City Council, a select committee was set up in response to the Post Office's announcement of plans to review the future of its local branches in Bristol. Post Office Ltd's 'Urban Reinvention Programme' will consider the future role of its local branches across the country on an area-by-area basis.

In response to public concern about the possible impact of such a review the select committee sought the views of local people and assessed the local impact. Evidence has been heard from local MPs, sub postmasters and organisations representing older people. Recommendations were made to the government, Post Office Ltd and council management. Public interest in this Committee has been high and meetings have received TV coverage.

