

SCRUTINY PANEL B

Meeting held in the Committee Room, Council Offices, Urban Road, Kirkby-in-Ashfield,

on Thursday, 21st March, 2019 at 7.00 pm

Present: Councillor Mick Murphy in the Chair;

Councillors Don Davis, Lauren Mitchell and
Matthew Relf.

Apologies for Absence: Councillors Helen Hollis, Cathy Mason and
Glenys Maxwell.

Officers Present: Lynn Cain, Mike Joy and Shane Wright.

In Attendance: Councillor Paul Roberts.

SB.14 Declarations of Disclosable Pecuniary or Personal Interests and Non Disclosable Pecuniary/Other Interests

No declaration of interests were made.

SB.15 Minutes

RESOLVED

that the minutes of the meeting of the Panel held on 29th January, 2019, be
received and approved as a correct record.

SB.16 Workplan Consultation and Delivery of the Scrutiny Function 2019/20

The Chairman introduced the item and reminded Members that the meeting
would be the last meeting of the Panel prior to the District Elections in May
2019. Rather than commence a new review at this late stage, it had been
agreed that it would be prudent for Panel Members to consider the potential
impact of the upcoming national scrutiny guidance, evaluate the Council's
scrutiny function over the last four years and to consider topics for the 2019/20
Scrutiny Workplan.

New Government Scrutiny Guidance

The Service Manager, Democratic & Scrutiny Services advised the Panel that
officers had been waiting for some considerable time for the new statutory
scrutiny guidance to be released by Government. The guidance was originally
due to be published in December 2018 but due to Brexit priorities, the release
date has been pushed back indefinitely.

The scrutiny function was first introduced by the Local Government Act 2000 as part of the requirements for the new Cabinet/Leader regime. Should a local authority adopt a Stronger Leader model to facilitate their decision making processes then a scrutiny function will also need to be provided.

No new statutory guidance had been released since 2006 and it was evident that the landscape of scrutiny had changed over the last few years. Originally the scrutiny function enabled members to hold the Cabinet to account, be a critical friend in relation to policy development and to consider items on the Forward Plan.

However, from what was already known about the anticipated new guidance, the emphasis would now focus on:-

- scrutiny of outside/external organisations;
- recognising scrutiny's legal and democratic legitimacy;
- allocating sufficient resources to the scrutiny function;
- ensuring scrutiny members have powers to access pertinent information as required;
- focussing on scrutiny of financial resilience and sustainability of functions.

It was hoped that local authorities would give renewed consideration to the level of support given to their scrutiny function thus ensuring the provision of an effective service that adds value to the work of the authority.

Panel Members were advised that once the guidance was released, a report would be submitted to the next available Overview and Scrutiny Committee meeting for consideration.

Scrutiny Improvements

Due to the fact that the current term of office was coming to an end, the Scrutiny Research and Support Officer suggested that it would be a good idea to reflect on and evaluate how the Council's scrutiny function had performed over the last four years. Members comments were to be welcomed and also consideration could be given to some suggested improvements for the next term of office.

It was important that the credibility of the scrutiny function including its Members was maintained with a constant eye to raising its profile wherever possible. A strengthening of engagement with stakeholders during the review process would benefit both the Panel's deliberations and fulfil the Council's ongoing commitment towards transparent and informative engagement.

A reconsideration of scrutiny committee memberships and format (i.e. thematic panels) could be undertaken whilst ensuring that all new scrutiny members are fully supported and trained to ensure that their scrutiny work is focussed and well directed. Thought should also be given to the value, or otherwise, of utilising the expertise of co-opted scrutiny members and technical advisers as and when required.

Scrutiny meetings have traditionally been held at the main Council offices but in a bid to increase community engagement, Members could consider utilising different venues around the District to make the meetings more accessible to

local residents and if appropriate, to locate any such meetings based on the particular Workplan topic under review.

Scrutiny Workplan

It had been previously acknowledged that the compilation and management of the Council's Scrutiny Workplan could be expanded and suggestions had been made to ensure any future Workplans made reference to timelines for completion of reviews and contained an outcome tracking mechanism to ensure all interested parties were kept informed as required.

Discussion

Members took the opportunity to reflect on how the Council's scrutiny function had performed over the last four years and debated some of the issues and potential improvements as follows:-

- following the cessation of the four Area Committees in 2017, a gap had been left in relation to liaison with communities and local residents which the Overview and Scrutiny Committee and Panels could bridge with more public interest led topics for review;
- the scrutiny function should have two sides; a strategic direction for reviewing and holding to account the decision making processes and arrangements of the Council and a more community led engagement focus for reviewing topics of interest to the public;
- advice on how Independent Members are recruited and the potential benefits of producing a job description to alert potential candidates as to what is expected of them whilst undertaking the role;
- the importance of a good quality Workplan which contains a variety of topics for consideration;
- a suggestion that more meetings are streamed live through the Council's Facebook and Twitter pages to increase public engagement and accessibility;
- a suggestion that the Scrutiny Panels could tap into the work and expertise being demonstrated through the 'Discover Ashfield' initiative including the possible recruitment of business representatives as Independent Members if appropriate;
- a concern that many of the Scrutiny Committee and Panel meetings are poorly attended by the public and consideration of how this may be remedied including holding meetings at community venues within the District;
- how social media has changed how the public acquire information and interact with the Council regarding matters of interest over recent years.

In relation to the Scrutiny Workplan, the Scrutiny Research and Support Officer reiterated the importance of having an effective and inclusive Workplan and Members made the following suggestions for the 2019/20 municipal year:-

1. the impact of the introduction of Universal Credit on the Council and its customers;
2. to consider the Stronger Leader model against the possible introduction of the alternative Committee System;
3. the risk and impact of Ashfield District Council becoming part of a Unitary Authority;
4. the Council's ongoing commitment towards apprenticeship opportunities;
5. the value of the third sector delivering a range of Council objectives;
6. to review the Nottinghamshire Business Rates Pool and how it facilitates the allocation of its pooled resources to encourage economic growth within the area;
7. the disparity of business rates requirements for private children's nurseries as opposed to public run nurseries and to consider options for levelling the playing field;
8. ways to improve communication between Members and officers to ensure Elected Members are kept informed of events/issues within their particular wards on a regular basis.

RESOLVED that

- a) the Service Manager, Democratic & Scrutiny Services be requested to circulate a copy of the new Government statutory scrutiny guidance to Panel Members should it be released before May, 2019;
- b) Members comments/responses in relation to the effectiveness of the Council's scrutiny function over the last four years and any suggestions for future provision, be received and noted;
- c) the potential topics for the 2019/20 Scrutiny Workplan be submitted to the first meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee (following the District Election in May 2019) for further consideration and inclusion on the Workplan if agreed.

The meeting closed at 7.37 pm

Chairman.