



EVALUATION OF OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY

Council - 2 March 2009

Report Title	EVALUATION OF OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY
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Agenda Status: PUBLIC

1 Purpose

- 1.1 To receive the report - "Evaluation of Overview and Scrutiny".
- 1.2 To note that the findings from the self-evaluation framework are intended to be used as the basis for developing an Overview and Scrutiny Improvement Plan.

2 Recommendations

- 2.1 That Council notes the report – "Evaluation of Overview and Scrutiny".

3 Background and Issues

- 3.1 The Centre for Public Scrutiny (CfPS) is a national organisation, which was established to promote the value of overview and scrutiny in modern and effective government. CfPS aims to do this through a number of measures, including the production of guidance, advice on best practice and promoting information sharing. The research has shown that, in the relatively short time since Overview and Scrutiny was introduced, there has been a slow but gradual improvement of its outcomes.
- 3.2 Acknowledging that each Local Authority undertakes Overview and Scrutiny in a different way and the absence of objective measures by which its success or otherwise could be assess, the CfPS has developed a self-evaluation framework.
- 3.3 The self-evaluation framework is a mechanism for all Local Authorities to examine the effectiveness of their Overview and Scrutiny arrangements and to identify areas for improvement. The framework is based on the CfPS four principles of good scrutiny: -
 - Providing a critical friend
 - Reflecting the public voice
 - Leading and owning the process
 - Making an impact

- 3.4 The framework is a series of questions, based on the above principles, which require the assessor to show evidence of achievement, identify areas for improvement and also emphasise potential barriers to improvement.
- 3.5 A significant amount of evidence was gathered from a variety of sources, details of which are contained in the report as attached at Appendix A: -
- The Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee and the Overview and Scrutiny Officer completed the self-evaluation framework form
 - All other Councillors were sent a short questionnaire, comprising six main questions regarding the Overview and Scrutiny process at Northampton Borough Council
 - The Head of Scrutiny at Tameside Metropolitan Borough Council and the Scrutiny Officers from Rugby Borough Council undertook separate peer reviews
 - The Overview and Scrutiny Officer carried out a comparison of Northampton Borough Council's Scrutiny function with that of other districts, noted as best practice by the CfPS
- 3.6 Once completed, the framework provided a clear picture of how Overview and Scrutiny operates in Northampton. The findings will then be used to identify priorities for improvement planning.
- 3.7 After all the evidence was gathered, a number of key findings were identified which are highlighted on page 4 of the report as attached at Appendix A.
- 3.8 A summary of the findings is detailed below:-

Achievements

- There have been some good issue-based Reviews.
- Overview and Scrutiny sets its own work programme.
- Members are committed to the Overview and Scrutiny process.
- All Overview and Scrutiny members have a fairly good awareness of their role in Scrutiny.
- There is effective challenge to performance monitoring.
- There is good use of external witnesses and experts.
- A formal monitoring system is in place to monitor progress of the implementation of Overview and Scrutiny recommendations.
- Past issues for Review have been suggested by the public, for example Allotments (water charges).
- Task and Finish Groups are non-partisan and focus on the issue being reviewed.
- Scrutiny is generally of a consensus nature and it is rare for a vote to be used.
- Cabinet reacts well to scrutiny and is required to formally respond to scrutiny recommendations within two Cabinet cycles.
- There is effective scrutiny. For example the work around the closure of post offices and the Review of the contaminated water incident.
- The relationship between Scrutiny and the Executive was considered by the Peer Reviewer to be very good and the Executive is keen to see a challenging and effective Scrutiny Function.
- A number of effective publications have been produced, for example the Overview and Scrutiny Toolkit and a regular newsletter.
- There is an effective Call-in process.

- There is positive support from senior management for Scrutiny, particularly as a senior officer is assigned to each Task and Finish Group for the life of the Review.
- Good quality information is issued to Overview and Scrutiny members.

Challenges

- Limited pre-decision scrutiny.
- The Forward Plan is not used to inform the work of Scrutiny.
- Lack of understanding of how Overview and Scrutiny can help the improvement of the Council.
- The general public often do not understand Overview and Scrutiny.
- The public must be interested in a Scrutiny Review if they are to participate.
- The public is not consulted about the Overview and Scrutiny Work Programme.
- There is limited press coverage of Overview and Scrutiny Reviews.
- The term 'scrutiny' is often seen as negative and overly intrusive.
- The value of Overview and Scrutiny is not always recognised.
- Overview and Scrutiny Officer resources are limited
- The meeting cycles do not allow Overview and Scrutiny enough time to examine forward plan issues.
- The current number of Overview and Scrutiny Committees and the function of the Management Committee needs to be reviewed to improve delivery of outcomes.
- The Overview and Scrutiny website requires updating.
- Better attendance at development sessions.
- The Overview and Scrutiny work programme has a tendency to be reactive, rather than focusing on delivery of the corporate plan and service improvement.

Suggested Changes

- The Portfolio Holder(s) and Leader should be invited to inform the relevant Overview and Scrutiny Committee of his/her priorities at the work programme setting stage.
- Work Programmes should contain clear links to Council priorities and National Indicator Set performance information and encourage an input from the Executive into the development of the Work programme.
- Overview and Scrutiny must be clearly identified with the improvement programme for Northampton and this would be aided by the adoption of a clear mission statement for the Overview and Scrutiny function.
- There needs to be linkage of Overview and Scrutiny work to the Council's Improvement Plan.
- Consideration should be given to renaming the Overview and Scrutiny Committees as Panels.
- Consideration should be given to changing the role of the Management Committee into a more Overview committee type role
- There should be more engagement with the press, including proactive statements from the Chairs.
- There is a need to demonstrate clearer outcomes following Reviews.
- The profile of Overview and Scrutiny in Northampton and therefore the Borough of Northampton itself can be raised by highlighting through, for example, the Centre for Public Scrutiny web site and other sources, the good practice currently being undertaken.
- The evaluation of Overview and Scrutiny could be carried out every two years.

- Consideration could be given to holding some Overview and Scrutiny meetings in community buildings.
- The percentage of recommendations accepted by Cabinet should be calculated.

3.9 It is suggested that the Overview and Scrutiny Improvement Plan could then be used to: -

- Demonstrate Scrutiny's value to auditors and inspectors
- Encourage involvement in the process of those being scrutinised
- Communicate the potential of Scrutiny to local communities
- Build confidence of those undertaking Scrutiny activities

4 Options

4.1 This report is for information and therefore there are no options for decision.

5 Implications (including financial implications)

5.1 Policy

5.1.1 The work of Overview and Scrutiny plays a major part in the development of the Council's policy framework through its work programme.

5.2 Priorities

5.2.1 Effective Overview and Scrutiny arrangements leading to improvement in service design and delivery contribute to achieving the ambition of being a well managed Council where the customer is at the heart of what we do.

5.3 Resources and Risk

5.3.1 The improvement plan will take account of the availability of resources to ensure a realistic programme of action.

5.4 Legal

5.4.1 The duties to undertake Overview and Scrutiny are set out in the Local Government Act 2000.

5.5 Equality

5.5.1 Equality issues will need to be considered when the Overview and Scrutiny Improvement Plan is produced. This will need to include an Equality Impact Assessment.

6 Consultees (Internal and External)

6.1.1 Members of the Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee, along with the Overview and Scrutiny Officer, completed CfPS's self-evaluation form.

- 6.1.2 All Councillors were issued with a short questionnaire comprising six main questions regarding the Overview and Scrutiny process at Northampton Borough Council (NBC).
- 6.1.3 As part of the self-evaluation process, Scrutiny Teams of two Local Authorities carried out peer reviews of the Overview and Scrutiny function at NBC.

7 Background Papers

7.1 The key paper is:

- CfPS self-evaluation form

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