

Scrutiny Committee – 12th February 2009

10. Review of Report Writing

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Purpose to Report

Scrutiny Members raised the issue of report writing at the last Scrutiny Committee meeting – there were general concerns about the information contained in Committee reports – is financial information clear enough – etc. This report outlines the recent work undertaken by the Democratic Services Team to try and assess the views of members regarding current report formats.

Action Required

Scrutiny Committee members are asked to consider the following points and make any necessary recommendations to District Executive:

- What do you see as the main issues relating to current committee reports?
- What changes do you think would improve committee reports?

Whatever recommendations the Scrutiny Committee make, members should be mindful of the need to keep the report writing process as simple and manageable as possible for all concerned.

Background

Committee reports are a vital part of the decision making process and as such, decision makers need relevant information displayed clearly. It is understandable that report authors wish to ensure that all members have as much information as possible before being asked to make any decisions. However, modern local government is based on the principles of openness and transparency and these principles need to be demonstrated in all report writing. The following information should be clearly understood by all those who may read committee reports:

- Who is taking the decision?
- Contact details
- Purpose of report – why is the decision being taken?
- Key recommendations
- Alternative options
- How taking this decision will contribute to delivering the Council's Corporate Plan
- Any financial implications
- Any legal implications
- Who has been consulted
- What are the risks associated with this decision ?

Know your audience

The language used in committee reports is also important. It is inevitable that there will be some language that is specific to local government but every effort should be made to avoid using 'jargon' and especially explaining any acronyms that may be used – it is

worth remembering that as we strive to improve public participation in the democratic decision making process – our reports must not be a barrier to engagement.

Standard templates

At the December Scrutiny Committee meeting, members raised the issue of having different styles of reports for different committees, especially a separate report style for Scrutiny.

There are arguments for and against each option. To have a standard report template would make the report writing process more streamlined and would mean that officers and members would become used to the production and consideration of a single style of report. The public would also recognise a single report style.

The focus of Scrutiny Committee reports does needs to be slightly different to other committee reports and may benefit from an alternative format. A separate template for Scrutiny Committee reports would allow Scrutiny members to focus on one of the key Scrutiny principles of holding the executive to account and would emphasise the distinct role of Scrutiny. However, having alternative report templates may lead to some confusion on the part of report authors and would complicate the report production process. Also there are occasions where Executive reports are considered by Scrutiny and it would simply not be feasible to reproduce the same report in a different format. It could also be argued that Scrutiny Committee members should be able to exercise effective Scrutiny skills regardless of the format of the report under consideration.

Research

In December 2008 a survey was sent to all 60 elected members asking them about the quality of current committee reports and if there was anything they wished to change. There was a disappointing response rate of only 21%. The responses received do not constitute a reliable evidence base but do provide some useful indicators of the issues that could be addressed through a review of existing report formats.

The Survey posed the following questions:

1. Do you find the existing format easy to read and understand?
2. How do you feel about the length of committee reports?
3. Do you find it easy to extract the most relevant and significant facts from the reports, or do you feel a one page executive summary would help you to do this?
4. Any other changes you would like to see?

It would be helpful if members of the Scrutiny Committee could consider these same questions in advance of the February meeting to help inform the discussion.

Some of the key comments made were as follows:

- reports are far too long
- reports should be limited to 2 pages
- there should a one page synopsis containing all the key information
- reports should outline more clearly other options and the risk of doing nothing
- reports contain too much jargon and are overly complicated
- no-one seems to know how to fill in risk matrix correctly

As several of those who responded to the survey identified the need for a one page synopsis to be included in all committee reports, a draft report summary has been prepared as shown below:

South Somerset District Council
Notice of Meeting



Making a difference where it counts

Report for :	District Executive
Date of meeting:	February 2009
Agenda Item Number:	

Title of report:	
Report Author (Contact Details)	
Portfolio Holder:	
Purpose of report:	
Key Recommendations:	
How does this report contribute to delivering the Corporate Plan?	
Alternative Options:	

<p>Financial Implications, to include comments of s151 Officer:</p>	
<p>Monitoring Officer Comments:</p>	
<p>Risk Matrix:</p>	<p>The Risk Matrix is a 5x5 grid. The vertical axis is labeled 'Impact' with an upward arrow, and the horizontal axis is labeled 'Likelihood' with a rightward arrow. The grid cells are colored as follows:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Row 1 (High Impact): All cells are red. Row 2 (Medium-High Impact): Cell 1 is yellow, Cell 2 is orange, Cell 3 is orange, Cell 4 is yellow with 'CY', Cell 5 is red. Row 3 (Medium Impact): Cell 1 is green, Cell 2 is yellow, Cell 3 is yellow, Cell 4 is yellow, Cell 5 is orange. Row 4 (Medium-Low Impact): Cell 1 is blue, Cell 2 is blue with 'CpP', Cell 3 is blue with 'CP', Cell 4 is green, Cell 5 is yellow. Row 5 (Low Impact): Cell 1 is blue with 'R', Cell 2 is blue, Cell 3 is blue, Cell 4 is blue, Cell 5 is green.