

Scrutiny Committee – 31st January 2012

10. Student Participation with Scrutiny

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Purpose of Report

This report sets out proposals to engage students in the Scrutiny function.

Action Required

Members of the Scrutiny Committee are requested to consider and comment on the proposals contained in this report.

Background

In October 2011 an initial report was considered by this Scrutiny Committee, outlining proposals for engaging local students in the democratic process via the Scrutiny function. The outcome of that meeting was that the Scrutiny Manager was asked to amend the proposals to take into account the points raised before bringing the matter back for the Committee to reconsider.

Below is an extract from the minutes of that meeting, setting out the points raised by members:

- It was felt that it was not appropriate to have young people involved in Task and Finish Reviews as confidential issues relating to finance and other matters were often discussed and it would be better for young people to participate in Scrutiny Committee meetings;
- Several members supported the concept of working with young people but were unable to support the proposed method outlined in the report;
- Some members stated that there was already an active Youth Council in Yeovil;
- It was felt that two young people was not enough and there needed to be more;
- It would be useful if the schools could identify the most appropriate young people;
- It was not felt that this proposal was a good use of the Scrutiny Manager's time and that limited resources have to be seen to be 'well spent'.

Since that meeting, the Scrutiny Manager e-mailed all Committee members seeking clarification and more detail on the concerns raised – one member responded.

This report therefore sets out the proposals for Student Engagement in more detail and in doing so addresses the concerns previously raised.

Student Engagement Proposal

This proposal is not intended to duplicate the work of various Youth Councils etc., which are already functioning well across the district. The proposal is more about getting the perspective of service users to inform a Scrutiny review and providing them with a valuable opportunity in return.

Scrutiny has previous experience of working well with young people, most notably on the Homefinder Somerset review. As defined by legislation, Scrutiny can co-opt any members of the community onto a Scrutiny review to bring additional perspectives and provide specialist knowledge as required. It would be perfectly possible to co-opt two local students onto a specific task and finish review on a first come – first served basis.

A selection process, involving completing an application form and attending an interview, is not required but it is hoped that such a process would provide local young people with vital workplace skills.

Whilst the proposal refers to 16-19 year olds, initial discussions with two local colleges indicate that although this is the formal educational bracket, in reality, interested students would be 16 – in the first year of their A-Level studies, and therefore not eligible for election to the Council.

If members agree to progress this proposal, the students would be working on a **specific** task and finish group – one topic suggested by the Leader would be to look at the role SSSC could and should be playing in working with local employers and educational establishments to ensure that local young people leave education with the right skills to obtain local, skilled and sustainable jobs. Youth unemployment is a national, regional and local high profile issue and there would be benefit to the council in understanding the issues particularly in the current economic climate. Arguably, such a review would not represent something which we would otherwise not be doing, or indeed be something that was wholly divorced from the functions of this council.

Improving community engagement, and in doing so, strengthening the Scrutiny function is an integral part of the Scrutiny Manager role. One of the four principles of effective Scrutiny as defined by the Centre for Public Scrutiny is that Scrutiny should act as the voice for public concerns, and this proposal for proactive engagement of local students would be an innovative, yet simple way of doing so.

As already mentioned, this is a pilot project, but if it proves successful, it could be continued and extended in the future.

All local institutions providing post 16 education would be invited to participate in this proposal – including Strode College whose catchment areas contains a large part of South Somerset. Initial discussions seem to suggest that teachers would be happy for their students to attend meetings without being accompanied by a member of staff, providing the school/college conducts an appropriate risk assessment. Such an activity would, in their view, provide a useful opportunity for independent learning – a key element of the assessed 16-19 syllabus. Of course, other schools may have different policies and procedures which would need to be addressed if and when appropriate.

Financial Implications

As stated, the choice of topic for a Task and Finish Group would not be something which we would not otherwise have done, therefore does not represent the use of any additional resources.

There would be some use of officer time in arranging the selection process, but seeking to develop and improve the Scrutiny function forms a core element of the Scrutiny Manager role.

There may be some costs involved in the payment of mileage claims for students attending meetings, but initial discussions with both Strode College and Yeovil College indicate that they would be prepared to meet any such costs.

Background Papers: Scrutiny agenda and minutes 4th October 2011
