

Scrutiny Committee – 1st May 2012

9. Draft Guidance for Overview and Scrutiny Substitute Members

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Purpose of Report

This report provides draft guidance for Substitute members of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee to consider.

Action required

Members of the Scrutiny Committee are requested to consider the style and content of the draft guidance and are requested to provide feedback during the meeting. The aim is to develop and agree a final document that will be made available to all Overview and Scrutiny Substitute members should it be required following Full Council in May.

Background

District Executive considered a report on 2nd February 2012 and agreed to recommend to Council the use of substitute members for Scrutiny Committee. This is scheduled to go before to Full Council on 17th May 2012.

Report

Overview and Scrutiny is part of the political process and plays a vital role in the decision-making and policy development processes at SSDC. Scrutiny is an innovative development in the democratic process because it provides an independent view.

Effectively, the Scrutiny process is like the Council having its own 'watchdog' representing the South Somerset Community. It's a process that provides a chance to get a second opinion on key decisions to be made at District Executive and Full Council. It is also used to inform and review any of the Council's plans, policies and strategies or question existing practices of the Council or any other public services causing concern.

Overview and Scrutiny make recommendations and scrutinise the policies, decisions and performance of the Executive. The Executive in turn consults with and responds to Overview and Scrutiny recommendations.

Full Council appoints the 14 members to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee – the committee must be politically balanced and has one Chairman (drawn from one of the opposition groups) and 2 vice chairmen (drawn from the administration and the other opposition group).

The Committee conducts its business through monthly meetings but can also establish time limited Task and Finish Groups to carry out more in-depth reviews. Any member of the Council who is not a member of the District Executive can work on a Task and Finish Group if they wish. The work of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee and the Task and Finish Groups are supported by the Scrutiny Manger post.

Whilst our Overview and Scrutiny arrangements have been set up to provide an independent process for informing and reviewing the Council's decisions and policies, 'scrutiny' is not intended to be a confrontational or divisive process. It is not a process that questions every decision the Council makes for example. If it was, clearly, this would be counter-productive to Council. Instead, all those involved in Overview and Scrutiny are aware that its purpose is to complement and add value to the work of the Council.

Topics for review by Overview and Scrutiny can come from various different sources – suggestions could be made by residents, District Executive and other members of the Council (any member of the Committee has the right to ask for an item to be included on a Scrutiny Committee agenda). An issue could also be highlighted when considering the performance of Council services. It is therefore important to have a flexible work programme that can respond to this variety of sources.

Regardless of its source, a topic chosen for review must have the potential to make a difference.

Overview and Scrutiny is different from more formally managed Committee work and the work of the Committee should reflect this by applying the following basic 'ground rules':

- informal style
- represent the district in its entirety
- challenging
- be flexible
- no party political stance
- use a variety of approaches, ensuring we use plain English to make Scrutiny as accessible as possible.
- No 'no-go' areas
- Maintain a strategic focus
- Be proactive and confident
- Seek to challenge, influence and make a difference.

The Scrutiny Managers provide independent support and advice to the Scrutiny Committee and assist in reviews by providing independent research and generally project managing the work of the Scrutiny Committee.

Roles and Responsibilities

Members of the Scrutiny Committee:

- Provide a clear voice for Overview and Scrutiny within the Council, helping lead all non-executive members in the Overview and Scrutiny process;
- Make evidence based recommendations based on their reviews and deliberations; and
- Are responsible for the outputs and outcomes of Overview and Scrutiny.

Being a member of the Scrutiny Committee is a rewarding responsibility, each member gets the opportunity to really explore the work of the Council, ensuring it responds to community needs effectively and explores ways of improving the services the Council provides.

The work of the Committee is not limited to receiving reports. It is able to be more proactive by calling Portfolio Holders to answer questions and explore issues in more depth where appropriate. It allows members a good opportunity to present the views of their community and encourage the engagement of residents with their local authority.

An effective Scrutiny Committee has:

- Project Planning Skills - the ability to plan events to ensure efficient and timely conduct of more in-depth reviews
- Team Working Skills - the ability to work towards a common goal
- Questioning Skills – the ability to probe and bottom out issues without being adversarial or aggressive, combined with the judgement to ask the right questions at the right time (i.e. when to remain strategically focussed and when to drill down into the detail)
- Listening skills – particularly where others are giving views and opinions that differ
- Analytical Skills – the ability to interpret and review data and reach conclusions

Procedure

Scrutiny Committee meet half an hour before the actual committee meeting commences for a confidential pre-meeting, this provides the committee members with an opportunity to collectively consider and discuss any thoughts, comments and observations they have regarding the reports within the Scrutiny and District Executive agenda. The aim of the meeting is to develop a structured questioning plan to present to report authors and portfolio holders.

Scrutiny Committee considers the District Executive agenda reports to formulate questions and comments to take forward to District Executive, the aim of this is to aid and inform the decision making process known as pre-decision Scrutiny, this can reduce the need for 'call-ins' but doesn't prevent them from happening should the need arise.

Background Papers: *Report to District Executive 2nd February 2012*
