

Structure of Overview and Scrutiny

Conservative Group Response

The Conservative group acknowledge the need for a review of the structure of the Councils overview and scrutiny function. However there are several factors that impact on when would be the best time to implement change. It is essential to ensure that Overview and Scrutiny fits the newly re organized City Council whatever its political make up from May 2010.

The timetable as suggested in the reports, whereby Council would decide any changes at its 1st of March meeting, is impractical and any implementation should be deferred until at least the AGM.

Careful consideration needs to be given to any changes necessary. Some of the main factors to be considered are:-

Significant changes in the organisation.

The developing, additional functions, powers and responsibilities for Scrutiny.

The potential for change in the political make up of the Council.

In answer to the questions asked of the group.

Question 1

a) Taking into account all their other roles as a councillor, do your Members believe that they currently have sufficient time to make our current scrutiny model effective and one which adds value to decision-making?

Members opinion was that generally members struggle to various degrees to devote sufficient time because of their individual circumstances. Other commitments, meetings and circumstances mean that sometimes decisions have to be made as to which commitment takes priority.

The group as a whole attempts to balance membership of the commissions according to availability, experience and interest of its members. The time available to individual members varies significantly according to a number of factors including.

Family and employment circumstances.

Political responsibilities.

Growing neighbourhood agenda.

Membership of regulatory committees.

The number of commissions of which they are members.

Outside bodies.

Casework.

Current arrangements mean that membership of the commissions is made up of only 30 of the 51 members of the Council. Some members hold membership of 4 commissions and others none. The effectiveness and added value of scrutiny is dependant on the availability, commitment, ability and interest levels of those members coupled with that of the available scrutiny officers.

Where it is possible to reform scrutiny without compromising the effectiveness, the group would encourage any measures to increase the numbers of members involved in scrutiny commissions and facilitate any reduction in the numbers of meetings necessary for individual members to attend.

Question 2

b) Do your Members consider that they can sustain commitment to adequate levels of time and energy to scrutiny over the next three years?

Ever increasing demands on Members time as outlined above, affect their ability to commit and sustain the necessary levels of time and energy.

The ever changing political scene in the City has meant, in recent years, that different levels of involvement and commitment to scrutiny, by political groups, has been required. Consistency of Commission Chairs and membership of particular commissions is desirable but has been hard to achieve year on year.

It is important that careful consideration is given to which members are assigned to which commission. Where a members personal circumstances or availability changes their membership of the commission may need to be reviewed.

c) Do your Members see advantages and/or disadvantages in moving to a model involving fewer commissions with broader portfolios?

The streamlining of commissions from 6 to 3 has the potential advantage of reducing some members level of time commitments and presents a potential financial saving.

However, it is difficult to see how such changes to the functions of scrutiny and as suggested “more carefully selected and focused scrutiny reviews“, can be achieved without compromising the over all effectiveness of the role.

Change would be necessary to the Councils constitution. The “definition of task for scrutiny” is currently all encompassing and wide ranging and in addition responsibilities have and will continue to expand.

Article 6 item c) states “Scrutiny will consider **any** matter affecting the area or its inhabitants. Fewer commissions and wider portfolios can only reduce further the councils ability to effectively meet their responsibilities to the public.

Current arrangements allow, to a large degree, for the mirroring of the roles of the Cabinet executive and assist opposition groups to effectively shadow the portfolios of the relevant Cabinet Member. Broader commission portfolios may lead to confusion, greater difficulty in identifying relevant issues and Cabinet Members having to be called to account by more than one commission.

There are issues in respect of Members Special Responsibility Allowances. There would potentially be savings. Indeed the issue of whether or not commission vice chairs should receive any allowance has previously been raised. Clearly a reduction from 6 to 3 commissions would result in a potential doubling of the areas of responsibility for the three Commissions and their Chairs.

There would have to be a significant increase in the length of the commission meetings agenda and or the numbers of meetings that the 3 commissions hold, to deal with the relevant issues.

Reducing the numbers of commissions does not reduce the number of relevant issues that need to be addressed. Matters for scrutiny are often dictated by events and the suggestion that there should be “more carefully selected and focused topic and reviews” implies that some of those currently carried out are not warranted.

The role of Commission Chair would as a consequence, require a much greater commitment in terms of time and responsibility. With the current level of Special Responsibility Allowances some concerns have been expressed as to which members would have the availability, time, ability, and inclination to take on the roles and responsibilities of one of only three Commission Chairs. The quality of overview and scrutiny outcomes would stand and fall by the strengths, ability and political will of just three Councillors.

A reduction in the number of commissions is unlikely to result in a corresponding reduction in the number of meeting necessary. The issues would be similar and the meetings would need to either be longer or more frequent. Less time would be allocated or available creating an inability to effectively consider the issues.

The call for special meetings, such as Call in, Councillor Call for Action etc. would remain the same and increase with new powers/responsibilities. Of the 57 meetings held, 47 were scheduled meetings but 10 were special meetings. It follows that fewer commissions would therefore have to deal with the same number of special meetings.

A number of commissions benefit from the involvement of people co-opted to give valuable input and steps would be necessary to facilitate, accommodate, retain and encourage their continued involvement. Their specialist knowledge and input would not readily fall into the enlarged and non specific portfolio of proposed three new commissions.

d) Does your Group have other suggestions to improve and/or modify the operation of overview and scrutiny in the Council? If so, how would those impact on the available officer (and Member) resources?

Council and Groups need to explore ways of involving more members in scrutiny whilst sharing and reducing the time commitment necessary from individual members.

With regard to officer resources there appears to be a natural reduction in scrutiny activities and meetings in the run up to the elections. The current schedule of events should be sustainable by current staffing levels. There is a clear case for a review as outlined in the report, but it is important to include factors listed in the report such as considering arrangements in place at other authorities. With the current staffing situation in O/S there could be some capacity issues in providing for such a detailed review, which will have significant officer resource implications.

Reorganisation means a time of change for the Authority and will have potential repercussions for the role of scrutiny. It will be difficult if not impossible to map out the changes necessary, when the structure of the organisation and political make up in May is as yet unknown.

Changes will need to take account of the outcome of these factors and also be clear about how to deal with the new powers/responsibilities for scrutiny such as scrutiny of partner agencies as listed in the report.(6.19 appendix 2)

The role and responsibilities of the Corporate Parenting Sub Commission are considered vital for the continued safeguarding of children in care. Before being abolished Members would have to be satisfied that the Corporate Parenting Board is properly able to discharge these responsibilities.

Labour Group Response

Think all members should be offered an opportunity to be on a commission – e.g. competent members (Barbara Jackson) has not been allocated a commission as all our allocation had been taken, a waste!

Some topic reviews would be of interest to other members they should be encouraged to be involved not just commission members

Information on all commissions should be circulated to members – what are they doing, why and outcome if changes have been made

Cabinet are not taking on the recommendations of O\S e.g. Exeter house, public conveniences without reasonable explanation