

Extract from the Notes of the Political Structures Working Group Meeting held on Wednesday, 19 May 2010 – Item 2: Initial Findings on the CfPS Overview and Scrutiny Report

Present: Cllr Keith Baldry
Cllr Roger Croad
Cllr Bill Hitchins
Cllr Trevor Pennington
Cllr Rosemary Rowe
Cllr John Tucker
Cllr Anne Ward
Cllr Judy Westacott MBE

Also in attendance: Becky Fowlds
Cllr Mike Hannaford (Item 1 only)
Cllr Ian Longrigg (Item 1 only)
David Incoll
Darryl White

General Consensus:

- Since the new Government has announced its intention to review relevant legislation, that any proposed structural changes to Committees should not be implemented before November / December 2010;
- The Group did not support any attempts to prevent non-Executive Members from attending meetings of the Executive. Similarly, Members did not agree with Executive Members being precluded from meetings of Scrutiny and the Policy Development Groups. Particular reference was made to the need to monitor decisions for call-in purposes and constituents' expectations that Members should be aware of items being discussed. It was concluded that participation of non-Group Members at meetings should be at the discretion of each respective Chairman;
- Executive Members should be specifically invited to attend (and generally lead on the presentation of) reports within their portfolios at Scrutiny and PDG meetings;
- That the contents of the 'Future Agenda Items for Consideration by the Programming Panel "pro-forma"' should be simplified;
- The effectiveness of using Task and Finish Groups to undertake detailed reviews (e.g. through a Task and Finish approach) and make recommendations was acknowledged;
- The need for Members (and not officers) to take a lead on the work plans of Scrutiny and the PDGs;
- That the Strategic Management Team should not attend Scrutiny and PDG meetings as a matter of course. The Group believed that the Chairman of each Group should determine for which (if any) meetings/items an SMT representative should be in attendance. Therefore, as a general rule, it should be the responsibility of report authors to attend such meetings to support the lead Executive Member; and
- Whilst recognising potential budgetary implications, it was recognised that a more Member led system could result in a need to increase Overview and Scrutiny officer support and that use of a Graduate would be a cost effective solution.

Other Raised Points of View:

- Support was expressed to align the Overview and Scrutiny model on a similar basis to that applied by Devon County Council;

- The CfPS report authors having only attended a few Committee meetings, which made it difficult to reach firm conclusions;
- In support with the recommendation to scrap the Programming Panel, a Member felt that it was not being used properly to ensure that items were coming forward for presentation on agendas. In disagreement, other Members felt that each respective Chairman had a big input into their work plan and highlighted that the onus was on Members to bring forward potential items for consideration. In addition, some Members felt that the Leader and Chief Executive should be in attendance at Panel meetings to ensure that resource implications (e.g. potential budget constraints, officer work schedules) are borne in mind when considering potential future items. Moreover, the comment was made that neither the Leader or Chief Executive imposed their will on the Panel during its deliberations;
- The need to improve upon Community Engagement, particularly in the PDGs, was highlighted. In support of this point, a Member highlighted that there was potential to convene meetings away from Follaton House, but past experience had resulted in low attendances. Other Members made reference to the results of the Place Survey which scored the authority highly on Community Involvement. Furthermore, regardless of where meetings were held, some Members felt that the overriding majority of residents entrusted their local Member(s) to represent their views;
- The need to revise the Public Question Time procedure at the Executive was stated. A Member believed that the current format prevented any dialogue and was often perceived as being intimidating by the public, but others felt that it was often better for the public to raise issues through their local Member(s);
- The potential to establish Community Forums and extend the current Cluster meetings to become public meetings were also suggested;
- With regard to Member training, it was noted that the Member Development Steering Group was due to consider the identified training needs as supplied by Members via their Surveys. After evaluating these results, training events will be convened depending on the highest need. Therefore, if a number of Members had recognised that they required Community Involvement or Questioning Skills Training, then the Steering Group would recommend that such sessions be convened; and
- A number of Members did not agree with the suggestion that an increased number of Minority Group Members should be appointed to the positions of Chairman/Vice Chairman of the PDGs.