

Report to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Date of meeting: 19 April 2016



Subject: Select Committee Framework - Review

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Recommendations/Decisions Required

That the Committee consider:

- (a) any necessary changes to the service scrutiny responsibilities of the four select committees, for implementation from the commencement of the 2016/17 municipal year;**
- (b) any necessary enhancements to the current arrangements for the development of work programmes for the individual select committees; and**
- (c) any other matters relating to the operation of the select committees.**

Report

Introduction

1. As the Committee are aware, a new Overview and Scrutiny framework based on a structure of four 'select committees', was established with effect from the commencement of the current municipal year. Details of the select committee framework and the responsibilities of each select committee are attached as Appendix 1 to this report.
2. As the first year of the select committee arrangements comes to an end, it is considered that it would be useful for the Overview and Scrutiny Committee to review the operation and management of the select committees, particularly in terms of the allocation of service responsibilities between individual committees and the achievability of their associated work programmes.
3. The views of the current chairmen and lead officers of the select committees have therefore been sought in connection with the operation and management of the select committees over the last year. An item was also included in the Council Bulletin during February 2016, inviting other members to contribute to the review, and a number of officers have also submitted observations on the current arrangements. This report presents the outcome of this review exercise.

Select Committee Structure

4. The Committee will recall that the adopted select committee framework largely reflects the Council's current management structure. Although the introduction of a fully-aligned framework was considered at the time of the adoption of the select committee arrangements in February 2014, the Committee considered that the creation of a

standalone 'Communities Select Committee' might result in the disproportionately heavy workload and that the Community Services and Community Safety responsibilities of the Communities Directorate, should therefore be subject to scrutiny through a 'Neighbourhoods and Community Services Select Committee', leaving a standalone 'Housing Select Committee' that reflected the previous framework approach. In adopting this structure, members requested that the appropriateness of the framework be reviewed after one year of operation.

5. The comments and observations that have been submitted in relation to the operation of the select committee arrangements over the last year are largely focussed on the division of service responsibilities, which appear to have created a disproportionately heavy workload in terms of overview and scrutiny activity, between the Neighbourhoods and Community Services Select Committee and the other three select committees. Other matters raised by members or officers on the current select committee arrangements are set out towards the end of this report.
6. For background information, the Governance Select Committee has met on five occasions during the current municipal year. The Housing Select Committee has met on four occasions during the same period, the Neighbourhoods and Community Services Select Committee on six occasions and the Resources Select Committee on five occasions. One meeting of the Housing Select Committee (September 2015) was cancelled during the year due to a shortage of business. An additional meeting of the Neighbourhoods and Community Services Select Committee was held during the year (November 2015) to consider a review of the introduction of the Council's new waste collection and recycling arrangements.
7. The Neighbourhoods and Community Services Select Committee also acts as the Council's Crime and Disorder Scrutiny Committee, keeping under review the activities of the Epping Forest Community Safety Partnership. At the time of the establishment of the select committee framework, it was felt by officers that a move to a strictly directorate-aligned structure could be adequately addressed through the development of focused work programmes for each committee.

Chairman of the Neighbourhoods and Community Services Select Committee

8. The Chairman of the Neighbourhoods and Community Services Select Committee (Councillor M. Sartin) has indicated that, whilst she understands some of the argument that lead to the introduction of the current framework arrangements, the structure has meant that the Neighbourhoods and Communities Select Committee has assumed a very heavy workload. Councillor Sartin has stated that the Committee has received some substantial reports during the year and has had in-depth discussions on a wide-range of matters. However, Councillor Sartin considers that there have been occasions when there has not been enough time available to the Committee at its meetings to give subjects as fair a hearing as would have been liked or that was deserved.
9. Although an additional meeting of the Select Committee was held during the year (specifically to consider a review of the introduction of the Council's new waste collection and recycling arrangements), Councillor Sartin would not like additional meetings to be held or further select committees to be established to address the difficulties experienced by the Neighbourhoods and Community Services Select Committee in achieving its work programme. Councillor Sartin would like consideration to be given to at least some of the service functions of the Communities Directorate that the Select Committee is currently responsible for, being added to the responsibilities of the Housing Select Committee, particularly as meetings of the Housing Select Committee generally appear to have been comparatively short in duration during the year and that, on one occasion, a meeting of the Committee was cancelled.

Director of Neighbourhoods

10. The views expressed by the Chairman of the Neighbourhoods and Community Services Select Committee are generally echoed by the Director of Neighbourhoods, who acts as the lead officer for the Select Committee.
11. The Director of Neighbourhoods has suggested that his previous concern regarding the imbalance between the responsibilities of the Neighbourhoods and Community Services Select Committee' and the Housing Select Committee, has transpired. This is not only by virtue of the significant number of diverse service areas contained within the current terms of reference of the Neighbourhoods and Community Services Select Committee, but also the corporate importance of matters such as the Local Plan, the Waste Collection and Recycling Contract and community safety etc.). This has, in the opinion of the Director of Neighbourhoods, led to insufficient time to undertake thorough scrutiny activity as, on more than one occasion, meetings have concluded after 10.00pm and agenda have approaching twenty items.
12. The establishment of the select committee framework on a basis not aligned completely to directorate responsibilities has, in the opinion of the Director of Neighbourhoods also lead to a layer of complexity at officer and Portfolio Holder level which is inefficient. Going forward, the Director of Neighbourhoods considers that a straight alignment with the directorate responsibilities would resolve this issue and prevent the work of one select committee being compromised by the desire of another to be largely single issue based.
13. The views of the Chairman of the Neighbourhoods and Community Services Select Committee and the Director of Neighbourhoods are generally also supported by the Democratic Services Officer that supports the Select Committee.

Director of Communities

14. As part of the original consideration of the select committee framework, the Director of Communities expressed the view that the Housing Select Committee should also incorporate matters relating to Community Services and Community Safety (currently covered by the Neighbourhoods and Community Services Select Committee). However, the Director of Communities is of the view that the separation of these Communities Directorate functions between two select committees has not been detrimental and that there have been some real benefits in Community Services' issues being considered by the same select committee that is also responsible for leisure services and provision.
15. The Director of Communities also feels that the workload of the Housing Select Committee is now at an optimum level (following a review of its scope over the past year) and more in line with the workloads of the other select committees, which was a concern of members when implementing the select committee arrangements.
16. Additionally, the Director of Communities also believes that practical benefits have been generated by the new framework for the Safer, Greener and Transport and Leisure and Community Services Portfolio Holders, who only have to attend one select committee, rather than two. From the perspective of officers within the Communities Directorate, the separation of functions has also not appeared to be a problem, since the Director of Communities has led on the Housing Select Committee and the Assistant Director (Community Services and Community Safety) has led the Communities Directorate's input to the Neighbourhoods and Community Services Select Committee.
17. In the opinion of the Director of Communities, the select committee framework has worked much better than the previous arrangement of thematic scrutiny panels, not least since all of the Council's services are now covered by one of the select

committees. In particular, the Director of Communities considers that the scrutiny of Key Performance Indicators by the select committee works much better as the individual committees are able to devote more time to scrutinising performance in their relevant areas.

Other Matters

18. The Technology and Support Services Portfolio Holder (Councillor A. Lion) considers that the scrutiny function is still not strong enough and to needs get behind the real issues to improve the functions of the Council. Councillor A. Lion believes that the work programmes for the select committees need to be linked to corporate objectives, business plans and to business, as opposed to financial audit, and has suggested Portfolio Holders could be asked to present the business plan for their portfolio and what they are planning to achieve in the year ahead.
19. On a wider issue, Councillor Lion has also suggested that meetings of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee do not seem to allow members to question things and that, when presentations are made to members, questions should be followed up and reports brought forward on progress. However, it is considered that these matters are already covered by the existing Overview and Scrutiny provisions of the Council's constitution.
20. Councillor Lion has also proposed that a meeting should be held between the chairmen of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee and the select committees at the start of each year, in order to plan the work programmes for the year ahead. It is worth noting however that the development of focused and achievable work programmes for each select committee each year, drawing on Portfolio Holder and service delivery aims and objectives and relevant community priorities, was a recommendation arising from the overview and scrutiny review of 2014/15 that lead to the establishment of the select committee framework.

Conclusions

21. The year-end position with regard to the achievement of the work programme for each select committee for 2015/16 is set out elsewhere in the agenda for the meeting.
22. The views expressed in regard to the operation of the select committees over the last year have been considered by Management Board, which is of the opinion that the select committee framework should in future be fully aligned to the directorate management structure. The Board also considers that concerns previously expressed that an aligned structure would result in the service responsibilities of some Portfolio Holders being split for scrutiny purposes across different select committees, can be adequately managed through relevant, achievable and prioritised annual work programmes for each select committee. The lead officer and the chairman of each select committee are responsible for the development of the work programme, which should be informed by relevant service aims and member priorities.
23. In adopting the current framework in February 2015, the Overview and Scrutiny Committee stressed that it did not wish to place additional burden on service directors in respect of attendance at meetings of the select committees, and that meetings of the committees could therefore also be supported by an appropriate Assistant Director most relevant to specific topics under consideration.
24. The Committee is asked to consider any necessary changes to the select committee framework, for implementation from 2016/17. Revisions to the select framework are not a matter reserved to the Council.