

EPPING FOREST DISTRICT COUNCIL
NOTES OF A MEETING OF SCRUTINY PANELS REVIEW TASK AND FINISH PANEL
HELD ON MONDAY, 20 OCTOBER 2014
IN COUNCIL CHAMBER, CIVIC OFFICES, HIGH STREET, EPPING
AT 7.00 - 8.45 PM

Members Present: K Angold-Stephens (Chairman), Mrs A Grigg, Mrs M Sartin, D Stallan and Mrs J H Whitehouse

Other members present: Councillors Mrs. J. Lea, S. Murray, Mrs. G. Shiell, Mrs. Y. Knight

Apologies for Absence:

Officers Present S. Hill (Assistant Director (Governance & Performance Management)), S. Tautz (Democratic Services Manager), G. Nicholas (National Management Trainee)

6. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

None.

7. SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS (COUNCIL MINUTE 39 - 23.7.02)

None.

8. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest pursuant to the Council's Code of Member Conduct.

9. NOTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING

The notes of the first meeting of the Task and Finish Panel (29 September 2014) were agreed as a correct record.

10. TERMS OF REFERENCE AND WORK PROGRAMME

The Task and Finish Panel noted its terms of reference in relation to the review of the current framework of the Council's overview and scrutiny panels. The Panel also agreed a work programme for the review, which was to be considered by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee at its next meeting.

11. REVIEW OF SCRUTINY PANEL FRAMEWORK - INITIAL STAKEHOLDER FEEDBACK

The Task and Finish Panel received a report on the progress of the review of the operation of the Council's current overview and scrutiny panel framework.

At the previous request of the Panel, a number of the current chairmen and vice-chairmen of the existing overview and scrutiny panels attended the meeting to present their views in relation to the operation of the current framework. The Chairman reported that Councillor G. Chambers (Chairman of the Planning Services Scrutiny Panel) had wished to attend the meeting, but was unfortunately not now

able to be in attendance, and that he would be discussing the operation of the current panel framework and options for any future structure with Councillor Chambers separately. The Panel was also advised of the key findings arising from recent discussions held with service directors and the lead officers for some of the present panels, in terms of the management of the current panel structure.

Councillor S. Murray (Chairman of the Housing Scrutiny Panel) advised the Panel that he considered that the Housing Scrutiny Panel currently operated efficiently, and offered an effective opportunity for focused scrutiny of a discrete service area. Although Councillor Murray accepted that the existing panel framework may have lead to a situation where not all of the Council's services were subject to regular scrutiny, he felt that the existing arrangement generated member expertise in specific areas and that any alignment of the panel framework with the authority's management structure, could create unmanageable work programmes for particular panels. Councillor Murray considered that the recent re-allocation of performance monitoring responsibilities to each of the existing panels had helped to provide clearer scrutiny of key areas and that the existing structure helped to promote member engagement and involvement in scrutiny.

Councillor D. Stallan considered that alignment of the panel framework with the management structure might reduce the ability of members to be involved in scrutiny activities, through a consequent reduction in the number of panels. Councillor Stallan believed that the current structure was appropriate for the full involvement of members, given the scrutiny workload, although it was clearly important that all of the Council's services were able to be subject to scrutiny when necessary, through the allocation of service responsibilities to specific panels. Councillor Stallan felt that the Council should however increase the publicity generated for scrutiny matters, in order to improve focus and public involvement in scrutiny responsibilities, and that members should be regularly reminded of their ability to identify matters and issues for scrutiny consideration. Councillor Angold-Stephens supported the view of Councillor Stallan in this regard, suggesting that many members were not currently actively involved in the scrutiny function.

Councillor Mrs. M. Sartin (Chairman of the Constitution and Member Services Scrutiny Panel) reported that her panel was not really a scrutiny panel in the strictest sense, and that it adopted an approach to its work that was more usually associated with the format and operation of a working group. Councillor Angold-Stephens suggested that as part of any new scrutiny panel framework, once this Panel's work on the review of the Council's constitution had been completed, it could possibly be dissolved and its ongoing work programme transferred to a new panel as appropriate. Councillor Mrs. Sartin expressed concern that any directorate-aligned structure would need to be achievable in terms of overview and scrutiny, even though it supported the management of the Council's operations.

Councillor Mrs. J. Lea (Chairman of the Safer, Cleaner, Greener Scrutiny Panel) indicated that she had learnt a lot about the Council's activities through her chairmanship of the Panel, and endorsed the view of Councillor Murray that a new structure might result in significant workloads and a reduced ability to undertake specific scrutiny activities, alongside a potential loss of interest in scrutiny matters by members. Councillor Lea was concerned that a new structure could diminish opportunities for the 'on-the-job' training such as that which she had enjoyed, and did not consider that any change to the current panel framework was necessary at this time.

Councillor Y. Knight (Vice-Chairman of the Planning Services Scrutiny Panel) expressed concern at the potential for over burdening the panels as a result of any

new structure, and also supported concern expressed by other members in terms of any framework that might offer limited opportunities for engagement in scrutiny activities for all members, and a consequent reduction of member knowledge and experience in areas of the Council's service areas.

Councillor G. Shiell was concerned that any alignment of the panel framework with the management structure might result in a situation where scrutiny became a 'officer-led' function and, as with several other members, expressed doubt that this approach would provide the current level of opportunity for members to increase their knowledge of the authority's operations and to be involved in scrutiny activities.

Councillor Mrs. J. H. Whitehouse supported earlier concerns expressed in relation to the potential for experience to be acquired by members as a result of the existing panel framework, and whether any directorate-aligned structure would be achievable in terms of an overall scrutiny framework or individual panel work programmes. Councillor Mrs. Whitehouse suggested that a larger number of smaller focused panels might be more appropriate, although the Panel noted that it was doubtful that such an approach would be able to be managed in terms of the support required for each panel from the Democratic Services Section.

Councillor Mrs. A. Grigg suggested that the Council needed to improve the opportunities that it provided for public involvement and engagement in scrutiny activities and that it might be difficult to achieve the work programmes of the existing panel framework within a smaller panel structure.

The Assistant Director (Governance and Performance Management) indicated that at present, about one third of members were not formally involved in overview and scrutiny, and questioned whether scrutiny activity was always necessarily directed towards key issues of concern to local residents. From the viewpoint of officers, it seemed that different approaches to work programme development were taken by the existing panels and that a uniformity of approach in this respect might be more appropriate, in order that scrutiny activity resulted in positive change or improved outcomes. In order to complete the ongoing review however, it was necessary for members to provide some direction in terms of the development of appropriate structure options, in order that a report could be made to the next meeting of the Panel (25 November 2014) in accordance with the work programme.

Councillor Angold-Stephens reported that the Chairman of the Audit and Governance Committee (Councillor A. Watts) had previously expressed concern in relation to the establishment of a panel framework aligned with the management structure, specifically in terms of the scrutiny of audit and standards matters and how these would interrelate with the work of the existing Audit and Governance and Standards Committees. The Panel note that Councillor Watts had been unable to attend this meeting, but had proposed that the scrutiny panel review be included as an item for the next meeting of the Audit and Governance Committee (24 November 2014), in order for these matters to be considered. It was hoped that the Vice-Chairman (Councillor Mrs. M. Sartin) would be able to attend the meeting of the of the Audit and Governance Committee, in order to present the work of the Task and Finish Panel to date. The views of the Committee in relation to the review would be reported to the next meeting of the Panel.

The Panel also considered options for a facilitated member workshop to be held in the near future, as part of the review of the scrutiny panel framework. The Assistant Director (Governance and Performance Management) reported that this could be hosted by an independent scrutiny and policy consultant that had previously worked

with the Council on overview and scrutiny matters. The Panel considered a draft outline of the aims, objectives and outcomes for the workshop session and the Assistant Director indicated that it would be necessary to encourage as many members as possible to attend the session in order to participate in the review process, as this would provide an opportunity for all members to put forward ideas and suggestions for discussion.

AGREED:

- (1) That relevant chairmen and vice-chairmen of the existing overview and scrutiny panels be thanked for attending the meeting to present their views of the operation of the current framework;
- (2) That the review of the scrutiny panel framework be referred to the next meeting of the Audit and Governance Committee and that the Vice-Chairman of the Panel (or appropriate officers) attend the meeting of the of the Committee to present the work undertaken to date;
- (3) That a facilitated scrutiny workshop as part of the review of the scrutiny panel framework, be held on Saturday 22 November 2014, and that all members be encouraged to attend to participate in the review process; and
- (4) That a report outlining all possible options for any future structure of the overview and scrutiny panel framework be made to the next meeting of the Panel.

12. DATES OF FUTURE MEETINGS

The Panel noted that future meetings would be held at 7.00pm on the following dates:

25 November 2014
20 January 2015