

Process Meeting: Overview and Scrutiny Review Task and Finish Panel

File Note.

23rd July 2012.

Place: Office of the Chief Executive.

Time: 14:00 – 15.30 hrs

Present:

Councillors R. Morgan (Chairman of Overview and Scrutiny Committee), K. Angold-Stephens (Chairman of Overview and Scrutiny Review Task and Finish Panel), R. Gadsby (Vice-Chairman of Overview and Scrutiny Review Task and Finish Panel).

Supporting Officers:

Derek Macnab (Acting Chief Executive), Ian Willett (Assistant to the Chief Executive), Simon Hill (Senior Democratic Services Officer), Connor Lattimer (Summer Intern in Democratic Services).

1. Purpose of Meeting

- (a). To understand the views and opinions of the Chairman and Vice-Chairman of the Overview and Scrutiny Review Task and Finish Panel and the Chairman of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee (OSC) towards a review of scrutiny at the Council. Furthermore, this information would support the preparation work for the Overview and Scrutiny Review Task and Finish Panel's consultation.
- (b). To approve the terms of reference for the Overview and Scrutiny Review Task and Finish Panel for 2012-2013.
- (c). To explore the views and opinions of the Chairman and Vice-Chairman of the Task and Finish Panel, and the Chairman of OSC towards the current and future consultation process on a review of overview and scrutiny (OS).
- (d). To agree a timetable for the review.

2. Introduction

- (a). Assistant to the Chief Executive, Mr. Ian Willett introduced Mr. Connor Lattimer who had undertaken OS and OSC research to develop the preparatory information for Councillors.
- (b). Mr. Willett emphasised that the OS review was a matter for Members of the Council and that Officers would provide support required by councillors.

(c). Mr Willett noted the key features of the [preparatory information pack](#) and that its main focus was outward-looking strategies and public engagement.

(d). Mr. Willett drew attention to the file note from a meeting with the former Chairman of the OSC, Councillor Bassett who agreed with the focus of the preparatory information pack.

(e). Finally Mr. Ian Willett recommended that the Task and Finish Panel should complete all their work by April 2013, which was subsequently agreed by the Members present.

3. Terms of Reference

3a. Overview and Scrutiny Committee

(a). All councillors and officers present agreed OSC needed to be reviewed to refresh the OS process at Epping Forest District Council.

(b) Councillor Angold-Stephens was concerned that some Members, in particular the new Members of OSC, had not been trained sufficiently to maintain impartiality during the OS process. Furthermore, Councillor, Angold-Stephens had noted in OSC meetings some Members were reticent to speak on issues at OSC as they were worried about compromising the beliefs of their political party. Councillor Angold-Stephens informed all present at the meeting that OSC should act as a “critical friend” and all Members at OSC should speak their mind.

3b. Chair and Vice-Chair

(a) All Members present agreed to adopt the terms of reference specific to exploring whether the Chair and Vice-Chair receive adequate support from the Council’s resources as well as questioning the selection process of the Chairman. Furthermore, a review of the election process of the Chair and Vice-Chair of OSC was also agreed.

3c. Cabinet

(a) Mr. Willett referred to the meeting with Councillor Bassett on 16th July 2012 where it was agreed that OSC needed to feedback to Cabinet on a regular basis. Subsequently, Mr. Willett noted at the meeting Councillor Bassett explored the possibilities of a monitoring group being set up to specifically review and scrutinise the work of the Cabinet.

(b). Senior Democratic Services Officer, Mr. Simon Hill suggested that if a monitoring group was set up it should focus on the forthcoming work of the Cabinet so that sufficient preparation could be undertaken by OSC. Therefore, it would be to OSC’s advantage to create a forward plan.

(c). Councillor Angold-Stephens recommended if a monitoring group was established at the end of the OSC review that it should regularly invite Cabinet Members to attend its meetings to allow Members of a monitoring group to ask questions on forthcoming items on the Cabinet agenda.

3d. Call-in

- (a). Members and Officers agreed that the call-in process was sufficient to deal with the OS work of Epping Forest District Council and that it was not advisable to channel the Council's resources into this area of OS.
- (b) Officers discussed with Members whether the organisation of the room during the call-in process was problematic. Mr. Willett queried whether the room should mirror the layout of select committees held in Parliament.
- (c). Councillor Gadsby advocated that separating non-Members of OSC and the Cabinet and Portfolio Holder would make it easier for Members of OSC to direct their review and scrutiny of the appropriate Portfolio Holder.
- (d). Councillor Gadsby recommended that the Portfolio Holder should present a brief to OSC first and then questions from Members of OSC should be asked to save time in meetings. Councillor Gadsby had recognised that some of the questions asked in OSC were more points of clarification that could be answered if the Portfolio Holder was given the opportunity to present a brief.
- (e). Councillor Morgan echoed Councillor Gadsby's concerns and added that advisors should sit with their portfolio holders to allow referral to occur whilst the meeting was being conducted. Councillor Morgan pointed out that in the last OSC meeting on the 17th July 2012 the call-in process was inhibited with advisors and Portfolio Holders having to communicate across the room to each other.
- (f). All members felt the organisation of the room should be reviewed, in particular for the call-in process and the Panel and Council could look at the new layout for other areas of OSC such as presentations by external bodies.

3e. Members of the Public (& External Bodies)

- (a) Councillor Angold-Stephens noted that Councillors should undertake background research to prepare for presentations by external bodies. Undertaking such research would create a richer experience for both councillors and external bodies during OSC meetings as presentations could be focused and questions asked could be more critical.

3f. Officers

- (a) All members present agreed that Officer support is excellent and that the focus and work of officers should not change.
- (b). Councillor Morgan raised concerns over the number of officers attending OSC meetings. Councillor Morgan referred to the last meeting on the 17th July 2012 where at least 15 officers were present.

Councillor Morgan and Councillor Angold-Stephens concluded recommended that the level of Officer participation in OSCs should be reviewed.

3g. Panels

(a). Councillor Angold-Stephens agreed with Councillor Bassett's comments on 16th July 2012 that the work of some Standing Panels was being duplicated.

(b). It was felt by all that the length of the agenda for Standing Panels was too broad and was being duplicated by other Panels. Thus, it was suggested that Standing Panels should narrow their scope, focussing on only a few items.

(c). Councillor Angold-Stephens argued that Members should conduct their own consultation in their respective Standing Panels to make Panels more proactive. Councillor Gadsby noted Councillor Wagland's proactive chairing of the Children Services Task and Finish Panel in 2011 ensured all Members of the Panel were given specific jobs to do. Councillor Gadsby emphasised this ensured all Members were fully engaged in their work at Epping Forest District Council.

3h. Work Programme

(a). All Members present were content with the PICK priority system used by OSC.

(b). All Members present advised that all recommendations for the Work Programme could be submitted in writing to avoid any items being missed out.

3i. Party Whips

(a). Councillor Angold-Stephens made clear to all present at the meeting that no party whips were used at OSC and/or in the OS process and thus he felt that no consultation needed to be undertaken in this area. However, Councillor Angold-Stephens did have concerns about whether Council training had sufficiently dealt with impartiality at OSC.

(b). Mr. Willett suggested confidence and impartiality training could deal with Councillor Angold-Stephen's concerns. Mr. Willett agreed in the next OSC training he would emphasise the importance of impartiality in the OS process.

3j. Safer Communities

(a). Members present did not feel it was appropriate to include the Safer Communities Panel into its review as the Police Commissioner Elections in November 2012 could alter the way in which the Safer Communities Panel operates.

3k. Joint Scrutiny

(a). Mr Macnab predicted that joint scrutiny may occur between safer community panels or crime and disorder committees across the County as a result of the election of a Police Commissioner.

(b). Councillor Angold-Stephens explained that OSC carried out very localised O&S work due to the demand on its services. Councillor Angold-Stephens and Mr. Hill said joint scrutiny depended on the decisions made by local authorities concerned.

(c). All Members agreed that avenues could be explored for joint scrutiny, but it might not be the main focus of the review.

3I. Performance and Finance Monitoring and Community Budgeting

(a). All Members agreed performance and finance monitoring and community budgeting could be reviewed.

4. Consultation Process

(a). Councillor Angold-Stephens emphasised the need to consult with all councillors on the OSC review as well as increasing the participation of members of the public.

(b). Councillor Gadsby stressed in the meeting that Members had the responsibility to increase the level of public engagement in the OS process.

(c). Acting Chief Executive, Mr. Derek Macnab raised the point that consultation should also be directed towards external bodies. Mr. Macnab said the consultation process with external bodies would produce vital feedback that could improve the way in which OSC meetings are conducted.

(d). All Members present agreed with Mr. Willett's suggestion that an open-session (like a "Think tank") should be held on OSC.

(e). Members present debated the possibilities of inviting an external facilitator to train all Members in the processes of OS and OSC. It was concluded that this option should be left open.

(f). All Members present were enthusiastic about the opportunity to study the OS processes of other local authorities and recommended site visits would develop the consultation work further.

5. Timetable for Review

(a). All Members present agreed the first meeting of the OSC Review Task and Finish Panel would commence late September 2012 and finish at the latest by April 2013.

(b). It was suggested by all that the rest of the OS Review Task and Finish Panel should be consulted about this meeting and the terms of reference for the review.

6. Any Other Business

(a). Those present suggested that the start time of OSC could be put forward to an earlier time to prevent meetings going beyond 2200hrs. The time suggested was 1900hrs but this would only be confirmed once full consultation had been carried out.

(b). Mr. Willett asked whether the Members present would want to undertake a conservative or a proactive approach towards the OSC review. Members present felt a proactive approach should be undertaken in reviewing the OS process.

(c). Terms of reference were approved accordingly (Appendix A – see below) on 23rd July 2012.

Appendix A: Terms of Reference

- The Overview and Scrutiny Committee: to scrutinise the current processes of OSC at the Council and to what extent could its functions be improved.
- Chair and Vice-Chair: to explore whether the Chair and Vice-Chair receive appropriate support from the Council's resources as well as questioning the selection process of the Chairmen. Furthermore, to review the election process of the Chair and Vice-Chair of OSC.
- Cabinet: to examine and scrutinise decisions or actions taken by the Cabinet and to identify whether the current arrangements for reviewing forthcoming Cabinet agendas is satisfactory.
- Call-in: to review the organisation of the current call-in process used by OSC.
- Members of the Public (& External Bodies): to investigate options for OSC to adopt a more outward-looking strategies in order to maximise its openness and accountability to members of the public and other external bodies.
- Officers: to review the current Officer and Management arrangements of OSC.
- Panels: to consider if the arrangements for Standing Panels and Task and Finish Panels are satisfactory, in particular the election process for the Chair and Vice-Chair and whether the right kind of Panels are in place.
- Work Programme: to reassess the PICK priority system and its suitability for developing a work programme.
- Joint Scrutiny: to explore avenues into undertaking joint scrutiny with other local authorities such as Harlow Town Council.
- Performance and Finance Monitoring and Community Budgeting: to assess the effectiveness of performance monitoring by OSC including budget monitoring.