

**EPPING FOREST DISTRICT COUNCIL
NOTES OF A MEETING OF OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY REVIEW TASK AND FINISH
PANEL
HELD ON MONDAY, 25 MARCH 2013
IN COMMITTEE ROOM 1, CIVIC OFFICES, HIGH STREET, EPPING
AT 4.00 - 6.11 PM**

Members Present: K Angold-Stephens (Chairman), Mrs R Gadsby (Vice-Chairman), Mrs A Grigg (Asset Management and Economic Development Portfolio Holder), D Stallan (Housing Portfolio Holder), Mrs J H Whitehouse and G Waller (Safer, Greener and Highways Portfolio Holder)

Other members present:

Apologies for Absence: Mrs M Sartin (Vice Chairman of Council)

Officers Present I Willett (Assistant to the Chief Executive), P Maddock (Assistant Director (Accountancy)), S G Hill (Senior Democratic Services Officer) and A Hendry (Democratic Services Officer)

20. SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS (COUNCIL MINUTE 39 - 23.7.02)

It was noted that Councillor G Waller was substituting for Councillor M Sartin.

21. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

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

22. NOTES OF THE LAST MEETING

The notes from the 14 February 2013 meeting were agreed as a correct record.

23. TERMS OF REFERENCE

The terms of reference for the Panel were noted.

24. SCRUTINY TRAINING

The Panel considered the training requirements of scrutiny members for the new council year.

The Panel considered that the following courses be offered to members:

- Chairing Scrutiny for positive Outcomes; and
- Improving Questioning Skills - *to be run together as one course.*

They noted that the budget for member training had been squeezed but some money could be found from the O&S budget. Packaged together these courses could proved to be cost effective. It was queried if training on Chairmanship was applicable

to all members but it was agreed that it would be useful for Chairmen, Vice-Chairmen and any other member who were potential chairs of other committees.

They also considered that the following courses should also be offered to members:

- Effective Financial and Budget Scrutiny;
- The Fundamentals of Scrutiny; and
- Assessing Evidence and Drafting Effective Recommendations.

The Panel considered that the financial training course would prove useful for all members. Each member should receive basic finance training as most Council business was connected to finance.

Also if possible the financial scrutiny training be held in the autumn just before the start of the budget setting process.

Members wanted make the training available to every member so that it became cost effective and there was not always a high attendance at the training sessions.

It was agreed that the courses be held on a Saturday and if possible to share the costs of training with another authority (such as Harlow and/or Broxbourne etc.).

Councillor Stellan noted that the Tenants and Leaseholders Federation had set up their own scrutiny panel, and it may be that we could invite them to an appropriate training session.

If possible the training session should take place before the first presentation to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee in June and should be organised for some time at the end of May.

RESOLVED:

- (1) That the external trainer, Tim Young, be appointed to run the training for members;
- (2) That the courses should be:
 - Charing Scrutiny for positive Outcomes; and
 - Improving Questioning Skills - *to be run together as one course*; and
 - Effective Financial and Budget Scrutiny;
 - The Fundamentals of Scrutiny; and
 - Assessing Evidence and Drafting Effective Recommendations.

These course to be organised for a Saturday if possible.

25. FINANCE SCRUTINY

The Panel considered a report on budget and performance monitoring by Overview and Scrutiny. They noted that the Finance and Performance Management Standing Panel mirrored the Finance and Performance Management Cabinet Committee and this could cause problems especially in joint meetings, when the Cabinet Committee invited the Scrutiny Panel, it was still a cabinet meeting.

The report also contained feedback made by members on budget and performance monitoring. They noted that the volume of information provided at the meetings was daunting and confusing for members. They also tended to go through figures that the Cabinet had already looked at. It was the Cabinet's responsibility to look through the details and not the scrutiny panel's. The Standing Panel should have different terms of reference to avoid duplication. They could look at what's coming up in the budget, but also at look backwards at what happened before and how that worked. They should be looking at any trends, problems and themes that were emerging.

The agenda also contained an interesting I&DeA document on financial scrutiny. Councillor Angold-Stephens drew the Panels attention a statement in the I&DeA report that "a good financial scrutineer does not require you to be a financial expert. But it does require you to ask questions and challenge when you are not clear about how the council is spending its money and how it is ensuring that there are sufficient financial resources to fund its current and future plans. Similarly, don't be put off by the columns of detailed figures you may be presented with as a member. The same principle applies – if the key messages are not clear to you ask your cabinet members or financial officers to explain what the information is supposed to tell you. Good financial scrutiny will require you to develop a reasonable knowledge of the council's financial standing, but it will require you to ask pertinent questions even more."

The Assistant Director of Finance, Peter Maddock, informed the Panel that the finance directorate produced a mid-year financial plan as the first draft of the budget. There could be a role for scrutiny to look at this plan as a first step of scrutinising the budget process.

It was also noted that changes in the local government finances would mean that more emphasis would be put on business rates.

Members noted that not many councillors were interested in finance and that it could be intimidating to ordinary members.

Councillor Angold-Stephens said that they should look ahead all the time and be aware of pressures that are building up and ask for reports on these upcoming topics.

Asked what the standard budget cycle was Mr Maddock said that a first draft was produced in mid September, mostly in words and with few figures in it. Councillor Whitehouse commented that this was something that should be flagged up to all members as an important stage in the cycle. Maybe something should be put in the Council Bulletin. Officers noted that it did not go to scrutiny at this stage, but as a starting process maybe it should go to scrutiny before the budget process had properly started. January was the first time that Scrutiny got a view of the draft budget. Was there more scope for an earlier sight of these budget figures? However, they did not want to put in yet another stage in on top of the Cabinet finance budget process and overload officers.

The initial report in September could act as an early warning and scrutiny could ask the portfolio holder to a meeting to consider certain items.

Councillor Stallan noted that councillors had admitted that they did not understand all the figure work that went to the finance scrutiny panel. This highlighted the need for training on finance matters. Finance section did a very good basic training session for

members. Councillor Gadsby agreed that finance training was something that all members should have as it's basic to the council.

Mr Willett commented that finance should not need specialist knowledge to be effective as long as they keep the big picture in view and address their question to this bigger picture. Most members did not want detail but would like to influence the budget in a larger sense. Councillor Angold-Stephens agreed, saying that sometimes O&S had to flag up the larger points on the budget and not slog through the detailed figures.

Councillor Grigg suggested that the mid-term finance report should be highlighted to all members and a budget timetable be put in the Council Bulletin. Councillor Stallan suggested that there should be a specific O&S page in the Council Bulletin to point out what was coming up in the future and what was going to the next Standing Panels. The O&S logo should be put at the top of the page to identify it. If there was nothing to alert members to, then it need not be included in that weeks bulletin.

Councillor Angold-Stephens suggested that the I&DeA document should go to all O&S members at the time when the specialist training had been arranged.

As for the Key Performance Indicators (KPI) these were set by the Cabinet Finance and Performance Management Committee but were also pre scrutinised by the Finance and Performance Management Scrutiny Panel, which the cabinet welcomed.

Councillor Angold-Stephens commented that scrutiny should challenge the KPI targets if need be. Councillor Stallan replied that he had seen Assistant Directors called in to the Finance Scrutiny Panel to explain their targets and if they were meeting them. The rules are there to do this, but it was up to members to use them. Mr Willett noted that at present the Finance Scrutiny Panel were considering the targets and KPIs etc. It may be prudent to get Councillor Lion, Chairman of that Panel, here to tell us what they were doing. Mr Maddock commented that he would be interested in Councillor Lion's view on what was happening and to target the exceptions and ignore what was going well.

AGREED: to invite Councillor Lion to the next meeting.

It was suggested that the relevant KPIs go to their relevant scrutiny panel, but was noted that not all directorates have a relevant scrutiny panel.

The Panel summed up their deliberations, noting that:

- (1) only one standing Panel was needed to review the budget process;
- (2) the medium term Financial Strategy paper needed to be publicised;
- (3) a timetable of the budget process should be publicised in the Council Bulletin;
- (4) the Finance Scrutiny Panel should not get too involved in the details of the budget, but concentrate on the bigger picture;
- (5) Councillor Lion should be invited to the next meeting to outline the F&PM Panels deliberations on the KPIs and for his views on what the F&PM Panel should scrutinise generally;
- (6) Members should clarify what kind of budget scrutiny they wanted the finance scrutiny panel to carry out in the future (in its broadest sense); and
- (7) the Panel was to continue its deliberations on finance scrutiny at their next meeting.

26. COMMENTS AND AGREED ACTIONS

1. Councillor Girling's Comments:

The Panel considered the comments of Councillor Girling on various aspects of the Overview and Scrutiny process.

The Panel agreed with a lot of his statements and comments. His first point that members should submit a list of questions for a forthcoming O&S guest speaker two weeks in advance was considered. They agreed that it was sensible that members submit questions for upcoming presentations but it should not be a proscriptive two weeks before hand as suggested. Members "should aim to submit" questions as early as possible. These questions would be sent to the presenter so that they could prepare answers. It was noted that officers had sparse response from members when they asked for questions via the Council Bulletin.

A lot of presentations on the O&S work programme tended to be cyclical and may not be what members wanted. The Panel also discussed the merits of having a power point presentation. They concluded that it could still be useful but it should be time limited and we should ensure that they address the issues that we want them to and not what they want to.

It was also noted that outside bodies that gave presentations should be scrutinised and not just allowed to give a general annual update. They should give a more targeted presentation relevant to members needs.

Members also raised concerns of having a heavy agenda after a presentation and the constraints on time that this produced.

The Chairman asked about how O&S would interface with Health Scrutiny, the PCC Panel or County Scrutiny all of whom were due to go to O&S meeting in the near future. It may be some presentations could be devolved down to a relevant Scrutiny Standing Panel. Officers asked if they should start with a blank Work Programme at the start of the year.

Councillor Girling also asked if the agenda for a presentation at a meeting should be adjusted to allow for more time. Councillor Stallan asked if 7.30pm was a good time to start. Would not a 7.00pm start give more time. Mr Hill answered that as one of the major committees the committee members should be asked about their preferred start time.

Councillor Girling's also made the point that O&S committee members should be allowed to ask all their questions before the chair opened it up to the other councillors. It was noted that this was generally what did happen and this still applied as a general rule.

Councillor Girling also wanted a list of all questions and answers to be put in the Council Bulletin, but it was noted that they appeared in the minutes of that meeting.

Councillor Girling also suggested that the pre meeting should be only for committee members but the Panel agreed that it should be kept as is for all members to attend.

The last point of Councillor Girling was that the Chairman should be tougher on guests to make it clear they were not impressed if the answers and presentation were not suitably focused and answered. The Panel thought that this would be better

done by feedback through a letter sent by the chairman after a presentation, thanking them for their time but pointing out that some points had not been covered or that answers had been promised on certain topics.

2. Future Actions

The Chairman thought that he should report to the next Council Meeting on the Panel's deliberations so far and the work still to be done by them.

27. FUTURE MEETINGS

It was agreed that the Democratic Services Officer circulate available dates by email to members for possible future meeting dates.