

REVIEW OF COMMITTEE STRUCTURE

1 SUMMARY

- 1.1 This report contains details of the responses to the questionnaire circulated to Members about the operation of the Committee Structure and the Member training programme in 2002/03. It also contains some proposals for improvement for Members' consideration.

2 INTRODUCTION

- 2.1 A questionnaire was circulated to Members in April 2003 which asked
- what had worked well about the new political structure, and why?
 - what had not worked so well?
 - what improvements could be made?
 - what was thought about the arrangements for Overview & Scrutiny?
 - how many places there should be on Committees?
- 2.2 The questionnaire also sought Members' views on the operation of the training programme in 2002/03 and requirements for 2003/04.

3 DETAILED CONSIDERATIONS

Review of Committee Structure

- 3.1 There was a mixed response to the question about what has worked well about the new political structure. Whilst it was felt that the streamlined Committee structure had resulted in quicker decision-making in some areas, there was still concern about duplication on some occasions. The fact that items could still be referred to full Council was welcomed.
- 3.2 In response to the question about what had not worked so well, the comments included:
- lack of clarity around the role of Overview & Scrutiny Committees
 - confusion about which meetings Members could attend
 - duplication between Policy Committees and Overview & Scrutiny Committees.
- 3.3 In terms of identifying improvements that could be made there were mixed views about whether more encouragement should be given to the press and public to attend meetings. It was suggested that Committee meetings should be broadcast on the website.

- 3.4 There was a lack of consensus about the current arrangements for Overview & Scrutiny. There were some examples of policy development and the questioning or 'scrutinising' of individuals. For example, the Environment Overview & Scrutiny Committee hearing at the Freight House, which provided Members with the opportunity to hear the views of all those concerned about the future of Magnolia Road was an example of evidence-gathering away from the formal Council Chamber. The questioning of representatives from Essex Police, the County Council, Anglian Water and the Council's leisure and refuse contractors have been examples of scrutinising the performance of other bodies.
- 3.5 However, it was also felt that Overview & Scrutiny had not yet probed in depth into issues (like Select Committees in parliament) and it was also commented that the system was sometimes used for administrative convenience, rather than Overview & Scrutiny.
- 3.6 There was a general view that there should be a regular schedule of meetings for Overview & Scrutiny, and that consideration should be given to allocating a single topic, such as the Local Plan, to one meeting.
- 3.7 In terms of venues for Overview & Scrutiny meetings, the general feeling was that the venue should be appropriate to the matter under discussion, whether that was the Council Chamber, Committee Room, or around the district.
- 3.8 There was a clear majority view that all internal audit reports should be considered by the Finance & Procedures Overview & Scrutiny Committee.
- 3.9 In terms of the number of places on Committees, the overall view was that the current situation was acceptable. Whilst there were some specific comments about reducing the size of the Planning Services Committee, there were roughly an equal number in favour of retaining the existing arrangement of all Members sitting on the Planning Services Committee.

Suggestions for enhancements to the Committee Structure

- 3.10 Each Overview & Scrutiny Committee in the last cycle of meetings has agreed its programme of work for the year, which includes a combination of detailed policy development and review work and the scrutinising of the work of other bodies. These work programmes are attached at Appendix 1. From these, it can be seen that the work programmes are more focused and there is a clear differentiation from the work of the Policy Committees.
- 3.11 In the future, at the start of each Overview & Scrutiny policy development/review, in order to make the terms of reference, content and process of the review clear, a scoping form could be completed by officers for Member agreement. An example is attached in Appendix 2. This can also be used as a checklist to ensure that the review stays on course and meets the timescale set for completion.

- 3.12 To address the confusion experienced by Members about which meetings it is possible to attend, a detailed briefing note has already been circulated which covers this issue.
- 3.13 There is a regular schedule of Overview & Scrutiny meetings, and it is suggested that, when undertaking a review, Members consider the most appropriate venue for their work. This issue is covered in the suggested scoping form.
- 3.14 The scoping form also suggests that Members of Overview & Scrutiny Committees consider whether the use of site visits is helpful to the course of their review. For example, the Finance & Procedures Overview & Scrutiny Committee has recently suggested visiting other towns and cities that organise street markets. This type of activity, and the possibility of inviting expert witnesses, may require an increased budget in time.
- 3.15 The idea of broadcasting Council meetings on the Council's website will be pursued when appropriate, cost-effective, technology can be identified.
- 3.16 Further training in overview & scrutiny will be offered to Members. It is proposed that as part of the competency training programme in autumn 2003, the East of England Local Government Conference is invited back to run a workshop assessing progress on their "14 Steps to Scrutiny Success", and that then in the spring 2004 competency programme a session is organised to focus on any key requirements that emerge.

Member Training Programme

- 3.17 Based on the responses to the questionnaire, the 2002/03 training programme has been very well received. Members have commented that it has been well-balanced, interesting and well presented. New Members have reported that the courses have proved invaluable.
- 3.18 The majority of the responses indicated that Members still preferred training courses to be held in the afternoon and then repeated in the evening, thus providing maximum choice.
- 3.19 In common with what has currently been the case, the ideal length of time for each session would seem to vary between two and three hours. Where a subject requires more than this amount of time, the preference would be to spread the training across two afternoons or two evenings.
- 3.20 The majority of responses indicated that Members still preferred the venue to be split in the proportion of two-thirds being held at the Civic Suite, Rayleigh and one third at the Freight House, Rochford.

3.21 In terms of content for the forthcoming training programmes, the following observations were made about future requirements:

- follow-up Overview & Scrutiny training
- complex planning issues to be addressed (particularly around specific reasons for planning requirements or reasons for refusal)
- highways training
- Member/Officer relationships.

The first three items are included in the proposed competency training programme for 2003/04, and the final item was covered in the induction training on Code of Conduct issues.

3.22 The induction training for 2003/04 (attached at Appendix 3) is well underway and runs until 30 July 2003.

3.23 The Standards Committee considered proposals for the competency training programme in October/November 2003 and February/March 2004 at their meeting on 10 July. The Standards Committee requested that a session on chairmanship skills be added to the programme, and this will be timed to take place as soon as possible. In future years, consideration will be given to including this as part of the induction programme. The Standards Committee also asked that training on standards issues be considered, and it is possible that this can be combined with the “Rules of Procedure” training scheduled for 12 November. The competency programme is set out at Appendix 4. Once all details of the training have been finalised, a synopsis of the content of courses will be circulated to Members.

4 RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS

4.1 If Overview & Scrutiny Committees decide to use outside venues, or call on the services of expert witnesses, it will require the establishment of a specific budget for this activity. It is proposed that provision of £5,000 be considered for inclusion in the draft 2004/05 budget.

4.2 The costs of the training programme can be met from the Members Support and Training budget.

5 RECOMMENDATION

5.1 It is proposed that the Committee considers the suggestions for enhancements to the Committee structure as outlined in the report and in particular gives a view on the following issues for the Council to consider –

- the use of a scoping form at the start of each policy development/ review

- that each Overview & Scrutiny Committee should consider the most appropriate venue for its work
- that the use of site visits and expert witnesses be considered as appropriate
- that the broadcasting of Council meetings on the website be pursued when cost-effective technology can be identified
- that further training in Overview & Scrutiny be arranged for Members
- that specific budget provision of £5,000 for Overview & Scrutiny be considered as part of the draft 2004/05 budget.

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Background Papers:

Returned questionnaires from Members.

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**FINANCE AND PROCEDURES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY
COMMITTEE**

2003/2004 Work Programme

Appendix 1

From June – October

- Oversee progress of Risk Management Strategy - July
- Receive final report of Best Value Review on Financial Services – July
- Oversee review of Council premises – by September
- Input in connection with the Comprehensive Performance Assessment – by October
- Rayleigh Market Review – by September

Between October and Christmas

- Risk Management Review of the budget and the budget monitoring process
- Monitoring of the Council's Corporate Plan and Best Value Performance Plan

Between Christmas and end of municipal year

- Monitor Grant provision to outside bodies
- External Auditor's Management letter
- Update on Risk Management Progress

In September and March

- Receive progress reports from the Council's IT contractors - SIS

Ongoing

- Oversee and receive reports from Internal Audit on various operations of the Council

ENVIRONMENT OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

2003/2004 Work Programme

From June – October

- Environment Best Value Review – October
- Conclusion of Best Value Work in relation to Public Regulation, Inspection and Protection – September
- Work in connection with the Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA)

Between October and Christmas

- Evaluate responses to consultation on first deposit draft of the Local Plan
- Evaluate service delivery in connection with Decriminalised Parking Enforcement

Between Christmas and end of municipal year

- Monitor progress in connection with implementation of Environment Best Value Review
- Monitor progress in connection with Public Regulation, Inspection and Protection Best Value Review
- Monitor progress in connection with community transport.

Items to be brought twice yearly to September/October and February/March Committees

- Serviceteam (re refuse contract and street cleansing)

Items to be brought before June/July and November/December Committees

- ECC Highways re operations as a Highway Authority

Hullbridge Sub-Committee

To oversee the final stages of the town centre enhancement scheme – to be complete by October

Rayleigh Traffic Sub-Committee

To consider options for improvement in traffic flows within Rayleigh Town Centre – to complete by July.

COMMUNITY OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

2003/2004 Work Programme

From June-October

- Conclusion of Best Value Work in relation to Public Regulation, Inspection and Protection - September
- Conclusion of work around the development of policies and services for the Frail Elderly - October
- Work in connection with the Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA)

Between October and Christmas

- Development of policies and services in respect of young people

Between Christmas and the end of the municipal year

- Development of policy framework and response in respect of gypsies/travellers

Items to be brought twice yearly to September/October and February/March Committees

- Monitoring of Crime and Disorder Reduction Strategy/Community Safety Issues including implementation of Best Value Action Plan
- Leisure Contract (Holmes Place)
- Monitoring of Emergency Planning Best Value Review Action Plan

Items to be brought before June/July and November/December Committees

- Grounds Maintenance Contract (Serviceteam)

Animal Welfare Charter Sub-Committee

To consider the issues and oversee the drafting of the Council's Animal Welfare Charter to Overview and Scrutiny – to be complete by December

Housing Best Value Sub-Committee

To consider in detail the homelessness, housing strategy and housing management action plans, including work in relation to the Frail Elderly. Also, the Best Value Inspectorate's report - complete by September