

Outcomes from the Overview and Scrutiny (OS) Councillor Workshop:

Gathering and using evidence – 28 February 2019

Purpose

1. To report the main discussion points from the OS councillor workshop held on 28 February 2019 and some potential actions then discussed by the four select committee chairmen on 12 March 2019.

Background

2. The Management Committee has a responsibility to ensure that those councillors undertaking OS activity have appropriate knowledge and skills. In June 2018 the Committee approved a learning and development (L&D) programme for OS councillors during the 2017-21 council.
3. The L&D programme includes a programme of thematic workshops delivered inhouse. The workshop themes were chosen following a survey of non-executive councillors asking them to prioritise a range of topics and competencies relevant to OS work. After 'Making OS meetings effective', which was covered at a workshop in October 2018, 'Gathering and using evidence' was voted the most important topic to address.
4. The workshop was held in the Council Chamber, County Hall and comprised information briefings from Scrutiny officers, open discussion and participative group exercises. It was attended by 14 councillors.
5. The objectives of the workshop were to explore,
 - a) How to select and gather relevant, accurate and useful evidence
 - b) How to analyse this evidence
 - c) In Wiltshire what is and isn't working well
 - d) How we can continue to improve.
6. Following this, the Chairmen and Vice-chairmen of the four select committees were invited to meet and discuss the key points raised during the workshop and possible ways of addressing areas identified for improvement. This report presents some suggestions regarding taking these forward.

Key discussion points and actions

Development area	Comment / suggested action
<i>Gathering evidence</i>	
1. Be creative and gather evidence from a variety of sources, including the use of social media where appropriate.	The OS Task Group Protocol encourages task groups to use a breadth of evidence.
2. Take OS “to the people” by holding task group and rapid scrutiny exercises (RSEs) at relevant locations (other than council hubs).	This was also agreed following the previous workshop and relevant guidance has now been added to the OS Task Group Protocol.
3. OS to consider town/parish councils and area boards as potential sources of evidence in regards to local service provision.	The OS Task Group Protocol encourages task groups to use a wide breadth of evidence, including existing information (e.g. the results of area board surveys).
4. Prepare witnesses ahead of OS meetings by ensuring they understand, <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • OS’s purpose, powers and processes • What will be expected of them • What OS will do with the information they provide. 	Scrutiny officers already brief new witnesses and provide them with the OS Task Group Protocol in advance. Action 1: A standard chairman’s verbal statement to be prepared (and read out) in order to ensure all new witnesses understand OS’s purpose, powers and processes.
<i>Work programming and agenda management</i>	
5. Increase the focus on work priorities and those topics where OS can add real value.	Action 2: OS committee chairmen/vice-chairmen and scrutiny officers to undertake periodic reviews of work programmes to discuss what value can be added under each agenda item. Alternative

Development area	Comment / suggested action
<p>6. Reduce the number of items on OS committee agendas.</p> <p>7. Avoid agenda items being taken when they are purely “for information”.</p> <p>8. Greater clarity on why OS committees are receiving each item and their objective.</p>	<p>avenues to be used if appropriate, e.g. circulation of information to councillors by email.</p> <p>Action 3: Work programmes to clarify why each item is received (history, purpose and evidence required). Chairmen to also highlight this prior to committee debate.</p> <p>Action 4: When committee requests an update, the chairman/vice-chairman to conduct an initial review of the update information to ensure a further agenda item is needed.</p>
<p>9. Undertake more in-depth, “quick-hit” exercises prior to items being received by committee; increasing the use of in-depth scrutiny and reducing the length of committee meetings.</p>	<p>Action 5: Relevant OS protocols to be reviewed and revised to reflect,</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rapid, in-depth pre-committee scrutiny of forthcoming agenda items with findings brought to committee for endorsement.
<p><i>Task groups and rapid scrutiny exercises (RSEs)</i></p>	
<p>10. Undertake more “quick-hit” OS exercises to explore topics flexibly and in-depth and, where appropriate, consider if longer term scrutiny is required.</p>	<p>Action 6: Relevant OS protocols to be reviewed and revised to reflect,</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rapid, in-depth, group scrutiny to explore topics outside of a committee setting and, where appropriate, consider if longer term scrutiny is required (NB. Complementing the existing leading role of OS committee chairmen and vice-chairmen).
<p>11. Task groups and RSEs to scope reviews thoroughly before beginning work, to include,</p>	<p>Action 7:</p>

Development area	Comment / suggested action
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Forming clear and focused terms of reference (if not already set) • Evidence required • Councillor briefing/training required 	OS Task Group Protocol to encourage task groups to conduct early consideration of councillors' briefing/training needs.
<i>Councillor learning and development</i>	
12. Continue pre-meeting information briefings to enhance committee debates.	Action 8: Chairmen/vice-chairmen and scrutiny officers to continue to schedule briefings on priority topics.
13. Increase councillor awareness of the procedure for Area Boards referring matters to OS.	Action 9: A Councillor Briefing Note setting out all methods of requesting OS agenda items to be circulated.
14. Make better use of councillors' areas of experience and expertise.	Action 10: Reintroduce the annual survey of non-executive councillors' experience, skills and interests. Use this to target individual councillors to participate in relevant OS activities.

Proposal

7. To note the discussion points and outcomes of the OS councillor workshop held on 28 February 2019.
 8. To agree the actions listed in the table under paragraph 6 to address the development areas identified, with the Chairman and Vice-chairman to bring detailed proposals back for discussion where appropriate.
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Appendices

None