

WILTSHIRE COUNCIL

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY MANAGEMENT COMMITTEE

14 MARCH 2014

Overview and Scrutiny - Peer Review Challenge

Purpose

- 1 To report the outcome of the Peer Review Challenge in respect of the Council's Overview and Scrutiny (OS) function, and the subsequent action agreed by Cabinet.

Background

- 2 Following elections in May and the development of the new Business Plan for 2013-17, the Council invited a review team, consisting of six local authority peers to carry out a corporate peer challenge during the last week of September 2013
- 3 Corporate peer challenges are a form of sector-led improvement arranged by the Local Government Association. They are designed to highlight strengths and identify areas for further improvement and learning. Peer challenges are not inspections and do not provide a detailed diagnosis or scored assessment.
- 4 All peer challenges cover five core components: understanding of the local context and priority setting, political and managerial leadership, financial planning and viability, governance and decision making and organisational capacity. In addition, the peer team was asked to focus on how the Council is transforming Wiltshire through innovation. The findings were reported to Cabinet on 21 January.
- 5 The chairs and vice-chairs of the Management Committee and select committees were interviewed by the review team. Comments made about OS are best viewed in the context of the findings about the Council overall. The full letter can be found [here](#)

What was said about OS?

- 6 The following is an extract from the letter under the heading of Governance and Decision-Making:

"The Council's scrutiny function needs reviewing as it is primarily focused on process rather than outcomes. There has been a focus on scrutinising internal plans and strategies, including the recently approved Business Plan, financial management and staff morale. While focused internal scrutiny continues to be an important role, its remit ought to be much wider focusing on outcomes for

citizens, wider policy agendas and the impact they have on local communities and their resilience.

Examples could be the impact of welfare reform, demographic changes or perhaps the impact and future direction of Area Boards, Community Budgets or a specific local issue. This will use the resource of scrutiny in a more proactive, forward looking and developmental way.”

- 7 The following are non-OS specific extracts but may be of interest to the Management Committee in a wider context:

“As a general point and not to underplay the important of face to face discussions and engagement, there was a general sense among the Peer Team that the Council was operating through very many meetings, some of which may not be required to the extent or formality. They are an expensive way to conduct business.”

“The Council could challenge its own practice more. ‘*We are a bit too nice*’ was a quote the Peer Team heard repeatedly and some of our challenge, for example at workshops with managers, was received with a notion of defensiveness as opposed to interest. Openness, curiosity and active pursuit of challenge are essential ingredients in maintaining a culture of innovation.”

Key recommendations by the Review Team

- 8 These are quoted in full below with number 6 being specific to OS:

“Based on the peer challenge teams’ findings we recommend that the Council considers the following actions. The actions we believe will help improve and develop the Council’s effectiveness and capacity to deliver future ambitions and plans.

- (1) Address the budget gap of 15/16 and beyond
- (2) Clarify the outcomes you want Area Boards to achieve and their relationship with the Centre
- (3) Prioritise work with the CCG now to ensure shared vision and plans
- (4) Work with LEP partners to develop a stronger vision and delivery mechanism for the future
- (5) Strengthen performance management arrangements and align to organisational priorities and outcomes
- (6) Realign scrutiny to focus on outcomes for the public
- (7) Continuously review your corporate capacity to deliver major transformation Programmes”

Council’s Action Plan

- 9 This was agreed by the Cabinet at the same time as receiving the Peer Challenge Review letter. The following is the extract relating to OS:

Recommendation	Action	Measure of Success	Timescale	Lead
Realign scrutiny to focus on outcomes for the public	Review scrutiny as part of the transfer of democratic services into corporate services	Scrutiny work is focused on outcomes for citizens, wider policy agendas and the impact they have on resilience of local communities	March 2014	Maggie Rae Robin Townsend

- 10 The Chairman and Vice-Chairman of the Management Committee along with the OS Manager have met with Maggie Ray, Corporate Director and Robin Townsend, Interim Associate Director. Discussion was wide-ranging but all agreed the need to formally draw the Management Committee's attention to the comments made about OS and the resulting action required.

What does this mean for OS?

- 11 First it should be acknowledged that this was a short, week-long review looking across the Council as a whole, and at a given point in time. The views around OS were formulated following discussion with the chairs and vice chairs of the Management Committee and the select committees.
- 12 The timing was important in understanding the findings. There had been elections earlier in the year and a new leadership appointed for OS. In order to design a work programme focused on the Council's priorities it was important to go through a process of consultation including meeting the various Cabinet and portfolioholder members (many of which had also taken up new responsibilities) in order to agree a common understanding about what areas OS could add value in delivering the objectives set by Council in its Business Plan. An increasing emphasis was placed on contributing to policy development (and away from post-decision scrutiny) particularly through the use of single-topic, time-limited task groups which stemmed from an ambition in the last major review of OS in May 2012.
- 13 These discussions understandably took some time in order to achieve a position to report confidently about future topics. By implication, in focusing now on the key objectives in the Business Plan, there is a natural leaning towards outcomes for communities and the public. The Management Committee did not formally agree to its new work programme until 5 November and perhaps this had not had a sufficiently high profile at the time to influence the thinking of the review team.
- 14 Coincidentally many of the areas for action identified by the review team in paragraph 8 above are the subject of scrutiny within the current work programme. See the appropriate item on this agenda for a copy.

- 15 In terms of scrutiny of local issues, the role of the area boards as the focus of the Council's public consultative mechanism needs to be understood. It is right that issues are discussed at the appropriate level and that there is clarity around who is responsible for what with an eye on avoiding duplication. The Council's Constitution contains the following section:

"The overview and scrutiny management committee will consider referrals from area boards on issues which have been the subject of local review or are multi-boundary or have budget, policy or contractual implications for the council which have first been debated at an area board. The overview and scrutiny management committee will have full discretion in how it wishes to respond to such referrals. Further information on local challenge referrals is contained in the area boards' handbook. This does not preclude overview and scrutiny initiating its own review of a local issue."

What now needs to be done?

- 16 It is important that when scoping topics for OS there is a clear emphasis on adding value and focusing on outcomes for communities and the public in all its work. This is likely to have been done to varying degrees anyhow but now needs to be properly defined early in the process. The existing task group protocol will be revised to emphasise this point.
- 17 The select committees have already moved in this direction, and in particular the Chairman of the Children's Services Select Committee has set this as a requirement for all topics irrespective of how the matter will be scrutinised ie. at committee, task group, rapid exercise or single lead member appointment. It would be appropriate for the Management Committee to consider applying this consistently across the whole function perhaps in the form of some written guidance?
- 18 Topic selection will remain key and therefore careful management of the work programme by the Committee will continue to ensure topics remain relevant and outcome focused.
- 19 A new performance regime is being developed for the Council and it will be necessary to demonstrate that OS achieves appropriate targets when set which are likely to measure effectiveness in this area. The Management Committee will be consulted on this when further developed.
- 20 As mentioned in the action plan, the OS officer support team (4 posts) have been transferred to the new Corporate Office. This will better integrate and strengthen the OS function at the centre of the organisation.
- 21 The Committee will have a view about what more could be done but it is unlikely to require a full structural review in the light of what was said during the peer challenge. The Chairman and Vice-Chairman of the Management

Committee, in response to earlier comments from the Group Leaders forum, have indicated that a review would be appropriate post-May in order to better align and improve the Function's ability to respond to the challenges in the 4-year Business Plan (and supporting Financial Plan), with particular emphasis on the 12 key actions. The ability to apply the non-executive councillor asset and dedicated officer support in a more flexible and targeted way will be vital. The Committee will also be mindful in any review of how the Cabinet and senior management team have shaped themselves to meet the current and future challenges and opportunities faced by the Council.

Recommendations

- 22 To note the comments and key recommendations of the Peer Challenge Review relating to OS as set out in paragraphs 6 and 8 of this report
- 23 To note the action agreed by Cabinet in response to the findings as set out in paragraph 9
- 24 To endorse the work identified to deliver the action as highlighted in paragraphs 16 – 21 including any additional work required by the Management Committee

Paul Kelly
Overview and Scrutiny Manager (and designated Scrutiny Officer)
Corporate Office