

The future of scrutiny: a conference

Scrutiny practitioners have identified their top priorities for the future development of scrutiny effectiveness. Developing greater awareness and support from executives, managers and partners of the potential role of scrutiny in improving services, and providing more practical support are among the key issues which emerge from this debate. The findings in this report are from The Future of Scrutiny, a conference which took place on 30 October 2009, at the Local Government Association.

The issues highlighted as most important for the future development of scrutiny can be summarised as follows:

Rated as most important (with ten priorities) was the need **to gain greater support and awareness of the potential of scrutiny** from council executives, senior managers, and partner organisations. Examples of the priorities put forward in this area include:

- More buy-in from members and officers – executive and corporate management, and whole organisation
- Building constructive relationships with partners and better understanding of the positive role of scrutiny amongst partners
- Recognition amongst all partners that the challenge of scrutiny can lead to real change

Next in importance (with eight priorities) related to **improved practice in scrutiny**, such as greater focus on outcomes rather than processes, and improved practices by councillors. Examples of the priorities put forward in this area include:

- Demonstrating positive outcomes through scrutiny – getting scrutiny focussed on outcomes rather than processes
- Better skills, knowledge and understanding of the scrutiny powers and processes for officers and members
- Boosting capacity, members and officers, smarter working

After this (with seven priorities) was emphasised the need **to increase resources for scrutiny**, such as more staff, more training and increased budgets. Examples of the priorities put forward in this area include:

- Dedicated scrutiny budget for independent scrutiny team, member development, support for community co-optees and advertising to take on the road
- Dedicated and trained scrutiny officer support
- Accessible support for members, eg succinct guidance, checklists, training, officer support

The last category for change (with five priorities) related to **enhanced powers for scrutiny**, summarised as giving scrutiny 'more teeth'. Examples of the priorities put forward in this area include:

- To give O and S more teeth – refer to higher power (Secretary of State), and power to delay decisions being made
- More statutory backing to need to treat scrutiny seriously
- The idea of community call for action (not councillor call for action) should be brought back

One of the conclusions we can draw from this is that most of the changes the conference delegates wanted, as scrutiny practitioners, are within the control of councils. To enhance the role of scrutiny, council managers and leaders need to have more awareness of its potential to contribute to improvement of the council, and the wider area. At present, people involved in scrutiny do not feel this exists.

Greater attention needs to be given, within the LGA Group and elsewhere, to practical support and skills development for councillors involved in scrutiny. However, there also needs to be emphasis on developing wider engagement with scrutiny from decision-makers within and outside the council. Scrutiny's potential role as an important element of more sector-led arrangements to improvement and innovation needs to be recognised and developed. It would also be helpful to the future of scrutiny for government to help to build awareness among other public services of the role of scrutiny, and ensure their response. This is a more immediate priority than additional legal powers, although these have a role to play too.

Priorities for change

Other issues which were raised in the conference discussion groups give additional information on how to improve and develop local government scrutiny. The views expressed can be summarised as:

“It is most important to improve officer and executive member buy-in.”

Asked what it is most important to improve to make scrutiny more effective, again, officer and executive member understanding of the role of scrutiny is highlighted, alongside some concerns about skills for scrutiny of some elected members and in some cases, the level of commitment of elected members. Also emphasised are work programme issues: choosing the right, most important issues to look at, sometimes expressed as doing less but doing it better.

“Councillors would be more motivated if they could see it making a real difference for people.”

We discussed what would motivate councillors to be more involved in scrutiny. Repeatedly, the view was given that councillors needed to see practical outcomes from scrutiny, and that scrutiny addressed and influenced issues which were of concern to their constituents. Issues were raised here about effective work planning, choosing the right issues, and in particular, seeing impact from recommendations. Taking recommendations from scrutiny seriously emerges as a vital issue to be addressed within councils, if councillors are to be more motivated to engage with scrutiny work.

“We need examples of good practice which could stimulate ideas.”

National organisations (such as the LGA, IDeA, Leadership Centre and Centre for Public Scrutiny) are asked to put their emphasis on practical training. Briefer, succinct information, ‘how to’ guides, examples of good practice were emphasised. Practical skills such as chairing and questioning were mentioned. Raising the awareness of the role scrutiny with executive members, officers and partners was also mentioned as a task for national bodies.

“We need a dedicated scrutiny officer – release her from other duties.”

Resources are always of concern. Delegates considered what would be the top priority if additional resources were available for scrutiny. Additional scrutiny staff, particularly research staff, was most often advocated. The need for better support in district councils was specifically mentioned. In

addition to staffing, there were some issues raised about access to better data, and support for consultation, and some specific activities such as site visits.

“We should be able to compel attendance by wider stakeholders such as utilities.”

Ideas were put forward on the need to enhance legal powers of scrutiny. Most frequently, this concerned extending the requirements on external bodies to co-operate with scrutiny, and this could include organisations which have no current legal requirements to respond to scrutiny such as bus companies, or any organisation spending public money. The importance of a requirement to take part in meetings was mentioned. Having a stronger requirement to respond to recommendations was also advocated.

“I’d like other public services to know we are not there to cause problems but to help improve.”

We also discussed the attitude to council scrutiny which other public services should have. Conference participants emphasised the wish that services should see the potential of scrutiny to add value in the work of improving public services. That scrutiny took a constructive approach and that their input would contribute was frequently emphasised.

About the conference

The joint Local Government Association/Centre for Public Scrutiny conference on the future of scrutiny took place on 30 October 2009. The afternoon of the conference took a participative approach to identifying what changes would be most important to help develop scrutiny and improve its effectiveness. The conference delegates were a mixture of council staff, generally scrutiny staff, councillors, and a few people from organisations which would be scrutinised. The delegates, in ten groups facilitated by scrutiny experts, debated what needed to change to enhance scrutiny effectiveness. Each of ten tables was asked to discuss the future of local government scrutiny and identify their top priorities for change: their three wishes for the future of scrutiny. The information and ideas this generated are summarised above, and listed in greater detail in the appendix. Presentations from the conference are available on the LGA website, under ‘events’.

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A longer version of this report will be available in January 2010.

APPENDIX: The future of scrutiny

This appendix summarises the ideas and priorities for change put forward by ten discussion groups of scrutiny practitioners at the Future of Scrutiny conference held at the LGA on 30 October 2009.

Top priorities for change

The top three priorities put forward by each the ten groups were as follows:

- Positive experience – constructive outcomes
- Three Ps: prioritised, proportionate, prompt: balanced work programme
- Boosting capacity, members and officers, smarter working

- More buy-in from members and officers – executive and corporate management, and whole organisation
- Dedicated scrutiny budget for independent scrutiny team, member development, support for community co-optees and advertising to take on the road
- To give O and S more teeth – refer to higher power (Secretary of State), and power to delay decisions being made

- Demonstrating positive outcomes through scrutiny – getting scrutiny focussed on outcomes rather than processes
- Building constructive relationships with partners and better understanding of the positive role of scrutiny amongst partners
- Accessible support for members, eg succinct guidance, checklists, training, officer support

- Better skills, knowledge and understanding of the scrutiny powers and processes for officers and members
- Recognition amongst all partners that the challenge of scrutiny can lead to real change
- A higher profile and more teeth (legal) both within the council and externally

- Members should get more training to help them do their job
- The idea of community call for action (not councillor call for action) should be brought back
- Scrutiny needs to be adequately resourced

- More officer support
- Greater value given to scrutiny and recognition of what it can achieve for the council and partners
- More statutory backing to need to treat scrutiny seriously

- Extending the powers – the answer? Goodwill, two tier scrutiny, quality, resources
- Relationship: value added scrutiny, better understanding, profile, training, champions, demonstrating the benefit
- Reducing the burden on effective councillors; scrutiny needs to be effective, career ladder scrutiny; demonstrate it makes a difference, training

- Better understanding of the role of scrutiny, inside and outside the council
- More officers, especially researchers
- Better organisation, understanding of how effective scrutiny of outside bodies works

- Our communities see and understand the value and positive impacts on local service outcomes

- Improve communication between officers, members and the community; scrutiny was seen to make an impact; give scrutiny **more teeth**
- Impact is demonstrated as part of scrutiny's role

- Motivated, non-partisan overview and scrutiny members
- Commitment and engagement of all relevant parties (not political parties) to effective scrutiny
- Dedicated and trained scrutiny officer support