



better scrutiny for better government

The Future for Scrutiny **Ed Hammond, Centre for Public Scrutiny**

The National Context

There is significant pressure at the moment to find **efficiencies and cost savings** in all areas of the public sector at the moment. This is being felt particularly keenly in local government, which needs to battle to retain front line services while coping with significant reductions in funding from the centre.

This is happening against the backdrop of a **decline in public trust** in public services, which was most recently sparked by the MPs' expenses scandal. Politicians (and many service users) have frequently complained that local services are remote from their users, and that this has been exacerbated by a focus (in local government and elsewhere) on performance targets imposed by Government, and on inspection or assessment (such as Comprehensive Area Assessment).

There is also a need to work more **in partnership with other agencies**. A programme called Total Place has been running since last year which has been about finding opportunities for radically different ways of working in local areas. The talk is all about breaking down "institutional silos" – a jargonistic way of talking about the way that individual organisations often end up acting like monolithic entities rather than talking to each other. It's an old idea, but there is now some real momentum behind Total Place and over the next eighteen months or two years it is going to be at the centre of some pretty radical changes to the way that things happen locally.

But what on earth does all this have to do with scrutiny at local level?

It is important because even these big picture issues are going to have an impact on the way that you work as scrutiny members. Scrutiny doesn't operate in a bubble and different authorities around the country are currently doing exactly what you're doing – looking at their commitments, their responsibilities and their capacity and seeing how they can maximise their **value for money**. This is the ideal time to be carrying out this kind of work.

Different Ways of Working

Total Place, the need to demonstrate value for money and the decline in public trust will all have an impact on how scrutiny works in future. Scrutiny needs to be clued up to the needs of local people, responsive to change and willing and able to step outside of the comfort zone of just "looking at the council".

This will mean less committee work and more targeted, direct reviews and task groups looking at specific issues.

Performance management will be central to this. Making scrutiny more responsive and ensuring that you're adding value where it's most needed means that you need to make performance management – and a rigorous approach to how it can help you to improve services – the centre of the scrutiny process. You can use performance information to help you to decide what you put on your work programme, and the questions that you ask officers at committee meetings. This is central to making scrutiny itself more "value for money", because you are using performance information to ensure that you are looking at the issues that really need scrutiny's input.

Thinking about your role as leaders in the community is also vital. You are the people with the credibility and legitimacy – as democratically-elected representatives – to seek to influence what council officers, and partners, are doing. You understand the needs and wishes of your constituents and it's vital that you bring this to the table, and use it to influence wider scrutiny work.

Focusing on the need to be flexible is important. You need to know how the scrutiny function works, and for that you need structures and systems in place. However, scrutiny also needs to be responsive. If a critical local issue suddenly emerges, but it's eleven weeks before the next relevant committee meeting, there has to be a way to allow scrutiny to investigate the issue and, by so doing, to remain relevant to local people. **Task groups, challenge panels** and other means of working can take you away from the artificial constraints of committee meetings and can often make scrutiny more relevant, timely and value for money.

Finally, **think about how you're going to build a relationship with local partners.** This is less about legal powers – more about building a positive rapport and using it to try to influence what they do. This is vital, because more and more services are being delivered in partnership with other agencies and you need to start building those links now, to ensure that you stay relevant. It's also important to build links with **other scrutineers** such as police authorities, probation trusts and local involvement networks in the NHS – and scrutiny functions from neighbouring local authorities, with whom you can carry out **joint scrutiny** from time to time.