

SCRUTINY CHAIRS GROUP - VISIT TO WARRINGTON

WEDNESDAY 14TH JANUARY 2009

1. ATTENDEES

Councillors Ann Bridson, Phil Gilchrist, Simon Mountney, Denise Roberts and Alan Taylor
Alan Veitch (Scrutiny Support Officer)

2. BACKGROUND

It was agreed by the Scrutiny Chairs Group that it would be useful to visit another authority to investigate the workings of their Scrutiny mechanisms. Warrington Borough Council was chosen because:

- the balance of the Council is similar to Wirral (No Overall Control, resulting in a joint administration)
- Some good working practice is evident from Warrington Council website
- Close proximity

The format of the visit was:

- Attendance at a meeting of Warrington Scrutiny Chairs Forum, the last agenda item of which was 'Questions and Discussion with Wirral MBC Councillors'. (See Sections 4 and 5 below).
- Attendance at a meeting of Warrington's Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee. (See Section 6 below).

3. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

- The visit was very interesting; highlighting a number of different ways of working from Wirral.
- As with many Councils, creating impact through Scrutiny is not easy. However, there are ways in which it can be done. One Warrington member commented that "What we do, we try to do well".
- Emphasis is given to scrutiny via Working Groups. These appear to be flexible in their formation (not bound by political proportionality) and can produce positive results.
- There is a limit to what can be done in scrutiny, based on the capacity of both members and scrutiny officers.
- The aims of members depend, at least to some extent on the political context, for example, opposition members may see scrutiny in a different light to members of the party in administration.

4. SCRUTINY CHAIRS FORUM

4.1 Composition of the Chairs Forum

Warrington Council, which is a Unitary Authority, has five Scrutiny Committees, namely:

- Children's Services
- Communities
- Sustainable Environment and Regeneration
- Health
- Resources

The Chairs Forum is made up of the Chair and Deputy Chair of each of these Committees. Six members were present at the meeting. The Forum meets once per cycle, that is, five times per year. One of the members is elected chair of the Chairs Forum for the year. The purpose of the Forum is to identify ways in which scrutiny can work more effectively.

4.2 Forward Plan

The Chairs Forum considers the Forward Plan, identifying issues for further consideration.

4.3 Committee Work Programme

A short verbal report was given by each Chair to update members of activities of their Committee. This included a proposal for a small number of members from the Children's Services OSC to attend a meeting of the Health OSC to discuss an item of relevance to both Committees (Mental health). This demonstrated joint working between committees.

4.4 Legislation

Short written updates on proposed changes to legislation were included on the agenda for information. These included an update on Councillor Call for Action.

4.5 Expert witness

A Working Group has been established to produce a report on members allowances. An expert witness, a member of the Independent Review Panel, has agreed to give evidence to the Working Group.

4.6 Monitoring the impact of scrutiny

Working Group reports have recently been presented to the Executive. A Warrington member commented that "The issue for scrutiny is whether anything has changed twelve months after a report has been presented. Our watchword should be 'impact'".

4.7 Overview and Scrutiny training

Some Warrington members are attending training delivered through modules of the 'Cheshire and Warrington Improvement and Efficiency Partnership - Overview and Scrutiny Programme. Planning of the programme has been facilitated by IDeA.

5. **QUESTIONS AND DISCUSSION WITH WIRRAL MBC COUNCILLORS**

5.1 Officer Support

Warrington Council has 2.75 FTE in their Scrutiny Support team. The team is part of Democratic Services. Each Committee is supported by a scrutiny officer. That officer will also provide support for any Working Groups that are created. The scrutiny officers are part of the Committee section within the Democratic Services organisation.

5.2 Committee Structure

When scrutiny was first introduced, there were only two committees - one looking forward and one looking backward. However, that was amended so that there were ten committees, as Policy & Overview Committees were separate from Scrutiny. Approximately three years ago, a decision was taken to reduce and simplify the structure. Four of the current committees equate to directorates within the Council organisation. The fifth Scrutiny Committee is Health. Each committee usually meets five times per year, although one Chair did express the opinion that more frequent meetings would be useful.

The Executive has ten members. Therefore, there is not a one-to-one relationship between Executive portfolios and Scrutiny Committees. Although the five committee structure tends to work well, it is "sometimes difficult to pin down Executive portfolio holders to one Scrutiny Committee".

Four of the Committees have 11 members. (The share between parties is currently 6:4:1). Children's Services, due to the inclusion of co-opted members, has 15 members. The larger committees, compared to Wirral, provide more members from which to choose volunteers for Working Groups. However, the larger committees can appear unwieldy. Some members at Warrington serve on more than one Scrutiny Committee.

5.3 Health Scrutiny

Unusually, Health is separate from Social Care within the Warrington structure. A decision was taken three years ago to have a separate Health Scrutiny Committee due to the volume of work in that area. Wirral has a much simpler relationship with its health partners as the Council, PCT and Hospital trust all operate to similar geographical boundaries (with the exception of mental health). However, in Warrington there is a much more complex relationship with over-lapping boundaries. This gives rise to a large number of consultations, including joint consultations with neighbouring boroughs.

As there is no Executive portfolio for Health, Social Care is part of the Communities directorate. It was therefore natural for Social Care to be included as part of the Communities Scrutiny Committee.

Some health consultations are carried out using email; rather than formal meetings.

5.4 How are the scrutiny officers tasked with work?

The work of the scrutiny officers is generally determined by the Annual Work Programme, which sets priorities for the year. The programme is set by the Committees during the June cycle of meetings. The Committees hold a Work Programme setting event at which possible topics are discussed. As an example, Children's Services invited young people to the Event and asked them for suggestions. Some of these suggestions were included in the work programme.

Possible topics for the work programme will be proposed based on information gathered from a variety of sources, including ward issues, community issues, performance indicators, political groups, and so on. However, whether topics are selected for a review by a Working Group depends on "How many members are interested in pursuing this?". There is no point in setting up a Working Group if there is no interest from members in doing the detailed work.

The meetings of the Chairs Forum reviews progress against the work programme but the Forum does not set the work programme.

The Resources Scrutiny Committee has undertaken a review into the 'Effectiveness of Scrutiny at Warrington'. The review was carried out by a Working Group of members, which included some Executive members.

5.5 Scrutiny and political parties

Interest in the scrutiny process appears to be affected by the party political situation. One Warrington member argued that Scrutiny can do a good job. However, that member also indicated that scrutiny was more useful as a member of the party in administration and less of the case when in opposition. Another member felt that Scrutiny enabled opposition members to raise the profile of issues and hopefully "nip problems in the bud".

The current administration took control in May 2007. The opposition have so far declined the chairs of Scrutiny Committees. Therefore, the Chairs are of the same party as the administration. This can sometimes give the impression that "Scrutiny can appear too comfortable for the executive members". There is a concern regarding the politicisation of the scrutiny process.

5.6 Call-In process

Since the administration changed (May 2007), there have been three Call-ins, two of which were effectively on the same issue (proposed closure of a secondary school). The third issue was called-in by members of one of the administration parties (relating to a ward issue).

Call-Ins are dealt with by one of the five normal Scrutiny committees.

None of the Call-Ins have resulted in an amended decision. However, some of the Call-Ins have highlighted issues with procedures that were subsequently altered.

5.7 Working Groups

Each Scrutiny committee selects topics for which Scrutiny is undertaken by a working group. For example, Children's Services committee have created two Working Groups for the current municipal year, namely, 'Child poverty in Warrington' and 'Places and Spaces', which is investigating facilities for young people.

The membership of each Working Group is determined by 'volunteers'. There is no fixed allocation of places, for example, on a 1:1:1 basis. Party politics tends to "go out of the window" on the Working Groups, with much reduced disagreement on party lines. Some Working Groups are chaired by members of the opposition party. There was also an example where only member was interested in a particular topic. Therefore, that member undertook a review (supported by a scrutiny officer) and produced a report for the Scrutiny Committee to consider.

The scrutiny officer provides support to each Working Group which is set up for 'their' Committee. In addition, the Working Group will be supported by a departmental officer(s).

There is a limit to the number of Working groups that can operate at any one time, due to the capacity of both members and scrutiny officers. Care is taken "not to over-commit resources at any one time". Each of the five Scrutiny Committees operate a maximum of two Working groups at any one time. Space is left in the work programmes to allow topical / urgent items to be added if necessary.

6. **CHILDREN'S SERVICES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY MEETING**

6.1 Declarations of Interest

Declarations of Interest were invited at the start of the meeting. However, no declaration regarding whipping arrangements was made at the start of the meeting.

6.2 Officer Support at Committee meetings

Only three departmental officers attended the meeting, each speaking to specific items on the agenda. (Two officers spoke to more than one item). The introductions to each report, which were given by officers, were extremely limited, highlighting only one or two major points. The scrutiny officer takes the minutes of the meeting (that is, there is not a specialist Committee clerk present. (Apparently, the current scrutiny officers all have a background in Committee work). There is no legal representative present as it is recognised that the meeting cannot determine Council policy (only make recommendations). Officers were sat amongst members, helping to give the meeting a greater feel of informality.

6.3 Co-options

Members discussed the possibility of making further co-options to the committee, including representatives of 0 - 5 education, 16 - 19 education and young people.

6.4 Referring Outcomes to the Executive

On one agenda item, referring to 'Social Care Performance' the Committee agreed to convey concern to the Executive regarding the replacement of a respite home for children with Learning Difficulties and Disabilities. (Some of the Warrington Committees have a permanent agenda item called 'Review the Recommendation Log' whereby members review a document which analyses progress against past recommendations agreed by the Committee).

6.5 Involvement of young people (Public participation)

A young person had been specifically invited to the meeting as a report regarding 'Personal Social Health Education (PSHE) in Warrington schools' was on the agenda. This topic had been suggested for further scrutiny by the young people attending the work programme Setting Event.

A questionnaire is currently being organised by a group of young people (Impact - Warrington Youth Council) to assess the effect of PSHE education in the schools and colleges of Warrington. Representatives of Impact will be invited back to a future meeting to share their findings.

6.6 Working Groups

Both Chairs of the two current Working Groups (in Children's services) presented verbal reports to update members on progress. The activity of the Working Groups takes place outside the Committee, accessing relevant information / evidence from meetings with officers, residents, community groups, site visits, expert witnesses and so on.

6.7 Item referrals from Resources Scrutiny Committee

The Corporate Performance Report is scrutinized by the Resources Scrutiny Committee. That Committee identified two specific performance indicators relevant to Children's Services. Those two indicators were referred to Children's Services Committee for further comment. (This demonstrates cross-working between committees).

Alan Veitch (Scrutiny Support Officer – 19/01/09)