

MINUTE EXTRACT

STANDARDS AND CONSTITUTIONAL OVERSIGHT COMMITTEE

Thursday, 26 September 2019

13 REVIEW OF SCRUTINY ARRANGEMENTS

Councillor Dave Mitchell, the Chair of the Business Overview and Scrutiny Committee was in attendance at the meeting and introduced his comprehensive report on the review of the Council's overview and scrutiny committee arrangements that had been undertaken in consultation with the Committee Chairs and Group representatives. Members had considered the number of committees and their respective terms of reference and the report set out suggested steps on how to improve the arrangement.

The Committee was informed that the Scrutiny Review Panel had been established and an all non-executive Members' Workshop had been held. The report detailed the outcomes of the review of the scrutiny arrangements of the Business Overview and Scrutiny Committee. The findings and recommendations reflected the views of all the Members who had been involved.

The Review Panel had commissioned the Scrutiny Team to carry out a research exercise to explore governance including scrutiny arrangements at authorities with statistical similarities to Wirral and the experiences of Councils in the UK where committee systems had been introduced. A briefing pack had been approved by Chairs and Party Spokespersons of all four Overview and Scrutiny Committees and circulated to all non-executive Members in preparation for the workshop. It included statutory guidance on overview and scrutiny in local government published in May 2019. This was a best practice guide and it was noted that Wirral already fulfils several of these areas of focus. It was also worth noting that areas that needed work were around organisational culture which required a long term commitment to change.

The Scrutiny Review Workshop for all non-executive Members was held on 17 July 2019 to review current scrutiny arrangements in Wirral and to discuss future options for scrutiny and Members from all Political Groups were in attendance, eleven in all, as well as key members of the Strategic Leadership Team. The Statutory Scrutiny Officer facilitated the session in order to ensure the strategic objections were clear, to provide an overview of the current arrangements and to ensure that key points were considered as part of the workshop.

At the Workshop Members were asked to consider what had been working well and what key principles of overview and scrutiny were important. The discussion produced two lists of positive areas of scrutiny and areas for improvement. Members then asked questions about developing a fit for purpose overview model for Wirral and two models had been presented and were detailed in the report.

As a result of the Members' Workshop several crucial findings had been gathered and there was agreement for the retention of the following key principles in any new model of governance to ensure decision-making was efficient, effective and legitimate:

- Openness and Transparency
- Ensuring Effective Oversight
- Holding Partners to account.
- Use of Task and Finish and Scrutiny Review Groups – Pre-decision Scrutiny.
- Effective Assignment of Members with appropriate knowledge and skills and across political groups to relevant Committees and sub-Committees.
- Continued Engagement with Stakeholders.

Councillor Mitchell reported that it was important to note that two separate reviews had been directed by the Council; the Review of Scrutiny outlined in the report and the Governance Review that was also reporting at this Committee. Both were related to the Council's governance arrangements and, therefore, it was noted that the two reviews had implications for each other. The primary objective of the Governance Review Working Group was to explore different governance options that could be implemented by Wirral Council. They were the current system, an executive model, a committee system or a potential hybrid of both. Some governance models did not require scrutiny. It had not been possible to propose an exact scrutiny model because the Scrutiny Review Working Group had not been aware of the outcomes of the Governance Review until the report had been published.

Councillor Mitchell informed that the Council currently had four Overview and Scrutiny Committees and three Members sat on the Overview and Scrutiny Committee of the Merseyside City Region Combined Authority.

Appended to the report were:

- Appendix 1 – The Review of Scrutiny Arrangements Report
- Appendix 2 – The Review Briefing pack including Scoping Document
- Appendix 3 – The Presentation to the Members' Workshop

Members then commented on the report and asked a number of questions. Issues raised included:

- The monitoring of partner organisations should be built into any new form of governance arrangements.
- In the past not all the recommendations made to the Cabinet by Overview and Scrutiny Committees had been approved.
- Task and Finish Groups and the need for Call-in would need to be considered before any new governance structure was agreed.
- Culture was an issue and needed to be changed within the Council.
- Good scrutiny provided an invaluable service.
- A suggestion that when the Minute of this item of business was published, a document covering what the Committee discussed here including the summary and findings that Councillor Mitchell had outlined be included in a paper for Members to use as a reference document.

- It was essential that attention be given to Merseyside City Region Combined Authority scrutiny in any new governance arrangements.

RESOLVED: That

- (1) the Business Overview and Scrutiny Committee be thanked for its very detailed report;**
- (2) the Council be recommended to approve the recommendations of the review of its scrutiny arrangements as follows:**
 - (a) the findings of this review of scrutiny arrangements be taken into account as part any new governance model, with the six key principles of effective scrutiny formally included within the new model of decision-making;**
 - (b) the effectiveness of the Overview & Scrutiny arrangements of the new governance model at Wirral be reviewed after 12 months to ensure the good practice currently in operation is continued; and**
 - (c) the new governance model should ensure full consideration of Wirral's involvement in the Liverpool City Region Combined Authority Overview & Scrutiny function.**