Scrutiny Good Practice Guide

SCRUTINY COMMITTEE – GOOD PRACTICE GUIDE

This guide is about ensuring that scrutiny committee meetings (i.e. formal meetings of scrutiny committees) are focused, effective and secure meaningful outcomes, and that the role of the Elected Member is fully outlined.

The Role of Scrutiny:-

Scrutiny has an important role in the corporate governance of the authority and acts as a critical friend to make sure that the Executive makes sound evidence based decisions.

This can be done through :-
- Pre Scrutiny (this involves considering decisions to be taken by the Executive (Cabinet) before they are made.)
- Performance (this involves monitoring how services are performing)
- Policy and Partnership (this involves considering the impact of policies and holding partners of the Council to account.)
- Post Scrutiny (this involves considering the impact of decisions after they have been made)

How this can be achieved:-

- Examine how well the Cabinet and Council are performing.
- Hold the Cabinet to account
- Monitor the performance of the Council's services and functions.
- Review decisions made by the Cabinet where appropriate.
- Assist the Cabinet in the development, monitoring and review of policy.
- Scrutinise, as a key element of the consultation process, the proposed revenue budget strategy and capital investment programmes.
- Enable the participation of external organisations and partners in consideration of issues that may impact upon the delivery of Council and countywide priorities.

Committee Meetings

Scrutiny Committees are public meetings and Democratic Services will send a link to the agenda and reports at least 3 clear working days before the date of the meeting.

Members should download the paperwork on their mod.gov device on receipt of the email and read their papers before the meeting.

Scrutiny Committee meetings will be convened in accordance with the Council and Scrutiny Procedure rules

All Scrutiny Committees are encouraged to hold pre-meetings, which is considered good practice by the Audit Wales. Pre-meetings are known to improve effectiveness of scrutiny meetings and assist the Chair in developing a clear questioning strategy for the main meeting.

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Rules of procedure will include provisions on

- Public questions
- Length of meetings and the use of guillotine motions to extend meetings where necessary;
- How witnesses will be managed;
- How the chair will, generally, conduct the meeting, including the formal right of the vice-chair to deputise in the event of the chair's absence.

The role of the Scrutiny Member

Members of Scrutiny Committees have a collective and individual responsibility for ensuring that scrutiny is Member led.

This includes :-
- Determining the Committee's own work programme and deciding what evidence to seek.
- Good preparation – It is essential all members attend meetings having already read reports and prepared questions, meaning debate is focussed and appropriate to the issues contained within the report.
- Asking timely and relevant questions
- Focused Reports - Members should be clear before a report is written about exactly what the report should deal with, i.e. which aspect of the service or activity do they want to scrutinise and for what reason.

Scrutiny Committees are not about:-

- Making decisions – that is the role of the Cabinet

- Excessive party politics – should not be used to further political objectives

- Highlighting individual ward issues - ward issues should be dealt with via the Councillor Enquiry system.

- Non-Executive members have the option of asking questions of the Cabinet Member at Cabinet or Council

What is expected of a member of a Scrutiny Committee

- Attend all relevant training sessions
- Familiarisation with the Job Description for a Scrutiny Member
- Familiarisation with the Scrutiny Procedure Rules which includes the role of the Cabinet Member when attending Scrutiny meetings.
- Assist the Chair and Vice-Chair in setting and managing work programmes.
- Attend Committee meetings having read the agenda and reports and prepared questions, in advance.
- Attend Committee pre-meetings (if these are held)

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What is expected of a Scrutiny Committee Chair or Vice-Chair

- Attend all relevant training sessions
- Familiarisation with the Job Description of a Scrutiny Chair and Vice Chair
- Familiarisation with the Scrutiny Procedure Rules including the role of the Cabinet Member when attending Scrutiny.
- Provide confident and effective management of the Committee and confirm the Agenda for meetings, in accordance with the Forward Work Programme, with support from the designated Democratic Services Officer
- Take ownership of the agendas for all meetings by setting and managing Forward Work Programmes and forthcoming items, confirming which items will be included on the agenda.
- Encourage all members to attend and contribute to the meeting
- Speak to those members who demonstrate poor preparation or a lack of interest in items under discussion.
- Encourage their committee to hold pre-meetings. Audit Wales consider pre-meetings improve the effectiveness of scrutiny committees, helping members to prepare, as do pre-meeting notes to assist the Chair to function more effectively. Pre-meetings also assist in organisation of the formal meeting itself, reducing disorganised questioning (no common effort being made by members to pick up on each other's questioning/areas of concern) and developing a consensual view about the outcomes and objectives of the meeting
- Poor chairing can result in a lack of clarity about why the item has been put on the agenda and the lack of ability to channel and manage other members' questioning
- Chairs should ensure that there are clear recommendations arising from discussions. The Chair will need to wrap up discussions and convert findings or conclusions into clear, concrete recommendations at the meeting
- Minutes are action focused (rather than semi-verbatim transcripts) and post-meeting communication as part of the Actions and referrals reports will help;
- Make the necessary introductions at commencement of the meeting, asking all present to introduce themselves/ their role, explain translation and fire evacuation procedures (particularly when members of the public are present).
- Encourage all members to fully participate at meetings.

Committees Members in consultation with the Chair should ensure that there is

- A clear reason why individual items have been placed on the agenda. In order for Committee members to be effective they need to be clear on whey the Committee is considering the report
- It is good practice for reports for noting/information not to be included on formal meeting agendas. Members should discuss alternative methods of communicating these items outside of the formal committee setting, as including them on a formal agenda is a poor use of members' time, and the time of officers preparing those reports and speaking to them at the meeting itself.

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- Consider the number of items on an agenda as a large number of substantive items on a committee agenda (it is good practice to have no more than two to three substantive items per meeting) has a detrimental effect on effectiveness as it often leads to members having to rush through any remaining business.

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