



Supporting an evaluation of scrutiny at
South Cambridgeshire District Council

CfPS Scrutiny Improvement Review methodology

CfPS
Scrutiny
Improvement
Review

Proposal

November 2019

Supporting an evaluation of scrutiny at South Cambridgeshire DC

Summary

To advise and support South Cambridgeshire Council's Members and Officers in the review of the council's scrutiny function to ensure that it is effective in providing a quality contribution in accountability, policy and decision making, delivery of council plans and overall improvement.

Introduction

SCDC wants to check and test that scrutiny arrangements and effectiveness meet the council's high expectations of democratic accountability and that decision-making and overview and scrutiny is transparent, effective and impactful. It is determined to make its ongoing approach to scrutiny fresh, innovative and bold.

It wants its overview and scrutiny structure to create the right framework to maximise its impact within its governance arrangements. The Centre for Public Scrutiny, as the leading national governance and scrutiny organisation, has been asked to support a member review panel to help develop its plans for the development of scrutiny. This proposal suggests the scope and approach to that support.

SCDC has not undertaken a review of its scrutiny arrangements for some time and considers that this would now be valuable exercise – both in order to assure its existing practice, and to challenge it to undertake further improvements. No council can profess excellence in scrutiny across the board – there are always areas of weakness which, left untended, can develop into flaws in scrutiny which can have a more significant impact on effectiveness overall. The CfPS Scrutiny Improvement Review (SIR) is designed to be challenging, but essentially also to be constructive in suggesting ways to drive forward improvement.

CfPS has identified some principal areas of focus for this evaluation in the following sections. These areas will be evaluated using CfPS's Scrutiny Improvement Review method.

The CfPS SIR method aligns with both latest statutory guidance and best practice experience accumulated by CfPS over many years. This review will therefore evaluate the council's approach to scrutiny in the light of the guidance and best-practice.

CfPS is the leading national body promoting and supporting excellence in governance and scrutiny. Its work has a strong track record of influencing policy and practice nationally and locally. CfPS is respected and trusted across the public sector to provide independent and impartial advice.

CfPS is an independent national charity founded by the Local Government Association [LGA], Local Government Information Unit [LGIU] and Chartered Institute of Public Finance Accountants [CIPFA]. Its trustee board is chaired by Lord Bob Kerslake.

Proposal Outline

Overall objectives

The Council has confidence in the quality of its scrutiny arrangements but wishes to explore what it can do to further strengthen and develop them in the light of challenges that local government is facing.

Scope:

- **Culture.** The mindset and mentality underpinning the operation of the overview and scrutiny process. This will involve a focus on the Council's corporate approach to scrutiny;
- **Information.** How information is prepared, shared, accessed and used in the service of the scrutiny function;
- **Impact.** Ways to ensure that scrutiny is effective, that it makes a tangible difference to the lives of local people.

We propose the following broad areas of focus, which will be explored by the Scrutiny Improvement Review method, as described below:

- Prioritisation and focus in the work programme (informed by a clear, well-articulated role for scrutiny overall). We will look at the extent to which current arrangements result in a work programme which may be too broad, and at call-in arrangements;
- Outcomes from the scrutiny process – how these can be assessed and evaluated throughout the process;
- The way in which information is used by scrutiny councillors – how and where information can be accessed and how it can be used to triangulate and form an accurate picture for councillors as to how services are delivered on the ground.

Evidence sourcing

The Scrutiny Improvement Review method itself is based on substantial research carried out by CfPS since 2003, which includes regular reviews of good practice, large-scale surveys of scrutiny nationwide and a range of comprehensive support activity for individual councils.

The following elements are used as prompts to influence the Scrutiny Improvement Review. They are not criteria against which SCDC's approach will be "judged", but a framework for discussion and debate on those issues and areas most important to the authority.

1. Organisational commitment and clarity of purpose
2. Members leading and fostering good relationships
3. Prioritising work and using evidence well
4. Having an impact

We will use these four elements as prompts to ensure that all key aspects of SCDC's activity are evaluated, mapped against the SCDC-specific areas of focus identified above. We anticipate that the nature of these focus areas means that we will spend more time on elements 3 and 4.

As SCDC does not to have significant or complex challenges associated with its scrutiny function, we suggest a relatively streamlined approach to evidence gathering. This will consist of:

- **Desktop work.** Remotely, CfPS will carry out a general sense-check of the Council's constitution and rules of procedure insofar as they relate to scrutiny, and of recent work plans and scrutiny scopes and review reports. This will provide an evidence base for the rest of the work;
- **Interviews.** Principally, this will need to include the Leader, CEO, Monitoring Officer, Finance (s151) officer, Lead Scrutiny Officer, leading members in scrutiny (Chair, Vice Chairs) and Opposition Group Leaders and a 'sample' group of scrutiny members (possibly as a small group discussion) and scrutiny support officers (possibly as a group). The option exists to interview those who are subject to scrutiny – service officers – and people who have given evidence to scrutiny. If we do have particularly questions arising from our research that relates to those individuals, these will be raised during the process;
- **Survey.** If appropriate we will carry out a wider survey of members or invite comment from councillors more generally. In terms of setting future aspirations and providing a positive member steer for scrutiny, a short survey is likely to be the most suitable option;
- **Observation.** This is a common theme of the evaluation task and should be programmed in as practical timescales allow. If available web/video casts – live or recordings – can be used if attendance is not a viable option.

Typical Scrutiny Improvement Review engagement 'tests'

The following is intended to provide a flavour of the kinds of questions usually ask in interviews, and the generally topics that we would try to explore in our desktop research. It is fairly generic; as our initial evidence-gathering is under way we would be able to clarify and refine some of this questioning and would share this with the Council to ensure that our work is focusing on the right issues in the right way.

Element 1: Organisational commitment and clarity of purpose

We would ask questions to find out:

- What do people in leadership positions think of scrutiny and its work?
- How is scrutiny treated as a “strategic function” of the council, and as a resource for corporate improvement?
- How is the concept of a “parity of esteem” between scrutiny and the executive fostered and promoted?
- How are the links between scrutiny and other corporate functions – corporate policy, communications, financial planning – articulated?
- How do senior officers engage in a timely and proactive way with scrutiny’s expectations on the provision of information?
- How is scrutiny’s overall role articulated both by scrutiny itself and by the wider council?
- How has this role been based on evidence around what might add most value to the lives of local people?

Element 2: Members leading and fostering good relationships

We would ask questions to find out:

- How do members in scrutiny leadership positions operate?
- How do those members act to build relationships with those on the executive side, and with other scrutiny members?
- How members have the assurance that they have the necessary skills and capabilities to carry out their role? How does the authority have this assurance?
- How do scrutiny members overall work as part of a team with a common purpose based on scrutiny’s articulated role?
- How are disagreements (and scrutiny’s approach to contentious matters) resolved?
- How does politics (including party politics) influence scrutiny – both positively and negatively?

Element 3: Prioritising work and using evidence well

We would ask questions to find out:

- How does scrutiny use its role to prioritise and focus its workload (ie, through work programming)?
- How does scrutiny evaluate the likely impact of forthcoming work when it is considering its forward work programme?
- How does scrutiny gather evidence and information to support work programming (for example, through regular consideration of key data sources)?
- How does scrutiny gather evidence and information to support its substantive work? What evidence gathering methods are used?
- How is evidence gathering systematic, and linked to the objectives of the work being carried out?
- How are committee agendas put together, and by whom?
- How well do councillors (and the wider council) understand scrutiny members’ formal information rights?

Element 4: Having an impact

We would ask questions to find out:

- How are recommendations formulated and agreed?
- How do scrutiny's relationships with those outside the council influences what and how it recommends?
- How scrutiny evidences its tangible impact – on local people, major decisions and policy development?
- How is scrutiny's work, and impact, acknowledged by others (including those outside the council)?

Action planning

This is the most important part of the Scrutiny Improvement Review process. Once CfPS has gathered evidence it will put its overall findings – and a suggested range of actions – to members and officers. We do not propose to produce a formal report with recommendations, but instead suggest that we work with you to develop an action plan with which you are comfortable, and which you consider is deliverable. Our work is of course designed to be challenging, but this process ensures that what we think is necessary is in fact something you can do, and that you will feel a sense of ownership of the final product.

Member workshop

This event will present members with options for improvement and allow participation in the design of the future programme for change. CfPS will facilitate and construct the workshop and support Members to encourage the widest contribution.

The action plan will meet usual expectations of these kinds of documents. It will be:

- Timed;
- Resourced;
- Owned – so responsibility for individual actions and the whole action plan will be clearly assigned;
- Iterative (so, it will focus on experimenting with different ways of doing scrutiny rather than establishing perfect systems from day one);
- Focused on culture and conduct rather than structures;
- Predicated on periodic review;
- Integrated into the scrutiny work programme – so improvement is treated as part of scrutiny's substantive work.

Resources

Project delivery lead: Ian Parry – CfPS Head of Consultancy

Costs

Total fee £4700 + VAT and reasonable travel/accommodation expenses

Next steps

We welcome your views on the proposed scope and approach, which we hope matches your expectations in terms of delivery and costs. To discuss further please contact Ian Parry at CfPS ian.parry@cfps.org.uk or 07831 510381.