



Corporate Resources Scrutiny Committee

Briefing Paper

Report of: Ben Craddock, Assistant Scrutiny/Committee Officer

Date: Thursday, 14th October 2010

Open

Joint Scrutiny in Worcestershire

1. Summary

1.1 This report informs Members of ways in which cooperation and communication is being developed between scrutiny teams across the County, with reference to a recent joint meeting held between Scrutiny Chairs and Officers.

1.2 Members are advised that this report is informed by the minutes of this meeting, which have not yet been agreed by Members and could be subject to change.

2. Background

2.1 Since 2003 Scrutiny Officers from across the County have met on a quarterly basis, in order to discuss issues of mutual interest, share best practice, and update on each authority's work programmes.

2.2 In response to these meetings, it was suggested that a forum for both Members and Officers be established in order to develop communication and cooperation between authorities further.

2.3 The first such meeting was held on the 25th March 2010 at County Hall. Key points discussed at this meeting included the strengths and weaknesses of conducting joint scrutiny exercises, the scrutiny structure of each authority, topics suited to joint scrutiny, and how to develop procedures for joint scrutiny. Several suggestions arose from this meeting, including that a draft Joint Scrutiny Protocol be developed, and a shared intranet and message board be provided to improve communication between Scrutiny Chairs and Officers across the County.

2.4 A further meeting was held on the 13th September 2010 which was hosted by Wyre Forest. At this meeting the County Council provided a draft version of a Joint Scrutiny Protocol which was discussed by Members. Members felt that there were a number of difficult questions surrounding joint scrutiny exercises including:

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- Political balance and appointment of Members
 - Relevance to all authorities
 - Resourcing a joint scrutiny in terms of Officer time and costs
 - How to propose a joint scrutiny and identify other participating Councils
 - Approval of final recommendations
- 2.5 A number of suggestions were made as to how to overcome some of these problems. For appointment of Members, it was suggested that a Task and Finish Group model be used in order to reduce constitutional complexity. With regard to the number of Members appointed, it was felt that this should be dependent upon the number of participating authorities, but that for a joint scrutiny involving all of the County it would be best if this did not exceed more than one Member per authority.
- 2.6 It was considered that political balance was a difficult issue but one that could not be addressed by a protocol or procedure, and the appointment of Members would be best left to individual authorities and their Overview and Scrutiny Committees to resolve.
- 2.7 Members considered that joint scrutiny exercises need not involve all of the County's authorities, and that a successful joint scrutiny might involve only two or three authorities. Whether a scrutiny is relevant or appealing to all authorities is an important issue, but it was felt that when a joint scrutiny is proposed, it should not be seen to be obligatory for all authorities to want to participate. By the nature of joint scrutiny, some issues will affect some authorities more than others, and if an Overview and Scrutiny Committee feels that it does not wish to participate, then this would not necessarily undermine the other authorities from proceeding.
- 2.8 A further question was how to resource a joint scrutiny, and one which relates to the number of participants. The draft protocol suggested that arrangements relating to resourcing a joint scrutiny be made at the scoping stage, and in response to this a suggestion was made that in some instances, it might be suitable if the authority where the proposal originated leads with the officer support for the review. This could be suited to reviews involving only two or three authorities, but could prove burdensome for a significantly larger review, and how to resource a larger review was not resolved at this meeting.
- 2.9 How to propose a joint scrutiny was explored by the draft protocol, which suggested that Officers could liaise regarding this at the quarterly Scrutiny Officer meetings, in consultation with the Scrutiny Chairs. This idea was developed at the meeting by suggesting that a Joint Scrutiny Proposal Form could be developed, which would then allow for Joint Scrutiny Proposals to be submitted and then considered by each authority's Overview and Scrutiny Committees.

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- 2.10 It was felt that joint scrutiny exercises must not in any way undermine individual Overview and Scrutiny Committees, be that in terms of the decision making ability of the Committee to participate in a review, or in terms of Officer support and the time available to undertake individual scrutiny exercises.
- 2.11 Another important question was how to agree recommendations. One possibility is for a draft report to be completed and then submitted to each Scrutiny Committee for comment. However, it was felt that this could potentially become bureaucratic for a larger review, and where there were authorities with conflicting views this could potentially end up in a stalemate situation.
- 2.12 It was felt that the possibility of conflicting views between individual Scrutiny Committees was one that could not be addressed by a procedure or protocol, and instead a simpler option would be for the joint task and finish group to produce a final report, which individual Scrutiny Committees could then append their comments to. Individual Scrutiny Committees could make their own arrangements to monitor the progress of the Joint Scrutiny and to gather feedback from their appointed representative.

2.2 Possible Topics for Joint Scrutiny

- 2.21 Also discussed at the most recent meeting was which topics, if any, might benefit from joint scrutiny and whether or not any should be progressed.

A number of suggestions were raised, a summary of which is provided below:

- Proposals for the Worcestershire Local Economic Partnership (LEP)
 - Worcestershire Enhanced Two Tier Programme for Shared Regulatory Services (WETT)
 - Social Housing with reference to Choice Based Lettings (CBL)
 - Crime and Disorder
 - Revenues and Benefits
 - Refuse and Recycling
- 2.22 Of these topics, proposals for the Worcestershire LEP and WETT stood out as being of initial interest all authorities, and it was suggested that proposals for a joint scrutiny of WETT be revisited in approximately 12 months time.

2.3 Conclusions

- 2.31 Following this discussion, it was agreed that County Officers would liaise with Wyre Forest Officers in order to amend the draft protocol in light of the comments raised during the discussion, with a revised version being considered by the next meeting of Scrutiny Chairs and Officers which is expected to be held in either November or December in 2010, to be hosted by Redditch Borough Council.
- 2.32 In addition to this it was agreed that in future, the agendas and minutes of the Joint Scrutiny Officers meetings be circulated to Scrutiny Chairs and Vice Chairs, and that Scrutiny Chairs and Vice Chairs would meet on a joint basis, independently of Officers.

3. Options

- 3.1 Members may wish to make suggestions regarding the following:
- i) How joint scrutiny exercises could be better facilitated and conducted.
 - ii) Topics suited to joint scrutiny.

4. Equality Impact Needs Assessment

- 4.1 There are no discernible implications on any of the equality strands.

5. Wards affected

- 5.1 District wide.

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