

Report on Visits to Scrutiny Committees by Scrutiny Champion, Councillor A N Woolcock

Background

In my role as the Authority's Scrutiny Champion I initially visited all scrutiny committees between the 14th September 2017 and 1st December 2017 to observe proceedings. A report was subsequently presented to meetings of the Chairs/Vice Chairs of Scrutiny and Democratic Services Committee.

Follow up visits were carried out as follows:

- Social Care, Health and Wellbeing Scrutiny Committee – 11 October 2018
- Education, Skills and Culture Scrutiny Committee – 18 October 2018
- Regeneration and Sustainable Development Scrutiny Committee – 26 October 2018.
- Streetscene and Engineering Scrutiny Committee – 30 November 2018

Pre-briefing meetings

There was good evidence of the value of holding pre-briefing meetings where Members had the opportunity to consider officers' recommendations as to which agenda items required scrutiny. Additionally, Members were given the opportunity to indicate which questions they wished to ask at the subsequent scrutiny committee. In some instances, Members had submitted questions in advance of the meeting.

However, in one meeting, one Member queried the value of pre-scrutiny meetings. He suggested that it would be more prudent to submit questions in advance and, similarly, Members could give advance notice to request to scrutinise agenda items not recommended for scrutiny by officers.

In one of the meetings Members decided to scrutinise an item that was not recommended by officers for scrutiny.

Members also took the opportunity to discuss items not on the day's agenda i.e. Members of the Social Care, Health and Wellbeing Scrutiny

Committee of the 11 October briefly commented on recent Home Care Rota Visits, and attendance by officers of ABMU Health Board at the Council meeting held on 4 October. Members resolved to invite ABMU Health Board to attend a future scrutiny committee meeting.

In one meeting Members were prompted by the chair and scrutiny officer on questions that could be asked at the scrutiny committee.

Scrutiny

An officer from a partner organisation was summoned to attend one scrutiny committee where good, robust and appropriate questions were asked by Members. Cabinet Members were asked to consider amending the Cabinet Board recommendation for that particular item.

There were good examples across all meetings of Members robustly scrutinising officers and Cabinet Members. However, on more than one occasion criticism was levelled at spelling and grammatical errors contained within reports.

It should be noted that, as a result of austerity, the Authority's workforce has reduced by approximately 20% over the past 8 years. Consequently, more pressure is placed on remaining staff to cope with an increased workload.

I believe that scrutiny should be for the purpose of holding the Executive and officers to account in making appropriate decisions, and ensuring that the best possible services are delivered to our citizens, under extremely challenging circumstances. Therefore, I believe that the scrutiny process should focus on the substance of reports and any issues with standards taken up with appropriate officers prior to the committee meetings.

Attendance by non-Committee Members

Occasionally, Members will have an interest in items being considered at Cabinet Scrutiny Committees of which they are not Members. The interest may be general, or a matter affecting their wards. Such a situation is perfectly reasonable and there is provision within the Council's constitution to accommodate such requests.

Two non-Committee Members had requested to attend separate Scrutiny Committees for one specific agenda item. However, as well as

asking questions on the particular agenda item, one Member was also allowed, at the Chair's discretion, to ask questions on other agenda items.

Recommendations

1. Any Member concerned about the standard of reports should take the matter up with appropriate officers **prior** to the meeting and not at the committee itself.
2. Clarification is required as to whether it is appropriate for non-Committee Members to partake in discussions on agenda items, other than which they have specifically requested to attend.
3. The matter of pre-scrutiny meetings be further referred to a future meeting of the chairs/vice chairs scrutiny.