

Committee: Overview and Scrutiny Commission

Date: 15 July 2020

Wards: All

Subject: Scrutiny improvement plan 2020-21

Lead officer: Julia Regan, Head of Democracy Services

Lead member: Councillor Peter Southgate, Chair, Overview and Scrutiny Commission

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Recommendations:

A. To discuss and agree the actions contained in the draft scrutiny improvement plan

1 PURPOSE OF REPORT AND EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 1.1. The appendix to this report contains a draft scrutiny improvement plan that has been drawn up in line with recommendations made by the Centre for Public Scrutiny (CfPS) following its review of the scrutiny function in Merton last year. These have been agreed by a small member working group established by the Commission, and subsequently discussed and agreed by the Commission at its meeting in February 2020.
- 1.2. The draft improvement plan also takes into account recommendations made by the LGA Peer Review subsequent to the CfPS review, as requested by members of the Commission.

2 DETAILS

- 2.1. The member working group, comprising Councillors Ed Gretton, Sally Kenny, Paul Kohler and Peter Southgate, identified a number of potential actions arising from the Centre for Public Scrutiny's recommendations on agenda planning, external scrutiny, support to new members and member behaviour. These have been agreed by the Commission and included in the draft scrutiny improvement plan.
- 2.2. Annual Member Survey
- 2.3. In considering the draft scrutiny improvement plan, the Commission is asked to be mindful of the results of the 2020 Annual Member Survey. Only 17 responses were received this year, which is much lower than usual and probably because it was issued in the period immediately preceding lockdown. The small numbers mean that the results should be treated with caution. This is not to say they should be discounted and the comments made by members are of particular value.
- 2.4. The survey results were similar to last year's on most measures including:
 - Overall effectiveness of scrutiny (59% rated scrutiny either completely or somewhat effective), remains lower than pre 2019, so there is scope for improvement
 - Task group work still rated the most effective element of scrutiny

- Respondents expressed a wish to have more external experts at meetings and to be provided with more background policy guidance
- Satisfaction with the performance of the scrutiny team remains high

2.5. Key differences in results this year were:

- Increased satisfaction with call-in, though still rated the least effective aspect of scrutiny. This change probably due to impact of having a call-in on parking charges that resulted in a referral back to Cabinet and subsequent additional work undertaken by Cabinet as requested by the call-in.
- Increase in agreement that scrutiny has had an impact on Cabinet decision making, though still at a lower level than pre 2019
- Decrease in satisfaction with agenda length and quality of evidence given to scrutiny (these will be addressed through the scrutiny improvement plan)

2.6. LGA Peer Review

2.7. The work programme working group have requested that the recommendations of the LGA Peer Review be addressed within the scrutiny improvement plan.

2.8. The Peer Review received and endorsed the recommendations of the CfPS review and agreed that, overall, scrutiny functions effectively in Merton. They made some further recommendations for improvement:

- To create a more collaborative officer-member balance in the setting of agendas for scrutiny and enable councillors to be more involved in setting the content of scrutiny agendas
- To simplify and shorten officer reports to allow for more open debate and discussion of the policies and activities that they contain.
- To consider using external support such as peer mentoring to ensure the ongoing development of the scrutiny function.

2.9. These have been included and marked as LGA in the draft scrutiny improvement plan.

3 ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS

3.1. The Commission has responsibility for keeping under review the effectiveness of the overview and scrutiny function and to recommend, where appropriate, changes in structure, processes or ways of working.

4 CONSULTATION UNDERTAKEN OR PROPOSED

4.1. None for the purposes of this report.

5 TIMETABLE

5.1. The timetable for drawing up and implementing an action plan is at the discretion of the Commission.

6 FINANCIAL, RESOURCE AND PROPERTY IMPLICATIONS

6.1. None for the purposes of this report.

7 LEGAL AND STATUTORY IMPLICATIONS

7.1. Set out in paragraph 3.1 above.

8 HUMAN RIGHTS, EQUALITIES AND COMMUNITY COHESION IMPLICATIONS

8.1. None for the purposes of this report.

9 CRIME AND DISORDER IMPLICATIONS

9.1. None for the purposes of this report.

10 RISK MANAGEMENT AND HEALTH AND SAFETY IMPLICATIONS

10.1. None for the purposes of this report.

11 APPENDICES

11.1. Draft scrutiny improvement plan

12 BACKGROUND PAPERS – NONE

DRAFT SCRUTINY IMPROVEMENT PLAN

OBJECTIVE	ACTION	LEAD AND DATE
AGENDA PLANNING		
To create a more collaborative officer-member balance in the setting of agendas for scrutiny and enable councillors to be more involved in setting the content of scrutiny agendas. (LGA)	2020/21 work programmes agreed by member working group containing representative from each political group. 2021/22 work programmes to be agreed through member workshops	Scrutiny chairs and scrutiny officers
Each scrutiny committee to take an approach to agenda planning that best suits its style of working and the content of the agenda.	Work programme to be discussed at each meeting so can retain flexibility and use this as an opportunity to raise suggestions for future work programme items.	Scrutiny chairs and scrutiny officers June 2020 and ongoing
Order of the agenda - to focus attention on discussion items, these could be taken first on the agenda and information items at the end.	Scrutiny chair and scrutiny officer to discuss and agree order prior to publication of each agenda. Note – aim is to avoid/reduce number of information items.	Scrutiny chairs and scrutiny officers September 2020 and for each subsequent meeting
Each work programme item should have a clear purpose and outcome	Scrutiny members should be mindful, in advance of the meeting, of potential outcomes and recommendations arising from agenda items. Such recommendations might include the relevant cabinet member reporting back to a subsequent meeting on remedial action that could be taken in response to a concern raised by scrutiny	Scrutiny chairs and scrutiny officers September 2020 and for each subsequent meeting
To ensure that officer reports provide a useful basis for scrutiny.	Committee/Chair should give a steer on report content so that authors would be	Scrutiny chairs and scrutiny officers

	able to ensure they were fully addressing scrutiny members' concerns.	June 2020 and ongoing
To ensure that officer reports are shorter and simpler to provide a useful basis for scrutiny. (LGA)	Officers will be asked to simplify and shorten officer reports to allow for more open debate and discussion of the policies and activities that they contain.	Scrutiny officers June 2020 and ongoing
To improve the quality of scrutiny through the employment a wide range of scrutiny techniques	This would include inviting expert witnesses, service users and residents; and to experiment with having single issue meetings and adopting a task group approach for one or more item on the agenda	Scrutiny officers to advise as part of work programming process
To use meeting time effectively by agreeing lines of questioning in advance of the meeting, where appropriate. This should not preclude spontaneity at the meeting when an unforeseen but productive line of questioning emerges.	Lines of questioning could be agreed through discussion at the previous meeting, holding a pre-meeting or agenda planning session between chair, vice chair and departmental officers	Scrutiny chairs to check with Panel/Commission at preceding meeting as part of work programme discussion September 2020 onwards
EXTERNAL SCRUTINY		
To ensure that external partners have a clear understanding of how scrutiny operates and what their role is in relation to scrutiny	Head of Democracy Services should review and revise Merton's external scrutiny protocol to set out the respective roles in relation to the scrutiny of partner organisations Draft revised protocol to be shared with scrutiny chairs and external partners. Protocol to be signed off by Overview and Scrutiny Commission	Head of Democracy Services First draft by end July

To raise the profile of scrutiny, encourage greater involvement and improve external partner organisations' experience of scrutiny.	Scrutiny officers should brief partner organisations prior to attendance at meetings and should follow up afterwards on how the meeting went and any agreed actions.	Scrutiny officers July 2020 onwards
SUPPORT TO SCRUTINY MEMBERS		
To consider using external support such as peer mentoring for scrutiny members to ensure the ongoing development of the scrutiny function. (LGA)	This will be discussed with the Group Leaders in the lead up to the May 2022 council elections.	Group Leaders and lead scrutiny members March 2022
To identify a pool of experienced scrutiny members who could support new members following the 2022 local elections.	This will be discussed with the Group Leaders in the lead up to the May 2022 council elections.	Group Leaders and lead scrutiny members March 2022
MEMBER BEHAVIOUR		
To ensure that there is a respectful and non-party political culture at scrutiny meetings.	The working group agreed that Chairs and Group Leaders should take a lead in re-inforcing a respectful and non-party political culture at scrutiny meetings. How members behave at scrutiny meetings is crucial to establishing respect for the function and demonstrating the commitment of all political groups to scrutiny.	Chairs and Group Leaders All scrutiny members June 2020 onwards