

## **About Overview and Scrutiny**

Scrutiny is still a comparatively new function for local authorities. It has been introduced as part of the modernisation agenda for local government and the Local Government Act 2000 requires Council's to have at least one scrutiny committee.

## **What is Scrutiny?**

There is no single definition of overview and scrutiny. It therefore should be viewed as an umbrella term covering a wide range of possible roles. However, the four key legislative roles are:

- holding the Executive to account
- policy development and review
- best value reviews
- external scrutiny.

This suggests an emphasis towards:

- acting as a watchdog for Executive decision-making
- checking on whether existing policies are effective and helping to shape new ones
- contributing towards the continuous improvement of Council services
- reviewing or investigating matters of particular concern either within the Council or within the Community.

The scrutiny role also provides new opportunities for public involvement and debate. This can support elected members in taking a community-orientated approach and brings new ideas and experience to scrutiny. Above all, the process needs to be firmly focussed both on matters of importance, and in making a difference, as this will be key to scrutiny reaching its potential and being of value to the Council and to local people.

## **Different Skills**

This new approach differs fundamentally from the previous 'committee system' requiring new ways of working and different skills for all concerned. In particular, to work effectively, scrutiny needs to be member led.

## **Opportunity**

The scrutiny process provides the opportunity for councillors to examine the various functions of the Council, to ask questions on how decisions have been made, to consider whether service improvements can be put in place and make recommendations to this effect. It also provides the opportunity for councillors to champion issues of local concern to residents and to

participate in the development of new policy. It is quite different from the old committee style of working – the agenda is different in that members decide the areas they wish to review/challenge. Scrutiny task groups can meet in an informal atmosphere and they invite those who they believe can help with their investigations to give “evidence”.

### **Policy Influence**

Scrutiny councillors can also influence the development of new policies or review old ones to help bring them up to date. This policy development role might be carried out at the invitation of the Cabinet, on their own volition or in response to public pressure (or perhaps also as a result of a call-in request). In practical terms, whether carrying out a review of a Council decision or helping to develop council policies, the processes are very similar. Consequently training and development of members and support officers has an important part to play in ensuring the overall success of the overview and scrutiny function.

### **Keywords to the New Approach**

- Evidence based.
- Investigative.
- Exploratory.
- Deliberative.
- Cross-cutting.
- In-depth - single issue events rather than broad multi-issue agenda – driven events.
- Outward-looking - to the community and external as well as internal.
- A Process rather than a single meeting.

### **Training**

Adapting to make the new arrangements fully effective has proved challenging to most local authorities and Eastbourne is no exception.

### **The main role**

The main role of Scrutiny is to help improve the council’s performance through monitoring and review; to examine the Cabinet's decisions and challenge where necessary; and to help in the development and monitoring of the council's policies and strategies. The Committee can also look at the effectiveness of outside organisations and the council's external partnerships.

Scrutiny’s approach is loosely based on the model of Select Committees at Westminster.



It is one of the most effective ways in which councillors who are not on Cabinet can independently challenge and influence those making decisions.

### **How does it work?**

The Scrutiny Committee meets in public and members of the public are encouraged to take part and join in the discussion.

The Committee can invite Cabinet Members, Council officers and representatives of outside organisations to discuss how things are currently being done and how they can be improved.

Scrutiny Committee can also gather evidence in other ways, for example public consultation.

The Scrutiny Committee has a work programme that sets priorities for the coming year.

### **How do Scrutiny Task Groups operate?**

Scrutiny task groups meet in an informal atmosphere. They invite those who they believe can help with their investigations to come along to a task group meeting to provide information or views about a particular issue – and usually working through a list of questions prepared in advance helps to do this.

### **What powers do Task Groups have?**

Scrutiny task groups, like the main scrutiny committee, cannot automatically change earlier Cabinet decisions or alter the way services are provided. A task group's recommendations go to the Scrutiny Committee for consideration and possible amendment. They then go to the Cabinet and Council for evaluation.

Recommendations arising from reviews are monitored and reported back to the main committee at a later date.

### **How can I find out more?**

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