

By: Alex King – Deputy Leader
Paul Wickenden – Overview, Scrutiny and Localism Manager
Marcus Chysostomou – Media and Operations Manager

To: Scrutiny Board – 15 July 2010

Subject: Effective engagement with the Media and Press in its overview and scrutiny of decisions within the emerging agenda of devolved decision making and citizen empowerment.

Summary: This report sets out for the Scrutiny Boards consideration/discussion some ideas around working more effectively with the press and media, to engage with the public on overview and scrutiny activities

Introduction

1. (1) The Cabinet and Overview and Scrutiny model of governance places an emphasis for liaison with the media and press onto the Cabinet Members as the prime decision makers for the County Council. The emerging agenda of citizen engagement and devolution to localities will inevitably lead to more scrutinising and holding to account decision makers in the locality. In preparation for this emerging agenda this report sets out some “headlines” for discussion on how the Overview and Scrutiny function working effectively in partnership with the media and press can effectively engage the residents of Kent.

(2) Never has this relationship been more key than now with the austerity facing the country. This provides the Overview and Scrutiny function with an opportunity to develop a greater mutual understanding of how working collegiately together the local decision makers can be influenced for better and more effective decision making.

Community Engagement/Overview and Scrutiny/Empowerment

2. There is a real synergy in the future of overview and scrutiny with the coalition government agenda of citizen engagement, devolution of decision making and the “Big Society.”

What are the Challenges

General

3. (1) The following sub paragraphs reflect some of the ways that the profile and engagement of the public in the activities of the Overview and Scrutiny Function can be addressed. It is important that these suggestions are put into context with other pivotal strands of activity for the County Council which will be elaborated verbally at the meeting.

(2) It can be assumed that the public is, in general, not aware of this function and quite often only see Kent County Council policies being scrutinised through the media. The challenge is how to change this.

(3) Not every meeting will be interesting to the public, but it is important that the awareness of the public is raised to recognise that part of a members role as an elected representative of the people is to hold decision makers within their locality to account.

(4) We need to make the idea of scrutiny interesting and get the public to 'buy in' to scrutiny.

Public and Scrutiny

(5) Scrutiny needs to be opened up more to the public and the media to help them understand scrutiny and make them feel part of the process. It should become something the public care about and something that is newsworthy. Newsworthy big issues will make it interesting and promote scrutiny to the public.

(6) To find these big issues, we could ask the media to highlight to us what they think should be considered. This could be done through regular meetings with the KCC press officers. Alternatively, the media could help us by asking the public to send in their big issue to consider. This could be through the newspaper, online, a local event (eg the models of community engagement Neighbourhood Fora; Local Engagement Forums etc) or through a letter.

(7) We also need build up awareness of scrutiny. Again, the media will play a part in this. We could host a series of 'meet the press' media briefings to explain how the process works.

(8) Scrutiny can also be taken to the public. A number of information days or roadshows could travel round the county using Gateways and libraries to get the message out. School visits could also take place, where relevant subjects such as education could be discussed with the pupils. This will also give young people an opportunity to scrutinise the scrutineer. Scrutiny can also take place in different locations and move away from County Hall. For example, events could be based around big local issues such as the government decision on Dungeness power station.

(9) The public could also attend scrutiny and ask questions on relevant subjects to broaden story appeal. Witnesses such as newspaper editors could be called.

(10) The Listening to Communities conference on 5 November could also be used to promote scrutiny to the public through the media.

Online

(11) An online presence is important. We can already see webcasts, but this could be complimented by:

- More visual webpage with pictures, profiles and detail on scrutiny.
- Twitter reminders about scrutiny meetings.
- Online case studies showing how scrutiny has made a difference.
- Online video to explain the process including interviews with some of the Chairmen and the Leader/Deputy Leader.

Press Support

(12) There is an agreed protocol on how the press office supports the Select Committee Topic review process (see appendix 1). The Chairmen of the Select Committee can request press notices and support from the press office. However, as mentioned before, not all stories are interesting to the media and public. In order to help improve how we build stories around scrutiny the following could be looked at:

- Meetings with chairman of scrutiny suite committees and relevant press officer to look at what the committee is considering and how they can be developed into stories.
- Dedicated media officers for each overview and scrutiny area.
- Send press notice out to promote interesting scrutiny subjects and a monthly press notice on what committee is taking place.

(13) One of the issues for consideration is whether the chairman of Overview and Scrutiny suite should have the ability to automatically engage the media and communications centre to meet the need to engage fully with the residents of Kent.

Internal Communications

(14) Finally this must be underpinned by good internal communications. Staff must understand and support the process. Scrutiny is important council business and helps develop policies. A series of internal workshops and internal online activity could take place and articles in First and Knet could also help explain what scrutiny is.

Recommendations

4. The Boards views are sought on the issues raised in this paper and how the Board wishes to take forward the development of a collegiate relationship with the media and press forward as the agenda of citizen engagement and development and the role of overview and scrutiny develops.

