

KENT COUNTY COUNCIL

SCRUTINY BOARD

MINUTES of a meeting of the Scrutiny Board held in the Darent Room, Sessions House, County Hall, Maidstone on Thursday, 26 May 2011.

PRESENT: Mr E E C Hotson (Chairman), Mrs T Dean (Vice-Chairman), Mrs A D Allen, Mr C J Capon, Mr N J D Chard, Mr D A Hirst, Mr R F Manning, Mr L B Ridings, MBE Mrs E M Tweed

ALSO PRESENT: Mr R J Lees Mr K Smith

IN ATTENDANCE: Mr M Chrysostomou (Media And Operations Manager), Mr P Sass (Head of Democratic Services) Mr D Shipton (Finance Strategy Manager)

UNRESTRICTED ITEMS

56. Minutes - 27 April 2011

(Item 4)

RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting held on 27 April 2011 are correctly recorded and that they be signed by the Chairman as a correct record.

57. Involvement of POSCs in developing the budget

(Item 5)

(1) Mr Shipton introduced a report which set out the arrangements for informal consultation about budget options for 2012/15 in advance of Policy Overview and Scrutiny Committees (POSC) budget discussions in November 2011 and January 2012. This would build on the budget monitoring work of the POSCs and the involvement of Members of POSC was welcomed. He emphasised that the timescale for developing the budget was tight, especially for POSCs to consider the draft budget at their meetings in January prior to it being approved at County Council on 9 February 2011. Officers were investigating whether it would be possible to circulate the draft budget to POSC Members prior to the Christmas break, even if this was on an informal basis prior to its launch.

(2) The Chairman stated that previously POSCs had set up IMG's to assist with the development of the budget. Officers had indicated that this had been a useful exercise and a number of suggestions made by POSC Members had been incorporated in the budget. He encouraged the other POSC Chairman to support the suggestion that POSC's set up their own IMG's to assist with the development of the Budget. It was important that the IMG's were established as early as possible so that they could have the maximum opportunity to have an input in to the development of the budget.

(3) Reference was made to the two training sessions on the budget that had been arranged by the Acting Corporate Director, Finance and Procurement on 16 June and 5 July 2011, a reminder about these sessions would be placed in the Members Information Bulletin and all Members of the Council were welcome to attend.

(4) In relation to resources from Democratic Services to support these IMG's, Mr Sass stated that it would be possible to service these from within existing resources but if POSCs set up any other IMGs it would be necessary to prioritise the support for the IMGs to develop the budget.

(5) Comments made by Members included the following:-

- It was difficult for POSCs in assisting with the development of the budget when information on certain key government funding was not available until late in the process. Mr Shipton stated that there was a need to share more information on provisional grants for 2012/13 and changes in funding, for example, the reallocation of business rates in order to keep the IMGs up to date.
- The national comparative data being based on 2 year old figures was mentioned. Mr Shipton acknowledged that the comparative data, compiled by CiPFA and known as 'the Summerset model', was not as current as he would like. There was a return that all Local Authorities made to central government which was not published but we could ask for that information as it would be more current. Officers were working with colleagues in Essex, Surrey and Sussex plus our statistical neighbours to get consistency on the way that information was presented in their budget books to assist with up to date comparisons.
- It was possible for Members to carry out useful detailed work in relation to the budget within the setting of an Informal Member Group rather than a POSC.
- It should be made clear what the IMG was expected to do and the rules regarding the confidentiality of the information provided should be emphasised. It was important that the IMG had access to relevant information in order to carry out its work.
- Information on staff numbers (full time equivalents) should be provided to the IMGs.
- Reference was made to the decision not to use MORI to carry out public consultation workshops on the budget as part of the budget reduction. The importance of these consultation exercises being seen by the public as being independent off KCC was emphasised. Mr Shipton explained that it was intended to engage MORI every two or three years, rather than every year, to get them to check the County Councils budget consultation process in an advisory capacity rather than to carry out the annual consultation, which would now be carried out in house.
- It was suggested that the feedback from the public on the budget should be made available earlier in the process. Mr Shipton confirmed that there was no reason why these sessions could not be held in September rather than October and the feedback back from them made available soon afterwards.

(6) RESOLVED that (a) an IMG be established for each of the POSCs to assist with the development of the budget, these IMGs to have up to 5 Members and that POSC Chairmen decide how the Membership is to be selected and whether to invite Mr Lees and Mr Cowan (if not represented on the POSC) to attend the meetings of the IMG. The first meeting of the POSC should be held in July 2011; (b) the framework, background budget information and timetable for IMGs to consider the 2012/13 and 2012/15 Medium Term Financial Plan be noted.

58. Publicity for Overview and Scrutiny - discussion item

(Item 6)

(1) Mr Chrysostomou reminded the Board that he had submitted a report on publicity for Overview and Scrutiny to their meeting in July 2010. He stated that for editors of the local press to be interested in overview and scrutiny there needed to be a story, the process itself was not interesting. One editor was willing to gauge from the public what they would like to see scrutinised. How you engaged the public in scrutiny was a different issue. Big stories generated public interest. Some areas of Scrutiny i.e. Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee and Cabinet Scrutiny Committee often had topical issues and press releases were issued in respect of them.

(2) Members made a number of comments on this issue which included the following:-

- Some Members referred to the process that used to exist under the Committee Structure whereby a Member of the Committee would agree with the Chairman the items that should form part of a press release after each meeting, the press release would then be produced and issued by the Press office. This used to generate good press coverage.
- Members could feed issues to the press office and request that they produce information for the press in a form that was easy for them to use.
- In the past there was a dedicated press officer for each Committee.
- Local press circulation was dropping which was partly due to the public getting a lot of their information from the internet and other sources.
- Use could be made of existing email circulation lists for groups interested in certain issues and information about meetings could be targeted at specific groups. For example, a good news story about older people could be emailed to all over 65 clubs. The information on this type of organisation and other interest groups was held by the Community Engagement Managers. This would enable press releases and our webcasts to be targeted at those most likely to have an interest in it.
- As we placed advertisements in the local press we should encourage the press to at least publicise our website and webcasts.
- It was important that all channels of communication were considered and that if there was a role for the local press that we should make sure that we have the relationships in place to make full use of that.
- To expect the public to turn up to listen to meetings was unrealistic.
- It was disappointing that the press considered some of the work of overview and scrutiny not to be of interest to their readers when Members tried very hard to be transparent and to engage.
- Referred was made to the Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee (HOSC) Newsletter which was produced by the HOSC research officer and circulated via email to County Councillors, District Councillors, Parish Clerks and any other interested parties. It was an attempt to inform people about the work of the Committee so that there can be a better understanding of the relevance of its work.
- It was better for us to try to inform the public directly rather than rely on the media.

- We need to look for a method where the public can self select to be kept informed about issues that are of interest to them and they can always unsubscribe at a later date.
- Reference was made to role of Members in picking up issues from their local community and asking questions at the appropriate POSC.
- Regarding the Cabinet Scrutiny Committee meeting that had been held in Edenbridge it was stated that holding meetings in the localities needed to be done for a reason and there must be public interest in the matter to be discussed.
- You should not invite the public to attend a meeting and then tell them that they cannot speak. We still do not have a process for allowing the public to speak at our meetings. The public did not want to just be spectators.
- Press releases for Overview and Scrutiny Suite meetings needed to be more than just a list of agenda items. A press release has got to generate public interest.
- There was a need look at the most effective ways of getting information to the public. If there was public interest in a meeting then the press office need to be there or to be aware of what is on the agenda.
- Reference was made to the discussions that had previously been held on engaging with the public by streaming questions from them directly into the meeting.
- The press releases issued by the Community Engagement Managers, which were very successful in generating public interest in “local board” meetings were mentioned.

(3) Mr Kit Smith was invited to speak on this item. He stated that after one of his POSC meetings last year he spoke to Mr Chrysostomou and asked what the strong stories from the meeting would be and he suggested two, but these were so detached from the work of the POSC that he pulled them. He referred to the Dover Accountability Board (Locality Board) which had a scrutiny function as the Board in relation to any public money spent in Dover. There were a lot of changes going on such as the establishment of Locality Boards and these would have an impact on remodelling the POSCs.

(4) Mr Chrysostomou stated that the challenge was to use different methods to reach people. He pointed out that the Media Centre was currently involved in a restructuring. He confirmed that there was a team of press officers who worked to each directorate. If a press release was produced after each meeting by the press office it would have resource implications, the important thing was ensure that any press release achieved outcomes. He confirmed that his team were working closely with the Community Engagement Managers who were now part of the same directorate.

(5) In relation to public engagement, Mr Chrysostomou confirmed that his officers had a role in informing the public. It would be possible to engage groups in advance of meetings by using some form of database. In relation to agenda setting meetings for POSC and Cabinet Scrutiny Committee there would be a resource implication if press officers were to attend every meeting but there may be changes anyway with the introduction of Locality Boards.

(6) Regarding the use of social media for public engagement at meetings, Mr Sass confirmed that there would be a report to a meeting of the Selection and Member Services Committee, or this Board in due course.

(7) RESOLVED that the Media and Operations Manager submit a report to the July meeting of the Board on publicity for Overview and Scrutiny including the best of what had worked in the past, commenting on the suggestions that had been by Members and put forward some recommendations.

59. Select Committee update

(Item 7)

(1) Mr Sass introduced a report which updated the Board on the current Select Committee topic review programme.

(2) The Chairman of the Select Committee on the Student Journey stated that he was intending to come to both the relevant POSCs and Scrutiny Board halfway through the review to update Members on the potential areas for recommendation that were emerging. As was normal practise the Select Committee would be discussing draft recommendations with key stakeholders before the report was finalised.

(3) Mr Sass referred to the importance of recommendations being costed which was something that all Select Committees should be aware of when producing their reports.

(4) It was confirmed that when the Select Committee work programme was being developed, a check was made to see if the any other authority had carried out a similar review to avoid duplication.

(5) RESOLVED that the progress of the Select Committees on Educational Attainment at Key Stage 2, Dementia and the Student Journey be noted.

60. Sharing of good practice - discussion item

(Item 8)

There were no specific issues raised for discussion.