

By: Marcus Chrysostomou - Media and Operations Manager
To: Scrutiny Board - 13 July 2011
Subject: Publicity for Overview and Scrutiny

Summary: This report sets out for the Scrutiny Board's consideration ideas for working more effectively with the press and media and to engage with the public on overview and scrutiny activities. This is a second paper (the first was delivered to Scrutiny Board on 15 July 2010) and follows on from the discussion item on 27 April 2011.

Introduction

The overview and scrutiny function was established to hold the council's Cabinet to account for its decisions, and to contribute to evidence-based policy making in the council.

It is important that the public and staff are aware of this function. This means the right and appropriate types of communication need to take place to keep them informed and involved.

This issue was discussed at two Scrutiny Board meetings. This paper is in response to the meeting of 27 April 2011 and sets out the challenges and recommendations for highlighting the scrutiny function.

What are the challenges?

Clearly the scrutiny function has a role to play and it has to be accepted that the public often consider scrutiny as just another local government process, and not of interest. Occasionally, however, there will be issues that are of interest, and we need to make sure the public are aware.

This means we need to reach and inform both the public and staff in the most appropriate way. Local newspaper circulations are reducing, and people often find information and news in a proactive way, be it online, through word of mouth or via a broadcast medium. The challenge is to make sure we do not saturate the media, or other communication channels, with a plethora of press notices or information following each committee. We need to be more selective about what is likely to be of interest.

What happens at the moment?

Certain scrutiny committees already publicise their agendas and highlight stories to the media. This includes Cabinet Scrutiny and Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee. Realistically, not all committees will have interesting issues for the public. Press officers do attend some agenda setting meetings.

All details are published on the KCC website (www.kent.gov.uk) and many meetings are also webcast. The agendas are also sent to recipients, if they sign up for the online service. Occasionally, the general public will also attend meetings.

In addition, some journalists check committee papers online for stories and will attend key meetings. We have already met with newspaper editors to discuss publicising the scrutiny process and this led to some limited coverage. However, they will only cover a story, which in their view, is of public interest.

How do we get the message out to the public?

A number of suggestions were made at the Scrutiny Board meeting of 27 April. Rather than respond to each point, I have looked at them collectively and made some recommendations below.

Online

Currently the website – www.kent.gov.uk - includes committee papers, webcasts of meetings and a diary of committees. The public can also sign up to be kept updated, via email, of when committee papers are published.

Recommendations

- Improve the content on the website about the role of scrutiny to make it more relevant to the public, including interviews with the chairmen
- Publish features about topics of wider public interest under scrutiny to be available on the relevant areas of the website.
- Features showing how scrutiny has made a difference.
- Encourage people to sign up for Scrutiny Board email alerts through more promotion on relevant areas of the website.
- To explore ways for encouraging public feedback online
- Use Twitter to encourage people to watch webcasts or read reports when hot topics of general public interest are discussed.

Press notices and press support

Currently there is better press support for some committees than others. A chair of a committee is entitled to use the council press function. However, it needs to be realistic as resources are finite. Also, not all items discussed at Scrutiny Board will be of interest to the public, therefore sending a press notice out after every committee is not always the best use of resource.

Recommendations

- Meetings with chairman of scrutiny 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 (however, this will have to be reviewed in light of the current restructure).
- Send press notice out to promote interesting scrutiny subjects and a monthly press notice on what committee is taking place. The press releases need to be more than just a list of agenda items.

Media

The media will pick what committee issues are, in their view, of public interest. They will also cover issues that the public are campaigning on. News editors would say that the media should, and do, already hold the council to account. The Scrutiny function needs to be aware of what is in the news. It was also suggested that we could advertise committee meetings in the media, however, this would be costly and will only reach a limited audience.

Recommendations

- The chair of the committee will be briefed on relevant stories by the press office.
- Newspaper editors could be engaged, via the press office, to discuss with committee chairs if their hot issues correlate with scrutiny issues.

Direct contact with public groups and voluntary organisations

There are a number of existing email circulation lists for groups interested in certain issues so relevant information could be targeted at specific groups. For example, a good news story about older people could be emailed to all over 65 clubs, e.g. Age Concern. The information on this type of organisation and other interest groups was held by the Community Engagement Managers. This would enable communications to be targeted at those most likely to have an interest in it.

Recommendations

- To make sure there is one database of these groups and then target appropriate stories and decisions to these groups. There will be a time and resource implication to this. We are also reviewing how we communicate with these groups. This needs to be developed further.
- Various committees can hold meetings in different areas of the county to highlight how the scrutiny process works. However, the public cannot ask questions and this may lead to confusion. This needs to be looked at closely. If meetings are to take place around the county, clear guidelines need to be issued to any members of the public attending as these are not public meetings. It would be for Scrutiny Board to discuss this issue and decide on outcomes. However, the press office can help promote any such meetings.

Face to face and community engagement

The public can be kept informed and the committees can be promoted by members/staff at relevant meetings or boards.

Recommendation

- That Scrutiny Board produce an update briefing note for members and staff to use when attending relevant meetings.

Internal communications

We should endeavour to keep staff up to date on council decisions, on committee business and the role of scrutiny.

Recommendations

- To include a series of articles in the monthly staff newsletter to explain the work of the committees and the decisions they make.
- Alert staff to key decisions via Kmail.
- To show live webcast council meetings on the TV screens in communal areas of our offices.
- To consider inviting staff to attend council meeting/s as part of induction/training.

Next steps

That the Board considers the recommendations set out in this report.

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