

Committee: Overview and Scrutiny Commission

Date: 12 February 2020

Wards: All

Subject: Draft action plan arising from the findings of the CfPS scrutiny improvement review

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 comment on draft action plan
 - B. To agree the process for further development of the action plan
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1 PURPOSE OF REPORT AND EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 1.1. At its meeting on 11 September 2019, the Overview and Scrutiny Commission received the findings of the review carried out by the Centre for Public Scrutiny. The Commission established a small member working group to consider the report in more detail and to draft an action plan that would implement the recommendations of the review.

2 DETAILS

- 2.1. The member working group, comprising Councillors Ed Gretton, Sally Kenny, Paul Kohler and Peter Southgate, met on 22 October to discuss the recommendations and consider its response to the recommendations.
- 2.2. The working group identified a number of potential actions, grouped thematically below:
- 2.3. Agenda planning
- 2.4. It was agreed that each scrutiny committee should be able to take a flexible approach to agenda planning that best suits its style of working and the content of the agenda rather than following a prescribed format. It was also agreed that scrutiny should preserve the ability for members to be spontaneous during the meeting when an unforeseen but productive line of questioning emerges.
- 2.5. The principles to be followed are 1) to review the content of the work programme to ensure that there is a clear purpose and outcome for each item; 2) to use a range of mechanisms for identifying lines of questioning on specific agenda items, for example discussion at a previous meeting, pre-meeting or agenda planning session between Chair, Vice Chair and departmental officers and 3) to continue to use a range of scrutiny techniques such as 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.

- 2.6. It was also agreed that 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.
- 2.7. It was suggested that in order to focus attention on discussion items, these could be taken first on the agenda and information items at the end.
- 2.8. It was also suggested that, as part of the work programme item, the committee could give a steer on report content so that authors would be able to ensure they were fully addressing scrutiny members' concerns. Members should also use this as an opportunity to raise suggestions for future work programme items.
- 2.9. Specific proposals for the Overview and Scrutiny Commission:
- to build on the pre-planned line of questioning approach taken when the Borough Commander attends the Commission by using this approach to identify questions for Safer Merton at the same meeting and for the Leader and Chief Executive when they attend the July meeting.
 - To use the results of the residents survey as background information for the topic workshops so that this will inform selection of agenda priorities for the forthcoming year
 - To use the discussion of the draft Community Plan as an opportunity to identify and highlight "social fabric" issues as recommended by CfPS
- 2.10. External scrutiny
- 2.11. It was agreed that the Head of Democracy Services should review and revive Merton's external scrutiny protocol that sets out the respective roles in relation to the scrutiny of partner organisations.
- 2.12. It was also agreed that the 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.
- 2.13. Support to new scrutiny members
- 2.14. The working group considered how best to support new members and agreed that it would be helpful to identify a pool of experienced scrutiny members who could support new members following the 2022 local elections. The working group agreed that learning through doing scrutiny was also valuable and that members bring diverse skills and experiences to the role.
- 2.15. Member behaviour
- 2.16. 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.

- 2.17. Sharing of scrutiny chairing roles
- 2.18. Members of the working group agreed on the value in giving some scrutiny leadership roles to opposition groups. Various views were put forward on whether to ask the Leader to consider offering a Scrutiny Panel chair position to an opposition group (in addition to the existing Chair of the Commission). Members noted that the CfPS review stated "I also think that formal chairing positions would benefit from drawing in opposition members". The mechanism by which scrutiny chairs are determined was discussed and, although it was agreed that the current system of allocation was unsatisfactory, no conclusion was reached on this.
- 2.19. Developing an action plan
- 2.20. Commission members are requested to discuss and agree the actions set out in this report and to identify whether they wish to make any changes or to include additional actions.
- 2.21. The agreed actions will be collated to form the basis of an action plan. The working group have requested that the draft action be sent to the Centre for Public Scrutiny for comment.

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 – NONE

12 BACKGROUND PAPERS - NONE

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