3 Findings

This section will highlight the key findings from each stage of the project. These stages were:

- First observation of Service Delivery and Audit Committee

- Taking Scrutiny Forward training session

- Conducting Scrutiny Reviews training session

- Second observation of Service Delivery and Audit Committee

A complete set of the feedback from these sessions is available in appendix C.

3.1 First observation of Service Delivery and Audit Committees

The Service Delivery and Audit Committees were first observed on Monday 12th July 2004. The key findings were that Members did have the potential to make effective scrutineers. There was a level of engagement and interest amongst Members that clearly indicated this. However, the nature of Member's engagement indicated that they needed to be clearer about their role within Scrutiny. Members tended not to see Scrutiny meetings as an opportunity to challenge Officers. The meetings were being used to express Member's points of view in a basic manner. Comments were being made but not followed up with substantial questions or lines of enquiry.

Members needed to be more confident within the meetings. Officers tended to be leading items. Members needed to be more in control of the meetings and driving the agenda forward. They should have been leading items more and pushing for the outcome that they wanted. Members would be in a better position to do this if they planned for meetings differently. They should consider what questions they need to ask prior to the meetings in order to achieve the outcomes that they are looking for.

Overall the meetings were well organised with clear agendas and supporting papers. The relevant officers were in attendance as was a representative of the Cabinet. However, some Officers were under prepared for the meetings. There was also further scope for engaging the public in the meetings and using witnesses more. The strategic link between the Scrutiny function and how it helps the Council to achieve its objectives also has further potential to be developed by Members.

3.2 Taking Scrutiny Forward training session

This half day training session took place on 11th November 2004. A range of discussion and debate took place throughout the session with 15 Members in attendance. There were some Members who demonstrated a real aptitude for Scrutiny and who should be given a greater opportunity to come forward.

However, the training session reinforced much of what had been noted in the observational sessions.

Members were still treating Scrutiny in a traditional committee format. They were comfortable in dealing with the familiar skills issues such as Chairing and questioning skills. However, when asked to assess themselves against the Centre for Public Scrutiny's framework for effective scrutineers they scored themselves very highly although they couldn't provide any evidence to explain why this was the case.

Overall Members had the ability to ask detailed questions. However, they were not demonstrating the skills of asking more strategic questions, which look in to the bigger more longer-term aspects of issues. This may partly be due to the manner in which Members prepare for Scrutiny meetings. Strategic questions can only be asked if Members are clear about the bigger picture and then spend some time on planning what questions need to be asked in order to stimulate more strategic debate. The tendency in meetings was to leave the shaping of all discussion and challenge to the Chair and Vice Chair.

Member's interaction in the training session demonstrated that they were reliant on Officers to lead them through the Scrutiny process. This was most clearly demonstrated by the role-play exercise in which Members were asked to plan for and run their own Scrutiny meeting. Members found this quite a challenging activity and continued to look to the Officers at the training session to assist them even though they had been briefed that the Officers were simply there to observe.

3.3 Conducting Scrutiny Reviews training session

This session took place on 1st March 2005, with 15 Members in attendance. Those who attended were fully engaged in the training session and there was a good level of attendance from Chairs and Vice Chairs. Once again Members showed a limited level of self-awareness. They were very confident that they were involved in the development of Scrutiny reports. However, when asked to provide evidence of this they were not able to do so.

A number of Members weren't aware of the fact that they had been involved in Scrutiny reviews in the past. They were also unclear about how reviews are chosen and a number of them thought that reviews are generally driven by feedback from the public. There needs to be greater understanding that the selection of reviews is part of a process influenced by local and national priorities. Members still need to be making clearer connections between Scrutiny and helping to deliver on the overall corporate objectives of the organisation. There is still a tendency to look at minor issues in detail rather than focussing on the overall strategic direction of Scrutiny

The exercise giving Members the opportunity to plan a review gave Members the opportunity to demonstrate some planning skills. However, these weren't very strong and showed that Members aren't really thinking about the

practical implications of carrying out reviews. There was limited reference to how reviews could be resourced, funded and the timescales to deliver them in. Members demonstrated very limited project planning skills and a lack of understanding around the benefit of planning activity. Establishing the desired outcome for each review was also something that Members were finding difficult to do.

3.4 Second observation of Service Delivery and Audit Committees

This session took place on Monday 12th September 2005. Members had made clear progress since the first round of observation work. Engagement levels had improved. All Members asked questions in the meetings and these questions were of a more challenging nature, which demanded more of a response from officers. Members also made contributions, which were of a more strategic nature including asking questions about efficiency savings, communication and the procurement strategy.

However, Members still need to direct the meetings more and in particular Chairs of meetings should be framing the discussions. There is further scope for both Officers and Members to give greater consideration to how Scrutiny issues are helping to deliver on the corporate objectives of the Council. Furthermore Officers need to consider how they feedback on their reports to resist the temptation to read through them and to encourage Members to focus more on asking their own questions

4 Conclusions

Scrutiny at Easington is progressing well. Members show potential and aptitude for the role that they need to play. During the time in which the IDeA has worked with Easington on this project Members have shown clear progress. All Members are asking questions within meetings and the nature of questioning is starting to become more strategic and challenging. There also appears to be a good working relationship between Officers and Members. Information at meetings is well presented and clear. If Members request further information Officers are co-operative in supplying it. Officer attendance at meetings is also generally good.

In order for Scrutiny to now progress to the next level it is necessary for a number of key issues to be addressed. These are:

- Greater clarity around the role of Members and Officers in Scrutiny

- Skills requirements

- Linkage between Scrutiny and corporate objectives

- Engagement of the public

- Involvement of opposition

4.1 Greater clarity around the role of Members and Officers in Scrutiny

There are good working relationships between Officers and Members within the Scrutiny function at Easington. However, these relationships are perhaps too familiar and relaxed. Members do not demonstrate the self-awareness that they need to have as part of the Scrutiny process. Exercises such as the self-assessment, role-play and planning exercise demonstrate that Members are still very reliant upon Officers within the Scrutiny process. Easington is fortunate in having a good quality set of Officers who support the Scrutiny process. However effective Scrutiny must be shaped and driven by Elected Members in order for it to deliver for the organisation. Currently we do not get the sense that Members are aware of how reliant on Officers they actually are.

Members are getting better at being more challenging in meetings. This needs to continue. Members also need to be more forthright in framing the discussion within meetings. At the moment the agenda for discussion around an item tends to be set and led by Officers. Members need to be very clear about what outcome they are looking for in relation to each item they deal with and should clearly steer debate and discussion towards achieving this. For example on a few occasions it was observed that Members were unhappy about an issue and asked for their concerns to be minuted. Members should be more proactive than this. They should be clear about why they have a concern, and then give officers a clear steer about how they would like to see

this concern dealt with. Simply minuting concerns isn't enough. Members must be clear in setting the direction for where they want an issue to go.

Officers too need to adapt their roles within the Scrutiny process. Officers need to resist the temptation of reading through their reports at Scrutiny meetings. Members need to be encouraged to have read the reports prior to the meeting so that Officers can provide a high level summary and then present some strategic issues for Members to consider.

4.2 Skills requirements

The IDeA training has covered a range of Scrutiny skills related issues. However, some of these skills still need to be further worked upon with Members. Scrutiny Chairs have a chairing style, which is generally inclusive and provides all Members with the opportunity to contribute to meetings. Scrutiny Chair's now need to ensure that they are framing debates more and leading the meeting. Chair's should be introducing items themselves and drawing the necessary conclusions. They should resist the temptation to let Officers do this. They also need to be playing a greater role in planning the outcomes that Members are looking for from each meeting.

Further work needs to be done with all Members to get them to plan and prepare for meetings more. These issues were discussed in the training sessions. Members need to consider that even 20 minutes worth of additional planning time before a meeting could help them to shape their meeting more effectively and make it more Member driven.

Members have made clear progress in developing their style of questioning. Questions are becoming more challenging and in some cases focussed on strategic issues. Members need to ensure that this progress continues. There is still the tendency for some Members to ask ward level questions rather than strategic ones. Planning out questions prior to a meeting will help to ensure that a range of questions are put to officers and that all Member expectations are actually met.

Further work should be considered around providing Members with the skills needed to effectively plan and deliver Scrutiny reviews. The IDeA session provided a detailed introduction to this but Members still need a further opportunity to develop skills such as project management, resource allocation within a review and scoping skills. These are all skills which officers use on a regular basis. However, to make reviews effective Members too need the opportunity to fully develop these skills.

4.3 Linkage between Scrutiny and corporate objectives

There is still further potential for Members to strengthen the link between Scrutiny and the delivery of the Council's corporate objectives. Currently some Members use Scrutiny meetings to ask strategic questions about the issues under discussion. But this is not common practise yet. Each report submitted to Scrutiny has to have a section completed within it explaining how the issue links to the corporate objectives of the Council. In the meetings

observed Members did not spend any real time on these sections of the report. Most Officers too did not flag up the links between their issues and the corporate objectives and in many cases these sections of the reports were not filled in, in any detail. Both Officers and Members need to work to retain the focus on corporate objectives when discussing an issue.

At a broader level Members need to take a greater interest into how their work in Scrutiny committees is directly feeding back into the work of Cabinet. Although this may be happening behind the scenes there needs to be clearer feedback from Cabinet to Scrutiny suggestions and Scrutiny needs to be clearer about representing itself to Cabinet. A Cabinet member was present at every Scrutiny meeting observed as well as the training sessions. Is a Scrutiny member present at every Cabinet meeting to put the views of Scrutiny forward? If so how is that being fed back into the Scrutiny meetings as at the meetings observed by the IDeA no Scrutiny member was feeding back anything from Cabinet.

4.4 Engaging the public

Although this was beyond the remit of our work it was noted that at one of the meetings observed (Service Delivery) there were two members of the public present. They were in attendance to ask questions under the standing item, which allows questions from the public. Easington is to be commended for enabling members of the public to ask questions at Scrutiny meetings. A successful Scrutiny system is one, which engages the public and gets them involved in the issues under discussion by the Scrutiny committee.

Engaging the public in Scrutiny is a problem being faced by councils across the country. In general success levels are higher when Scrutiny reviews are being undertaken that address issues important to the public. These issues lend themselves more to being discussed at meetings held out in local communities at times when members of the public can attend. Members should consider ensuring that at least one of their Scrutiny reviews within a year has the potential to engage the public in this manner.

4.5 Involvement of opposition

The IDeA observed that although Members of the opposition had taken part in the training sessions they were not in attendance at the second round of meetings observed. It is important for us to highlight that an effective Scrutiny process is able to engage the opposition in a proactive manner. The Council needs to ensure that everything is done to encourage and enable the opposition to take part in Scrutiny. This means that information is openly shared and that the opposition has the opportunity to be meaningfully involved in the Scrutiny process.

5 Next Steps

The table below suggests some options for next steps against the conclusions:

Issue 1:		
Greater clarity around the role of Members and Officers in Scrutiny		
Need	**Action**	**Who**
Discuss the role of Officers and Members in Scrutiny	Facilitated session enabling Officers and Members to be open and honest	External facilitator
Establish greater clarity around roles	• Review/establish clear job descriptions for Scrutiny Members • Develop protocol outlining expectations of Officers/Members	Officers
Members to lead and shape discussion further	See section on skills	
Outcome		
• Members leading and shaping discussions within meetings and in all planning sessions • Officers providing brief updates on reports in meetings which are used as a base for strategic discussions		

Issue 2: Skills requirements		
Need	**Action**	**Who**
Chairs and Vice Chairs to be shaping discussions more	• Providing a scrutiny mentor to work with Chairs and Vice Chairs 1-2-1	External
Members to start planning their approach to meetings more so that they can drive the meeting	• Run a pilot exercise where a facilitator meets with members 20 minutes prior to their meeting to establish what they want to achieve and help plan out questions and then review how far they actually achieved this	External
Members continuing to improve questioning skills	• Officers to remind members about learning in 6 months time • Run refresher course on questioning skills	Officer/External
Members improving skills they need to plan Scrutiny reviews	• Provide skills sessions looking at skills such as time management, project management, Scrutiny resource management	Officer/External
Outcome		
• Scrutiny Members having the skills they need to drive and shape Scrutiny		

Issue 3:		
Linkage between Scrutiny and corporate objectives		
Need	**Action**	**Who**
Members to be clear about corporate objectives	- Briefing session - Attach summarised corporate objectives to each Scrutiny agenda	Officers
Members to proactively ask questions about corporate objectives within Scrutiny	- Production of crib sheet for Members to use - Members to note set of questions and ask them in the meetings	Officers and Members
Scrutiny messages taken back to Cabinet	Scrutiny Member to regularly attend Cabinet and then feedback outcomes to Scrutiny committees	Members
Outcome		
- Scrutiny members driving and shaping corporate objectives and issues more - Officers providing more information about corporate objectives in their reports		

Issue 4: Other issues		
Need	**Action**	**Who**
Engaging the public	• Organise Scrutiny reviews which look at issues driven by the public • Hold meetings out in the community • Develop a Scrutiny guide for members of the public	Officer/Member
Involvement of the opposition in Scrutiny	• Provide a member peer to work with Scrutiny opposition members	External
Raising Members level of self awareness	• Review self assessment template used in IDeA "Taking Scrutiny Forward" session • Run practical exercises to test self awareness out	Officer/Members/External
Ensuring Members of Scrutiny are making progress	• Further observational work to take place within a year	External