

Durham County Council

Overview and Scrutiny

Key Issues to consider for the CPA October 2007

Section One: Officer Support

1. Do you have a dedicated Overview and Scrutiny Team?

Yes.

2. What is the line management and reporting process for the manager responsible for Overview and Scrutiny?

Head of Overview and Scrutiny (2nd tier) reports to Acting Director of Corporate Services.

3. How are Chief Officers involved in Overview Scrutiny in your authority?

Chief Officers attend Overview and Scrutiny meetings as appropriate (i.e. Budget meetings).

Overview and Scrutiny reports are considered by Chief Officers at meetings of Chief Officer's Management Team (CMT). In future, regular reports will be presented to CMT by the Head of Overview and Scrutiny about progress with reviews and other Overview and Scrutiny Committee issues.

There may be liaisons with Chief Officers (formal or informal) during the course of scrutiny projects, or in relation to day-to-day issues raised by non-executive members.

Do you have senior/chief officer champions for Overview and Scrutiny?

There are links with Services via nominated Scrutiny Link Officers (mid ranking or above). These tend to represent the relevant Chief Officers at our Overview and Scrutiny Sub-Committees.

Is it effective? If not, what are the barriers? If so, what makes it work?

It can operate effectively, especially in terms of identifying witnesses; sourcing information for scrutiny investigations, or planning Sub-Committee agendas. Main barriers tend to be "silo" mentality, or concerns about the perceived "sensitivity" of some issues being scrutinised.

Section Two: Overview and Scrutiny Structure

4. Please describe your Overview and Scrutiny structure.

In Durham County Council we have an overarching Overview and Scrutiny Committee which meets approximately six times per year, plus specials. There are six standing Scrutiny Sub-Committees. Five of these are currently aligned to the County Council's Corporate aims which underpin our mission statement. These meet quarterly and are;

- Looking after the Environment
- Building a Strong Economy
- Developing Lifelong Learning
- Promoting Strong Healthy and Safe Communities
- Effective Corporate Leadership (Corporate Management)

The sixth Sub-Committee is the Joint County/District Health Scrutiny Sub-Committee which meets quarterly, plus specials. We are proposing to re-align the Sub-Committees to the Local Area Agreement blocks in future.

The work of our Sub-Committees is co-ordinated by a Scrutiny Co-ordinating Panel consisting of all Chairs and Vice-Chairs of the above Committee/Sub-Committees which we also use as a "sounding board" in relation to relevant issues. This meets approximately monthly.

Finally, we also have Working Groups set up to undertake specific overview and scrutiny investigations which meet as required. These may be either in-depth or light touch. We also have a standing Budget Scrutiny Working Group.

5. Will you be restructuring at all to accommodate the requirements of the Police & Justice Act and/or the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Bill?

Current support for the Overview and Scrutiny Function consists of a Head of Overview and Scrutiny and a Principal Scrutiny Officer, together with a PA/Scrutiny Office Manager. We have just gained part time support from a PhD student under a joint arrangement with Northumbria University over the next three years who will be particularly looking at developing more effective engagement with stakeholders and measuring the effectiveness of scrutiny recommendations.

We will be re-structuring specifically in relation to the Police and Justice Act and the Local Government Bill so that Overview and Scrutiny is set within the context of Local Area Agreements. A thematic approach (LAA blocks) will provide the focus for the work.

We are increasing resources and capacity to address health scrutiny issues (a proposed 50% appointment jointly with the Health Service) and a Scrutiny Support Officer (secondment opportunity until 2009) to undertake work linked to Scrutiny of Partnerships (LAA, LSPs etc.); member development; media/communication issues and light touch reviews.

Section Three: Members

6. How do you develop the work programme for Overview and Scrutiny?

The main drivers for our annual work programme are the County Council's medium term improvement priorities (these in themselves are developed following extensive consultation with the public and key stakeholders) and the Councils Forward plan. For the current year's work programme we also asked Chief Officers and Cabinet Portfolio Holders to attend the Scrutiny Sub-Committees to provide information about relevant issues and highlight potential areas for scrutiny investigation. These were collated and presented to a meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee for a debate and decisions about which areas should be selected for investigation. These were further refined into "in-depth" or "light-touch" reviews and scheduled by the Coordinating Panel.

7. To what extent is the Overview and Scrutiny Work Programme influenced by Cabinet / Executive Members?

See above.

Overview and Scrutiny may occasionally be asked to look at specific issues by Cabinet, but Overview and Scrutiny members decide whether or not to take these issues on board. It is a member led process.

8. How often do Cabinet / Executive Members attend meetings?

Cabinet/Executive members often attend meetings of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee and the Sub-Committees (these are public meetings in any event). Attendance (if any) at meetings of Working Groups is usually by invitation (i.e. if giving evidence), but Cabinet/Executive members are not specifically dissuaded or debarred from attending such meetings.

9. To what extent do the Cabinet / Executive respond to Overview and Scrutiny recommendations?

Scrutiny recommendations usually ask Cabinet to approve the recommendations in the report and respond with an appropriate Action Plan. The process of implementation of recommendations is set out in more detail in the response to question 15, below. All scrutiny reports contain a recommendation about subsequent review to check on progress with implementation of recommendations.

10. Do you offer an internal training programme to O&S Members?

Yes.

If so, please describe what you offer:

All of our members have personal development plans. These take into account specific competencies and member role descriptions and can include attendance at internal and external courses.

We have an extensive in-house development programme which members, as well as officers, can access, including areas such as public speaking, presentation skills and project management. We have undertaken some internal training in the past, as part of new member induction, and also bought-in training for specific scrutiny areas such as questioning skills. We are currently developing a seminar for members about target setting/performance.

The secondment opportunity for a scrutiny support officer mentioned above in question 6 will help us increase internal training opportunities for scrutiny members.

11. How good is the take-up of internal and external training opportunities by your Overview and Scrutiny Members?

Members are generally keen to take up internal and external training opportunities.

12. What works and what does not work so well when encouraging Overview and Scrutiny Members to take-up training opportunities?

It really depends upon the subject matter and whether individual members believe it will enhance their skills.

Section Four: Impact of Overview and Scrutiny

13. How do you track and evidence the outcomes of scrutiny reviews?

All of our scrutiny reports include a recommendation about review (usually six months or twelve months), which is when members re-visit the original scrutiny recommendations to check on implementation.

Following agreement at Cabinet to scrutiny reports, we submit a template (which contains all the recommendations) to the relevant Service(s) asking them to identify lead officers in relation to each recommendation. It is against these that progress is assessed.

A key part of the work to be undertaken by the PhD student working with us will be to assess not only whether scrutiny recommendations have been implemented, but whether they are making a difference for stakeholders and the public to whom they relate.

Section Five: Engaging the Public

14. If you have undertaken any successful work to engage the public in O&S please describe it below:

We engage directly with specific groups when undertaking projects, i.e. young people in schools, but also use our links and existing mechanisms to capture evidence – i.e. working with the Youth Engagement Service, Investing in

Children, Age Concern.

We seek to engage widely with our local communities in undertaking projects, i.e. the recent Domestic Violence Scrutiny Project looked at violence not only in heterosexual relationships, but also in same sex relationships and within the ethnic minority community. Consultation events were held with representatives from these communities as part of evidence gathering. The Community Buildings project recently undertaken also involved engagement events with representatives from the voluntary sector.