

BOROUGH OF REIGATE AND BANSTEAD
EVALUATING OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL

Minutes of a meeting of the Evaluating Overview and Scrutiny Panel held - Remote - Virtual Meeting on 20 August 2020 at 6.30 pm.

Present: Councillors J. C. S. Essex, K. Foreman, S. Parnall, J. E. Philpott and S. T. Walsh (Chair)

7. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Cllr J. King and Cllr R. Feeney.

8. MINUTES OF THE LAST MEETING

The Minutes of the last meeting on 14 July 2020 were approved.

9. EVALUATING OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY - HOUSE OF COMMONS REPORT AND GOVERNMENT GUIDANCE

Panel Members reviewed and discussed findings from two reports. These were the House of Commons Communities and Local Government Select Committee report: [Effectiveness of local authority overview and scrutiny committees](#) and statutory government guidance from the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government: [Statutory Guidance on Overview and Scrutiny in Local and Combined Authorities](#).

10. DISCUSSION AND QUESTIONS

The Panel discussed the following issues relating to the function of overview and scrutiny. Members wanted more focus on scrutiny rather than an overview of information.

Access to information – Members discussed access to information (set out in the House of Commons Select Committee report ‘Effectiveness of local authority overview and scrutiny committees’). The Panel highlighted the report’s conclusions on Accessing Information (p43) that there should always be an assumption of transparency wherever possible. Councillors scrutinising services needed full access to information on the Council’s services, including financial and performance information. It was noted that Overview and Scrutiny Committee Members can request information from officers or Executive Members and ask for written answers. Members were aware that some information may be commercially sensitive and could make provision on the agenda front sheet for any exempt information to be considered by the Committee, as necessary in the conduct of its business in line with the Access to Information Procedure Rules. It was noted that performance information was provided to the Committee for Members to review in the form of monthly dashboards, via direct links to the ModGov Library.

Focused meetings – the Panel recommended shorter and more focused meetings with additional meetings scheduled, if necessary, to conduct business. The Committee needed to be more agile in its way of working to be able to react to the issue of the day and have clear outcomes and recommendations from its meetings. Greater use of the Advance Questions procedure would allow officer responses to be prepared in advance of Committee meetings to facilitate debate.

Future Work Programme of Overview and Scrutiny Committee – no areas of activity should be left outside the scope of the Committee when it came to scrutinise the work of the Council. The Committee's Future Work Programme was a forward-looking work plan for the year ahead which set out an outline schedule of items for discussion. This was included on the agenda at each Committee meeting for Members to ask for items to be considered and included in future meetings. Members could actively review the current work programme at each meeting and request changes if they felt a particular topic should be scrutinised.

Scrutiny panels – the value of time-limited scrutiny task groups was discussed. These panels were valuable as a smaller group of Members had more time to scrutinise a particular topic and then report back to the full committee, such as the Budget Scrutiny Panel. A Scrutiny Panel to review the Recovery work from the emergency response to Covid-19 had been set up. The first meeting had taken place with an update to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee in September with two further meetings planned in October and early 2021.

Call-ins – it was noted there was a call-in of the Executive decision on Environmental Sustainability on 28 July 2020 had been requested. A special meeting of Overview and Scrutiny was scheduled for 27 August 2020 to question the decision. It was felt that call-ins should be a healthy part of the overview and scrutiny process to use as a check and balance that the Executive had made the right decision.

11. PANEL RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations to Overview and Scrutiny Committee were as follows:

1. Prepare a statement for all Council Members setting out the Overview and Scrutiny Committee's role as a critical friend to the Council and its principles and purpose (*to be drafted*).
2. Establish time limited scrutiny task panels when needed, to debate and report back to the Committee. This enables the Committee to be more agile and to scrutinise issues more quickly.
3. Keep meetings shorter and focused with clear recommendations, where necessary, to the Executive. This may lead to the need more meetings of the Committee each year. The panel recommended an increased number of meetings to be held (7 in total for year 2020-21)
4. Facilitate and encourage Members to evaluate and review information provided to the Committee such as performance dashboards, in advance of meetings.
5. Make use of the Advance Questions procedure to allow officer responses to be prepared in advance of Committee meetings and to facilitate debate.
6. Actively review the current work programme at each Overview and Scrutiny Committee meeting and request changes, and, if necessary to conduct

business, schedule additional meetings of the Committee, as noted in recommendation 3 above

7. In accordance with the Access to Information Procedure Rules, make provision on the agenda frontsheet for any exempt information to be considered by the Committee, as necessary in the conduct of its business.
8. Consider commissioning an external organisation such as the Centre for Public Scrutiny or Local Government Association to review the overview and scrutiny function if resources allow.

12. ANY OTHER BUSINESS

There were no other items of business.

The Meeting closed at 8.00 pm