

EXETER CITY COUNCIL

**SCRUTINY COMMITTEE – COMMUNITY
16 JANUARY 2007**

**SCRUTINY COMMITTEE – ECONOMY
18 JANUARY 2007**

**EXECUTIVE
23 JANUARY 2007**

OPERATION OF SCRUTINY WITHIN THE COUNCIL

1. PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

- 1.1 To consider proposals to develop the effective operation of scrutiny within the Council.

2. BACKGROUND

- 2.1 Following an undertaking made by the Leader of the Council at Council on 18 July 2006, work has been undertaken between members and officers to examine current Scrutiny practice at Exeter City Council in order to ensure that it is perceived to be robust and effective by the members of the Scrutiny committees as well as the Executive.
- 2.2 Meetings were held with Scrutiny chairs, both individually and as a group, and separate meetings were held with Group Leaders. This paper serves as an indication of the views of the Scrutiny Chairs. Also provided is officers' comment as to how the issues identified by the Chairs are currently being addressed or where there has been agreement as to a way forward.

3. BENEFITS OF CURRENT SYSTEM

- 3.1 A number of positive points about the current Scrutiny system were identified:
- All Chairs agreed that the Scrutiny arrangements were positive in bringing political groups together and considering issues in a cross-party way.
 - The committees were a useful way of receiving officer information
 - There is generally a positive response from the Executive for recommendations made by the Scrutiny committees.
 - One Committee has agreed to receive annual update reports on items where in-year changes were not significant. This would free up the agenda for the consideration of other items.
- 3.2 The following possible areas for development were discussed:

Area Identified	Proposed Solution
Members are not always clear as to why particular items appear on the agenda.	A work plan to be considered by each Scrutiny Committee on an annual basis to give members the opportunity to identify issues that they would like to be scrutinised. "Bids" for the work plan would then be considered by a cross-party member and officer sub-group who would agree a shortlist of priorities.
The length of agenda means that some items are not given due consideration.	Main agenda to focus on issues related to the agreed annual work plan. More thought to be given to (i) alternative means of conveying information items e.g. Councillors' Information Portal and <i>Extract</i> and (ii) streamlining Committee reports.
There is a need for a Member Briefing session on Scrutiny, perhaps externally facilitated, on effective scrutiny, building on case studies from other comparable authorities. To also include information on councillors' community leadership role and the link to neighbourhood engagement and governance as indicated in preliminary submission for unitary status.	A consultant with expertise in Scrutiny has been approached to deliver a session for Councillors early in 2007. Two of the Scrutiny Committee chairs will be attending a Chairing Scrutiny course organised by Torbay Council. All Councillors were invited to attend the DIP Community Leadership conference and attendees invited to give feedback. Officers are currently exploring with another authority the feasibility of making a joint bid through the South West LIFT initiative for a Councillor development scheme around community development.
There is a need for political leadership across all groups on the Scrutiny function.	Political issue
There is a need to provide all committees with examples of where decisions made by the Executive have clearly been influenced by Scrutiny's input.	Examples have been provided on many previous occasions. Councillors can obtain this information from the minutes.
There should be more opportunities for political groups to informally network to promote cross-party working.	To some extent, Member Briefings might fulfil this. The recent survey indicates a desire for increased opportunity for discussion at briefings.
In Scrutiny meetings, seating should not be arranged by political group.	Councillors can sit where they wish in Scrutiny Committee meetings and Member Services officers will position name plates accordingly.

<p>Portfolio holders should play an active role in Scrutiny meetings, perhaps by giving an update of their department or explaining how a particular policy was developed, where an issue related to that policy informs the agenda of the Scrutiny committee meeting. There should be the scope for questions to be asked of the portfolio holder.</p>	<p>It is proposed that Portfolio Holders attend the relevant Scrutiny Committee twice per year to advise members on their area of responsibility relevant to the Committee. Their first attendance will be to present the priorities for the upcoming year and the second will be present information on progress. The portfolio holder will answer questions related to what they have presented.</p>
<p>There should be greater use of review/ working groups. These have proved to be successful where they have been formed in the past.</p>	<p>Youth Issues Working Group is currently meeting, as is the Member Development Steering Group. Further review groups can be established where an issue has been identified for scrutiny, subject to resource implications.</p>

4. OTHER OBSERVATIONS

- 4.1 During the discussions, other issues were raised which were outside the remit of Scrutiny, but nevertheless it may be felt merit further consideration.
- 4.2 One issue related to the format of council meetings. Some members perceive these to be ‘rubber stamping’ with little meaningful debate. Apart from the frustration felt by members, this also dissuades the press and public from attending.
- 4.3 One Scrutiny Committee Chair also felt that where there is a question during the approval of the minutes of a Scrutiny Committee, the question should be answered by the portfolio holder, as the Executive would have approved the policy.

5. RECOMMENDATION

- 5.1 To note the outcome of the discussions on the operation of the scrutiny function and consider the proposals set out in paragraph 3.2 above.

ASSISTANT CHIEF EXECUTIVE

CHIEF EXECUTIVE’S DEPARTMENT

Local Government (Access to Information) Act 1985 (as amended)

Background papers used in compiling the report:

None

SR/Operation of Scrutiny

10 November 2006