

## **Elected Member Fact Sheet: The Role of Scrutiny**

One of the new roles the Scottish Executive is trying to enhance for Councillors is that of scrutiny. Scrutiny is closely linked to Accountability. Scrutiny has a role in driving up standards and performance. Scrutiny may challenge areas of potential weakness and result in a change of policy or strategy. Scrutiny should embrace style of delivery as well as outcomes and targets. Scrutiny is a combination of art and science.

### **Background to Scrutiny**

Elected members have a duty to act solely in the public interest, a duty of responsible stewardship and a commitment to openness and transparency.

Elected Members should not run council departments. A convenor should not micro manage. Members do have to reassure themselves that departments are fit for purpose. That is quite a different skill.

Elected members

- Create policies and set strategic direction
- Allocate resources and establish priorities

For effective scrutiny, elected members also

- Need to fully understand how the Council and departments operate
- Fully understand Council policy, corporate priorities and style
- Identify key officers, roles, remits
- Be reassured staff are competent
- Understand risk and what exposure to risk could involve
- Appreciate risk /likelihood continuum
- Know what controls exist both internal and external, mandatory and optional
- Understand corporate governance arrangements and legal frameworks

For this new role of systematic scrutiny, a huge learning curve may be involved for the councillor.

The bedrock for effective monitoring is the relationship between officers and elected members. This should be predicated on mutual respect and trust, an understanding of each other's roles and a shared commitment to the process of scrutiny. Candidness is essential.

Scrutiny is not negative or an opportunity to unearth failings and shortcomings within a department. Scrutiny is not a tool for partisan point scoring by non-administration councillors. Scrutiny is not the second-class poor relation to policy formation. Scrutiny is not a back door way of introducing policy although the results of scrutiny and review may alter or amend policy and practice..

In order to undertake effective scrutiny, elected members will need training, support from officers and the leadership of the council and a unique working relationship with departmental heads.

At its most basic; scrutiny is a way of ensuring that the council does what it says it intends to do;

**“It does what it says on the tin”**

## **Forms of Scrutiny**

Scrutiny already happens in a variety of ways.

- Public Performance Reports
- Annual Reports
- Committee Reports
- Audit sub committees
- Strategic Policy Committees
- Internal and external audit
- School and Social Work inspections
- Best value reviews
- Monitoring Groups
- Project management groups

The new role of scrutiny, partly driven by “cabinet styles” of administration, requires some refinement of the raft of opportunities listed above. It also requires a change of culture and thinking by elected members, especially those in power.

Scrutiny is the opposite of the ward advocacy role. Scrutiny looks at the process created to deliver policy and assesses the outcomes.

- Has the community benefited in the ways intended?
- Have the outcomes been achieved within budget and timescale?
- Is there value for money for council tax payers?
- Has the service been delivered in a way that the quality of life of service users has improved?
- What Best Value definitions and measures were applied?
- Was there genuine option appraisal and were alternatives considered?
- What benchmarking criteria were used at the outset and were they still relevant at the time of scrutiny?
- Are there lessons to be learned?

It is clear from the comments made thus far that the new role of scrutiny requires more than just a change of attitude and perception. It requires a clear separation of the policy making and executive function of councils from those entrusted to scrutinise fairly and evenly. Membership and chairing of scrutiny committees should almost by right come from non-administration or backbench members.

### **Establish a Scrutiny Suite**

An annual raft of core areas to be scrutinised should be published with flexibility to add exception reports if a serious issue arises.

Scrutiny reports should be published and distributed widely with recommendations and an agreed action plan incorporated in the report. The appropriate committee should consider policy changes that may result from the report and subject to subsequent scrutiny and audit.

Clearly maturity and a genuine wish to evaluate and appraise service provision are required for scrutiny to work. It is possible and it is much needed.

**Scrutiny develops a “performance matters” ethos**