



Councillor Bettison
Leader

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Dear Paul and Tim

IMPROVING PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT WITH OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY

As you may know, we have been giving a lot of thought to how we might improve public engagement with Overview and Scrutiny, to enhance its effectiveness. I would welcome your views on the changes I have in mind on this subject before I approach the members of the Overview and Scrutiny (O&S) Commission.

Public engagement with the O&S process in Bracknell Forest is low, and this is the same with most councils. We recognised this in our annual report to Council last year, and we arranged for the 2009-10 Service Plan for the Chief Executive's Office to include an objective to: 'Research best practice in improving public engagement with O&S and formulate proposals.' That research is summarised in the attached report by the Head of Overview and Scrutiny. This sets out in paragraphs 3 and 4 what the Council already does to stimulate public engagement with O&S, it includes some interesting research findings and a summary of the Centre for Public Scrutiny's self-evaluation which we undertook, and it ends with recommendations on the way forward.

The report also recognises the important new statutory duty all councils have under the Local Democracy, Economic Development and Construction Act 2009 to promote democracy - putting local authorities at the forefront of the drive to reconnect people with public and political decision-making. I believe that O&S has a valuable role to play in that regard.

The additional measures proposed for public engagement in O&S are set out in paragraph 11 of the report. I regard these to be sensible, valuable and capable of being delivered within the resources available. In the event additional resources became available to O&S, I should also like to undertake the further engagement activities set out in Annex 2 to the report.

OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMISSION

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I would welcome your views on these proposals, and I would be happy to meet to discuss them if that would help. I then intend to raise the subject with my fellow members of the O&S Commission.

With best wishes,

Councillor Bob Edger OBE
Chairman, Overview & Scrutiny Commission

Copies to: Councillor McLean
Assistant Chief Executive

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BRACKNELL FOREST COUNCIL

PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT WITH OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY

Introduction

1. This report proposes a way forward for better public engagement with the Overview and Scrutiny (O&S) process at Bracknell Forest Council. This is included as objective 10.7.20 in the 2009-10 Service Plan for the Chief Executive's Office: 'Research best practice in improving public engagement with O&S and formulate proposals.'

Background

2. As one of the principal means of public accountability, effective scrutiny needs to take account of the views and concerns of residents, and provide opportunities for the public to be involved and engaged with the O&S process. Most recently, this has had legal backing through the Local Democracy, Economic Development and Construction Act 2009. The Act contains a new duty on local councils to promote democracy - putting local authorities at the forefront of the drive to reconnect people with public and political decision-making. The duty is aimed at ensuring all sections of the community understand how the council works, who makes the decisions on their behalf in their neighbourhood, and how they can get involved if they wish to. A further new duty in the Act is to designate a Scrutiny Officer, whose functions include promoting O&S.
3. Public engagement with the O&S process in Bracknell Forest is low, and this is the same with most councils. Our Annual Report of O&S for 2008/09 stated:

As a main purpose of O&S is to act on behalf of residents in holding decision makers to account, it is important that we continue to improve our engagement with the public. All Councils have found that engaging the public with the O&S function has proved to be challenging. The measures we have taken to improve public engagement in 2008/09 are set out below, and we will be looking to see how we can improve this further in 2009/10.

- *O&S have held meetings in places other than the Council offices so people see and hear about O&S (for example at Garth Hill College, Sandhurst Town Council, Heatherwood Hospital, and working group visits to many places including a waste recycling centre, schools and children's centres)*
 - *Deciding to co-opt representatives of social care organisations onto O&S, and welcoming a member of the Local Involvement Network and a new Parent Governor representative into the O&S Commission and related O&S Panels*
 - *Consulting the public, for example we hosted a tea party for a group of carers*
 - *Actively inviting views from residents, for example by including a suggestion post card at the end of this annual report*
 - *Improving the presentation of our annual report of O&S to make it more accessible.*
4. Other measures to promote public engagement have included: production of a 'flyer' leaflet on O&S; having a full and informative set of web pages on O&S on the BFC website; occasional news items in 'Town and Country'; issuing press releases on publication of some O&S reports; and hosting visits by other councils interested to hear about how BFC operates O&S. Despite all these efforts, we still have very low public engagement, for example very few members of the public attend O&S meetings, and we had only one response to the reply paid card in the last annual Report.

Best Practice

5. The Chairman of the O&S Commission led an exercise in 2009 to complete the Centre for Public Scrutiny's (CfPS) Self Evaluation Framework for Local Authorities. This showed that the Council's O&S function is performing well or better on the majority of headings. The main area of weakness was public engagement. The self assessment was that:

- In common with the vast majority of councils, there is much more work to be done in involving the general public directly in the scrutiny process. However, there are examples where the public and partner organisations have been involved in Working Groups on a number of issues.
- BFC has good levels of resident satisfaction with its services, with rare issues of major concern. This contributes to a lack of interest by the general public in those issues that they are unaffected by as well as a lack of understanding of the local government procedures.
- It is difficult to involve a public that generally is reluctant to get involved with detail and effort to produce a positive outcome.
- In common with the vast majority of councils, it is very unclear what more we can do to improve public engagement with O&S. There is a recognisable inertia in public interest in scrutiny unless it involves single item concerns surrounding, e.g. hospitals, education, child care and adult services. Even then the core group will be that which is affected by the issue.
- We will only overcome this inertia if we make scrutiny more relevant and interesting in a way that encourages people to take an interest. A more challenging co-operation with the local press and involvement of members of the general public in specific reviews is something that we must improve upon.
- We could consider embarking on a review of a topic chosen by the NAG's and have them actively involved in the work and in producing the report. This could possibly be on speeding, a known and widespread concern.
- Lack of public interest in general local government affairs that are perceived as only mildly affecting the day to day lives of individuals. There is a view within the electorate that elected members are chosen to act on behalf of the public as a whole and the majority will be satisfied to 'let them get on with it'. This lack of interest and commitment is extremely difficult to overcome.
- Our corporate arrangements for media and public relations need to be improved. Insufficient attention is paid to the scrutiny process at the moment which may be one of the reasons why we have not yet developed a proper dialogue with the public. However, the understanding of officers in the process is vastly improved and is something we must continue to pursue.
- We could publicise O&S more in 'Town and Country'.
- We should refresh the corporate induction material for officers.
- We should strive to understand more fully what matters to residents, and ensure O&S addresses those.

6. The O&S Chairmen met on 4 November 2009 to consider what further actions might be considered to improve public engagement with O&S. Possible measures were seen to include:

- Involving the Youth Parliament;
- Using Community TV to advertise the programme of O&S reviews;
- Considering Podcasts;
- Asking people's views on specific O&S reviews, a good example being the review of highway maintenance;
- Work with schools to include an O&S focus to a sixth form citizenship event;
- Providing an opportunity for children and young people to question O&S Commission members;
- Hold a media interview at the time of publishing the annual report of O&S;
- Extend the formal public participation scheme to cover O&S meetings;
- Councillors to actively seek out public opinion on issues which should be considered by O&S;
- Adopt a targeted approach to interested parties for each O&S review, and refer to them in the scoping document;
- Issue press releases about the O&S work programme and forthcoming O&S reviews, along with the scoping documents.

The meeting did not explore the resource requirements for these additional possible measures, and subsequently the O&S officer team has been reduced in size.

7. The most recent (2008) annual survey from the Centre for Public Scrutiny revealed that, in relation to public engagement:
 - The average number of suggestions for scrutiny topics coming from the general public in the last year was 4, a marked decrease from the average of 6 in 2007, and 11 in 2006. 55% of authorities reported having received no suggestions for scrutiny topics from the public.
 - The average number of external witnesses who have attended overview and scrutiny meetings in 2008 was 20, which is 1 fewer than in 2007. The average value is skewed by a small number of large values and when the top 10 results are removed the average value falls to 14.
 - The experience of those councils which have been more successful at public engagement with O&S is that the most successful way to engage the public seems to be around topic or issue selection for scrutiny reviews or consideration.

8. The Office for Public Management (OPM) has issued good practice guidance in this area, recognising that public and stakeholder engagement in scrutiny is an important part of the work of local authorities. The OPM has set out six principles for this:
 - (I) Co-ordinate scrutiny with other corporate activities by using and adapting known consultation and engagement processes.
 - (II) Create confidence by publicising scrutiny and review processes, demonstrating the role of scrutiny and reassuring the public that checks and balances are in place.
 - (III) Clarify the review process, including how people can be involved.
 - (IV) Use terms such as 'checking' or 'reviewing' rather than the term 'scrutiny' which can be off-putting and jargonistic.
 - (V) Communicate both internally and externally about the processes and benefits of scrutiny reviews, as people are most interested in what has changed, and the added value from a review.
 - (VI) Confirm any change and improvement by letting residents know that scrutiny has made a difference.

9. Annex 1 to this report contains practical examples of acknowledged good practice by some council in relation to public engagement with O&S.

The recommended way forward

10. Effective public engagement requires resource, and particularly Member and Officer time. The reduction of the O&S Officer team from 3 to 2 will result in less O&S activity and we do not have the resource to pursue many of the various good ideas for improving public engagement set out in this report. Examples of specific public engagement activities which could be considered if resources permitted are in Annex 2.

11. Given the resource constraints above, and with reference to the CFPS self-evaluation and best practice examples and guidance, it is proposed to:
 - (I) Continue with the current arrangements set out in paragraphs 3 and 4 above, excluding the reply-paid card in the annual report;
 - (II) Councillors through their regular contact with local residents, should actively seek out public opinion on issues which should be considered by O&S, and report these to the O&S Officer team.
 - (III) For every O&S review, actively consider:
 - Co-opting someone onto the review who has expertise in the subject matter.

- Issuing a press release before the review commences, describing the purpose of the review, saying how residents can contribute their views, and advertising (if appropriate) the date of the public meeting of the Working Group.

- carrying out a site visit, meeting the people directly connected with the issue under review.

- Sending a questionnaire (or use an on-line survey) to interested organisations.

(IV) Produce an information leaflet for 'witnesses' for O&S reviews, explaining the process and arrangements to achieve fair, balanced and accurate reports.

(V) Issue a press release to coincide with the presentation to Council of the annual report of O&S, and referring to the new O&S work programme, showing how topic selection was informed by surveys and other feedback from residents.

(VI) Design and secure approval for a formal public participation scheme to cover O&S meetings.

(VII) Refresh the corporate induction material for officers.

(VIII) Use the responses to periodic surveys, for example the BF1500 survey in 2009 and the neighbourhood surveys, to inform the design of the O&S work programme, so that it reflects the main interests and concerns of residents.

12. These proposals are the most we can reasonably accommodate within our resources, and they should result in raising awareness of, and public engagement in, O&S in Bracknell Forest. This should additionally contribute to demonstrating to residents the Council's accountability arrangements.

PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT GOOD PRACTICE AND EXAMPLES

Kirklees

Kirklees practice in overview and scrutiny is central to the corporate management of the authority. Its scoping process for reviews has involved members of the public through its citizens' panel. This feedback is used to decide the review process for the year, along with information from other stakeholders and data sources.

Kirklees also invites comments from external stakeholders about topics and issues that could be subject to scrutiny. Like a number of authorities, a form on the website invites such comment. The council also promises to get in touch with the correspondent to confirm whether the issue will be considered either as part of scrutiny, or through a ward councillor or not at all. This is a simple but often forgotten consideration that keeps communication channels open.

Kensington and Chelsea

Kensington and Chelsea has a well established programme of public involvement and consultation including a citizens' panel and a group of resident reviewers who comment on services more directly – itself a way of adding a public voice to the scrutiny process.

Cornwall

A theatre group was commissioned to work with dementia sufferers and their carers to use humour and drama to discover their views on the quality of dementia care. This demonstrated the value of a good engagement process for those who take part, as well as those organising the event.

Coventry

A health scrutiny review of the discharge from hospital process used older people as peer researchers to talk to the elderly patients, both in hospital and after they had returned home. This allowed them to report on the patients' experience of health and social care in a sympathetic fashion.

North Somerset

A summit was held with representatives of the local media and the Youth Parliament to enable young people to put questions directly to the media about the way in which they were stereotyped as hoodies and hooligans. As a result, the local paper set aside a page in each issue where young people were able to write their own stories and provide a different perspective.

Public understanding of and input into select committee work has recently been enhanced through a partnership with Radio 4's 'You and Yours' programme. On a monthly basis, a Committee Chair reports on a current enquiry and asks for listeners to contribute evidence by phone or via web form. Some councils have similar arrangements to discuss overview and scrutiny items on local radio stations.

Somerset Council says the following on agendas

"At the Chairman's invitation you may ask questions and/or make statements or comments about any matter on the Committee's agenda. You may also present a petition on any matter within the Committee's remit. The length of public question time will be no more than 30 minutes in total. A slot for Public Question Time is set aside near the beginning of the meeting, after the minutes of the previous meeting have been signed. However, questions or statements about any matter on the

agenda for this meeting will be taken at the time when each matter is considered.

If you wish to speak, please tell the Committee Administrator, before the meeting.

You must direct your questions and comments through the Chairman. You may not take direct part in the debate.

The Chairman will decide when public participation is to finish.

If there are many people present at the meeting for one particular item, the Chairman may adjourn the meeting to allow views to be expressed more freely.

If an item on the agenda is contentious, with a large number of people attending the meeting, a representative should be nominated to present the views of a group.

An issue will not be deferred just because you cannot be present for the meeting.

Remember that the amount of time you speak will be restricted, normally, to two minutes only."

In common with a number of others, **Herefordshire Council** invite the public, via a public information sheet in the agenda, to submit questions (2 days prior to the meeting) for consideration at the meeting on issues that appear on the agenda. This has proved useful particularly when there is a hot topic and lots of the public want their say on a similar theme.

Herefordshire also include on the agenda, following the minutes, an Item 'Suggestions from members of the public on issues for future scrutiny.

ADDITIONAL PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT ACTIVITIES – UNRESOURCED

1. Carry out the planned project to engage with local schools during Local Democracy Week, to carry out a 'mini' O&S review.
2. Regular slot in Town and Country
3. Regular slot in local paper
4. Working with the Youth Parliament
5. Hosting an Online O&S forum
6. Using Council's complaints to inform work programme
7. Consultation with Neighbourhood Action Groups (NAGs)
8. Annual O&S Conference/event
9. Public discussion sessions
10. Presentations to interested groups
11. Local paper letters page, asking residents for views
12. Public workshops at the start of O&S reviews
13. Using Community TV to advertise the programme of O&S reviews
14. Considering Podcasts
15. Working with schools to include an O&S focus to a sixth form citizenship event
16. Providing an opportunity for children and young people to question O&S Commission members
17. Holding a media interview at the time of publishing the annual report of O&S
18. Local radio slot for O&S promotion – to explain what is currently happening, possibly a phone in.
19. Consulting the Citizens' panel (the Bracknell Forest 1500).
20. Public question time at meetings/written questions in advance.