

Report to: Overview Committee

Joint meeting Scrutiny Committee, Overview Committee and Housing Review Board

Date of Meeting 15 February 2024

Document classification: Part A Public Document

Exemption applied: None

Review date for release N/A



East Devon District Council Scrutiny Improvement Review – Centre for Governance and Scrutiny

Report summary:

The Centre for Governance and Scrutiny (CfGS) were commissioned by East Devon Council to conduct a scrutiny improvement review following a Motion at Full Council in July 2023.

The work took place in October and November 2023 ahead of the LGA Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC) Peer Review which is scheduled to commence in early 2024. The findings from the review can be used to ensure that the Overview and Scrutiny function has the arrangements in place to support and maintain ongoing improvement at the council, further to the CPC's outcomes.

To deliver the recommendations contained in the CfGS review an action plan and timetable to identify the necessary resources will be developed and report back to members in April 2024.

Is the proposed decision in accordance with:

Budget Yes No

Policy Framework Yes No

Recommendation:

To note the letter and recommendations from the Centre for Governance and Scrutiny arising from the scrutiny improvement review.

To request that the Democratic Services Manager prepares an Action Plan identifying the resources required to deliver the eight recommendations from the Centre for Governance and Scrutiny.

To present the Action Plan to a joint meeting of the Scrutiny Committee, Overview Committee and Housing Review Board by 30 April 2024.

Reason for recommendation:

To improve the ways of working at East Devon District Council in respect of the Council's overview and scrutiny function to ensure that the function can be carried out effectively.

Officer: Andrew Melhuish, Democratic Services Manager (andrew.melhuish@eastdevon.gov.uk)

Portfolio(s) (check which apply):

- Climate Action and Emergency Response
- Coast, Country and Environment
- Council and Corporate Co-ordination

- Communications and Democracy
- Economy
- Finance and Assets
- Strategic Planning
- Sustainable Homes and Communities
- Culture, Leisure, Sport and Tourism

Equalities impact Low Impact

The proposal to develop and prepare an action plan will assess any equality implications arising.

Climate change Low Impact

Risk: Low Risk; The recommendations in the CfGS review will ensure that overview and scrutiny has the arrangements in place to support and maintain ongoing improvement at the Council.

Links to background information N/A

Link to [Council Plan](#)

Priorities (check which apply)

- Better homes and communities for all
- A greener East Devon
- A resilient economy

Report in full

The Centre for Governance and Scrutiny (CfGS) were commissioned by East Devon Council to conduct a scrutiny improvement review following a Motion at Full Council in July 2023.

The work took place in October and November 2023 ahead of the LGA Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC) Peer Review which is scheduled to commence in early 2024.

The review explored the following areas:

1. Organisational commitment and clarity of purpose
2. Members leading and fostering good relationships
3. Prioritising work and using evidence well
4. Having an impact and value

The findings from the review can be used to ensure that the Overview and Scrutiny function has the arrangements in place to support and maintain ongoing improvement at the council, further to the CPC's outcomes.

In January 2024 the CfGS issued feedback on their review findings and offered suggestions on how the Council could develop its scrutiny process.

The full findings are set out in Appendix 1 and include eight key recommendations as follows:

Organisational commitment and clarity of purpose

Recommendation 1

That the current structure of three committees is maintained but that work takes place to ensure that they operate in a complementary manner. This recommendation should include a rework of the terms of reference for the three committees.

Recommendation 2

That consideration is given to providing a short term investment to the scrutiny function to ensure that the actions and recommendations arising from this report can be implemented and that 'added value' scrutiny can take place. This recommendation might include backfilling some of the secretariat functions to allow democratic services officers to utilise their skills to providing additional support to the scrutiny function with a view to making this change permanent if the additional investment realises impact and a clear business case can be made.

Members leading and fostering good relationships

Recommendation 3

That the three scrutiny committees are assigned a senior officer to provide expertise and advice to guide and support each of the respective Chairs and to retain oversight of the function, work programmes and help ensure that they work within their terms of reference and within the scrutiny protocol.

Recommendation 4

That the Council provides learning and development opportunities for all Elected Members to include (but not limited to) the following areas:

- Questioning skills
- Scoping and Managing In-depth scrutiny
- Making recommendations
- Access and use of information and work programming
- An indepth look at the scrutiny protocol and terms of reference for the committees, focusing on expectations, behaviours, and garnering ongoing support for participation.

Prioritising work and using evidence well

Recommendation 5

That the approach to work programming for scrutiny is redesigned so that the work programme is anchored by long term strategic issues for East Devon. This should include (but not limited to)

- Capacity to conduct in-depth scrutiny outside of the formal meetings
- Regular collaboration with scrutiny Chairs which might involve
 - routine sharing of work programmes for committees or possibly the consideration of the development of a single work programme for the entire function which is agreed annually. (with scope to flex throughout the year)
 - Chairs to collectively decide on member suggestions on proposal forms for what goes on the work programme – based on clear criteria that members themselves agree – process should look and feel challenging. Forward Plan could also go to this meeting for discussion (Portfolio Holder reports could go here too)
- Planned space on the work programme for detailed scrutiny of forthcoming decisions in a way that is planned in advance – for most complex / contentious issues – allowing for managed and proportionate political debate.
- Use insight from the public (ward work, corporate complaints) to inform work programming – in a proportionate way.
- Proactively share Forward Plan with members outside of committee; signpost members to background reports where necessary.
- Organise separate All- member briefings for members on forthcoming / high profile things which are for information rather than taking up space on the formal agenda.

- Continue with production of regular Portfolio Holder reports but integrate this better into work programming.

Recommendation 6

Consideration of cross-party pre-meetings being held (ideally) before the meeting and led in a way that helps committee members prepare for scrutiny sessions by reviewing the key lines of enquiry and coordinating their questioning approaches.

Recommendation 7

Provide development support and training for Officers across the Council to build, refresh and enhance their knowledge and understanding of the role, purpose, and powers of scrutiny. This should also include the approach to report writing and presenting and answering questions at committee meetings.

Having an impact

Recommendation 8

We recommend that a process is designed and implemented that tracks recommendations made and impact arising and that this is communicated back to all Elected Members.

An action plan, including a timetable for completing actions, will need to be developed to support the recommendations, including identifying any resources required to deliver the recommendations from CfGS.

Financial implications:

No direct financial implications arise from the report; however, resource implications may follow from the development of the action plan.

Legal implications:

There are no substantive legal issues to be added to this report