

Scrutiny Annual Report

Scrutiny is an integral part of the governance of the council. It has normally been described in terms of four principles of good scrutiny:

1. It provides a “critical friend” challenge to the executive policy and decision makers. That does not mean scrutiny is oppositional. It is about supporting better decision making through a process of public challenges. Scrutiny should sit closely by the executive. It should understand and engage with the executive’s priorities (Centre for Public Scrutiny). It should monitor the achievement or otherwise of the corporate plan objectives.
2. It enables the voice and concerns of the public - about being open and being prepared to have conversations with local people about the services that are important to them – which may come from members in their role as ward representatives.
3. It is carried out by independent minded members who lead and own the scrutiny process – with an understanding of the resources available – and may examine issues that are politically contentious.
4. It leads to improvements in public services – perhaps the most important of the four principles.

How well does MDCC match up to these aspirations?

1. Critical friend challenge to executive policy and decision makers

Each meeting a cabinet member is invited to attend to report on their portfolio and to consider success or failure in achieving their responsibilities and, where appropriate, their contribution to the implementation of the corporate plan. A briefing paper is circulated before the meeting and the cabinet member is subject to often intensive questioning.

Challenge may occur through call-in, particularly relevant where the cabinet/portfolio holder has acted beyond their constitutional responsibility or policy, expressed as beyond the remit of the corporate plan. Two call-ins were; the commitment to the construction of a Premier Inn as part of the multi-storey car park and, secondly, concern that housing construction failed to take sufficient account of the need to make provision for mobility scooters in the aids and adaptations policy. Both were aired but not actioned by the Scrutiny committee.

Each meeting examines performance and risk to monitor progress against the corporate plan and local service targets, as well as an update on the key business risks.

Scrutiny of the draft budget is an important function of the committee. The Chairman of the Scrutiny committee and other members attend Cabinet meetings and comment where appropriate in the “critical friend” capacity. However, it is worth noting that the structure of governance, with most policy proposals being first considered by PDG members which cover

the main business of the council and subsequently largely adopted by Cabinet, means that policy has been well considered as acceptable by members. This tends to limit the scope of scrutiny examination or concern of potential inappropriate executive action, but does provide the opportunity for Scrutiny to pull together and provide update and an overview of council policy and progress, e.g. devolution.

2. It enables the voice and concerns of the public to be examined

The regular public question slot has been well used by parish representatives to challenge mainly planning issues such as the perceived failure to communicate enforcement or deal with burgeoning AD concerns.

Members have established a task group to scope a project for consulting with the public in Tiverton, Crediton and Cullompton to ascertain their views on MDDC.

Scrutiny provides the means to act as examiner of the contribution of external public services to the welfare of the district. External agencies invited to attend have been the two local MPs, the Clinical Commissioning Group on proposed health changes and the Police and Crime Commissioner. Members forward a list of detailed questions and subject the interviewee to substantial interrogation. The interview with Mel Stride brought forth the proposal to introduce a MDDC delegation to the relevant Minister in respect of concerns over the 5 year land supply.

The contribution of the Portas executive to the regeneration and wellbeing of Tiverton town centre was explored in detail.

Scrutiny members are able to bring forward items of public concern for the agenda, e.g. failure to implement a planning condition.

3. Carried out by independent minded members who own the scrutiny process

A task group has been established to examine aspects of partnership with neighbouring authorities as a precursor to potential devolution developments. A task group was established on reviewing the cost of efficiency which made a series of recommendations to Cabinet to generate efficiencies. The relationship between MDDC and town and parish councils is much valued by members who established a task group to evaluate and improve the relationship by enhanced communication, e.g. Parish Matters, now replaced by the more informative Town and Parish Newsletter.

A number of important areas for investigation were requested by Members:-

- Safeguarding of children following a worrying incident in Tiverton
- The plans and progress for the Tiverton Pannier Market and Tiverton town centre with recommendations to Cabinet for action
- Increases to leisure centre charging
- Equalities and hate crime in the light of Brexit
- Car parking charges

- Establishment figures, staff stress and turnover
- Flood prevention
- Management restructuring
- Control of pigeons
- RIPA; whistleblowing

4. Leads to improvement in public services

The Committee drew the attention of the Chief Executive to concerns in respect of the planning service which led to an initial report with 11 recommendations for improvement. A subsequent report in October 2016 outlined the progress made, with recommendations on operational, structural and procedural changes which helped inform the merging of Planning, Regeneration and Economic Development teams. The Committee was also instrumental in introducing the potential of a LGA 'Productivity Expert' resource to help shape the council's planning function.

A report on the overview of S106 process for collecting financial contributions from development via the planning system.

Member development update to encourage greater expertise of Members.

Conclusion

The Committee briefly reviewed whether Scrutiny was as effective as it was intended in the original legislation of 2000. It noted a number of agenda items were updates or for noting, rather than representing the investigative capacity of Scrutiny. It has to be recognised that such opportunities without dedicated officer support are rather limited. However, this is a common problem across many councils but I would commend the level of support from officers for the Scrutiny function. In particular I would extend my thanks for the contribution of Julia Stuckey – and the efforts of the Members of the Committee.

Cllr F J Rosamond
Chairman