

Overview and Scrutiny Management Board

Task and Finish Group – Scrutiny and Media Relations

Tuesday 15 March 2011

PRESENT:

Councillor Ball, in the Chair.
Councillor Lowry, Vice Chair.
Councillors Berrow (Substitute Nicholson) and Ricketts.

Apologies for absence: Councillors Wildy and Nicholson.

Also in attendance: Giles Perritt, Lead Scrutiny Officer (Plymouth City Council), Richard Longford Head of Corporate Communications (Plymouth City Council), Ash Mashhadi, Social Media Entrepreneur, Kate Taylor, former member of youth parliament, Keith Rossiter, Political Reporter (The Herald), Emma Clements, News Editor (BBC Radio Devon).

The meeting started at 10 am and finished at 12.46 pm.

Note: At a future meeting, the committee will consider the accuracy of these draft minutes, so they may be subject to change. Please check the minutes of that meeting to confirm whether these minutes have been amended.

104. **DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

There were no declarations of interest in accordance with the code of conduct.

105. **CHAIR'S URGENT BUSINESS**

There were no items of Chair's urgent business.

106. **EVIDENCE FROM WITNESSES**

The Chair requested that each witness introduced themselves and gave evidence in turn following introductory remarks from the lead scrutiny officer.

The lead scrutiny officer reported on the work that scrutiny undertook and its place within the democratic process. It was reported that there had been good coverage of a number of issues that had been considered within the scrutiny function. However this did not reflect the large number of meetings that took place and the large amount of resource required. It was the purpose of the task and finish group to receive information from the witnesses in order to formulate realistic recommendations which could be implemented to develop the scrutiny function's relationship with the media.

Witnesses were invited to make comments on what communication from the scrutiny function had been successful, what had not been successful and how the scrutiny function could improve its relationship with the media and the general public at large.

The Panel heard from the following witnesses –

- Giles Perritt, Plymouth City Council, Lead Scrutiny Officer;
- Keith Rossiter, The Herald, Political Reporter;
- Emma Clements, BBC Radio Devon, News Editor;
- Ash Mashhadi, www.inplymouth.com, Social Media Entrepreneur;
- Kate Taylor, former member of the UK Youth Parliament;
- Richard Longford, Plymouth City Council, Head of Corporate Communications.

In response to the Chair's request, witnesses made the following comments –

- a. reports presented at scrutiny were often very difficult to read and lacked plain english. The planning department, when providing reports for committee, authored summary documents which allowed relevant information to be highlighted and negated the need to trawl through large documents to determine whether or not the issues would be of interest to the public;
- b. there was more interest in “member led” scrutiny; the issues raised by councillors often resulted in a large amount of public interest when compared to the “statutory” scrutiny work;
- c. there was an appetite in the media, particularly within radio, for councillors to be interviewed live on air. It was remarked that if a councillor was able to be interviewed in the early part of the day the issue had a better chance of being revisited throughout the day's programming and news bulletins;
- d. the BBC would not use edited clips of recorded council meetings as this would break their editorial guidelines;
- e. interviewing councillors before meetings took place would allow for issues to be followed over the course of the week;
- f. there was an appetite for engagement from the social media and online community in Plymouth. It was reported that there were conversations online regarding the council and by not engaging online there was a chance that the council was losing its voice;
- g. social media provided access to activists based in communities across the city who were literate and active within their communities. Social media was an inexpensive way for the council to engage in the community and did not have to be burdensome in terms of the time required to use social media tools;

- h. social media and social networking was the “language of the 21st century”, by using the social media tools the council would be able to engage a large demographic and councillors would be able to build a more personal relationship with their electorate;

It was reported by the Head of Corporate Communications that –

- i. the level of media coverage for scrutiny was high when compared to other councils across the country;
- j. the communications would respond to scrutiny enquires from the media to confirm factual information;
- k. the level of scrutiny coverage within the city was due in large part to the work of councillors.

In response to questions from councillors to all of the witnesses it was reported that–

- l. people involved in social media covered a large demographic in terms of age and it was incorrect to assume that older people have a problem engaging with social media;
- m. although there could often be provocative or abusive exchanges within social media the vast majority of users were satisfying a human urge to communicate. A large amount of conversations were taking place about Plymouth and the role of the city council regardless of whether the council engaged;
- n. if councillors were to engage with social media they would not be unique in having to carefully consider the contributions attributable to them;
- o. early morning radio interviews with councillors were necessary and reflected the way in which audiences listen to the radio. 8am was peak time, if a councillor was interviewed at 6:30am this could be repeated at 7:30am and clips could be played on the news at 7am, 8am and 10am. Audiences generally listened to the radio for around 20 minutes per day and earlier interviews allowed for the material to be used throughout the morning;
- p. the reluctance of councillors to take part in live interviews could be the result of a lack of media training;
- q. councillors were unaware of what a valuable resource they were to the general public and to the media. Media outlets would be more likely to use a quote from a councillor than a large amount of technical information from officers;
- r. there was an appetite for more information on the public sector, particularly in light of the current financial climate.

107. **RECOMMENDATIONS**

The task and finish group thanked the witnesses for their attendance and valuable contributions.

Agreed that –

- (1) media training would be made available to the Chairs and Vice Chairs of scrutiny committees after appointment as part of their development;
- (2) that an information event on social media and social networking would be organised to advise councillors on how to best use online social media tools and to clarify the city council's social media policy;
- (3) executive summaries should be made available to the press using planning reports as best practice;
- (4) scrutiny reports should be written in plain english with guidance made available to report authors. Councillors and those attending scrutiny meetings should be encouraged to flag any difficulties with reports and the author would be informed;
- (5) if scrutiny chairs and vice chairs engage with the media before planned panel meetings, guidance provided through media training should be followed;
- (6) officers should be reminded of their obligation to advise councillors of decisions affecting their wards;
- (7) the current communications protocol regarding scrutiny communications should remain.

108. **EXEMPT BUSINESS**

There were no items of exempt business.