

Report of Independent Adviser to the Support Services OS Panel

Introduction and Background

1. This report forms part of a wider commission to deliver specific training to members of Plymouth City Council's overview and scrutiny bodies and to observe and comment upon certain of their meetings and processes. While I will have based this report in part on individual members' contributions, the report should be seen primarily as a critique of your processes.
2. On 24th November it was planned that I should deliver a short session on scrutiny leadership/chairing and evaluating evidence at task and finish groups. Unfortunately there were insufficient members present for this. However, with the Chair and Councillors Stevens and Lock, together with Paul Chapman and Ross Johnston, we did have an informal discussion on scrutiny issues.
3. I observed the formal panel meeting that followed, looking particularly at meeting dynamics, balance of member/officer contributions, the way in which the statutory overview and scrutiny function is delivered and meeting management.
4. Not by way of disclaimer, but merely to put this report into context, my comments are based on what I observed and understood about the statements made at the meeting and my general understanding of your procedures. I do not have a detailed knowledge of the inner workings of the City Council. I do however have experience of devising relevant processes for, and strategic and operational management of, the overview and scrutiny statutory function in a nearby Unitary Authority.

Key issues arising from informal discussion

5. This was a very constructive discussion and focussed on some core principles relating to the City Council's approach to overview and scrutiny. It is my intention to report on these and other matters raised at training sessions direct to the Overview and Scrutiny Management Board but in essence the key points relate to the following:
 - access to the executive
 - opportunity to engage in pre-decision scrutiny
 - capacity to respond rapidly to local issues unencumbered by procedures and processes – balancing open governance with effective urgent response

- where work programme leadership resides – in part related to the previous point (Chairs or OSMB)
- degree of corporate buy-in to scrutiny and therefore officer leadership
- access to different levels of officers as witnesses

6. Although my remit is to comment upon the panel meetings, and the systems that the meetings represent, I feel it is relevant to draw attention to these concerns and to offer my thoughts about future action.

The meeting

7. When overview and scrutiny was introduced, the accompanying advice about operating this new function called for imaginative ways of engaging with the public, constructive dialogue with the executive and robust community leadership. Sadly in so many cases councils operate their overview and scrutiny function along traditional committee lines with officer reports, occasional presentations, formal debates and reports to note.

8. Inevitably, as a panel focussing mainly on internal services, your business is unlikely to be at the “sexy” end of public interest. Nevertheless, there are within your remit many issues directly of relevance to local people. In this context, you like other panels need to consider opportunities to be more engaging. I noted that the media were not present and looking at the agenda that was not surprising – some might see your meetings as more like the old Personnel Committees rather than as a probing and engaging force. Having said that, what I witnessed was a robust questioning process that was able to extract important information and understanding, on which outcomes would be based.

9. The opportunity was there for panel members to question the Cabinet Member and call him to account for issues of concern to members on a number of items on your agenda. If I had been the HR professional at the meeting, I would have felt that I had been thoroughly questioned and scrutinised and would have expressed some relief that I had prepared as much as Mark obviously had. However, if I had been the Cabinet Member, I would have felt that I had had an easy ride and had not been robustly called to account on these issues. *(I do not imply in these comments any expectation on my part that the Cabinet Member should have been challenged or was in any way vulnerable in his or the report’s arguments. It is merely a reflection following views expressed previously by members about not having the opportunity to challenge the executive.)* The absence of a second Cabinet Member was noted.

10. The point I need to make here is that I believe your focus seems to be very much orientated towards seeking information on behalf of the public, which is a perfectly proper thing to do in your community leadership role. Your role in calling the executive to account is less clear as you operate it and might be seen as a missed opportunity.

11. This does however beg the question in my mind as to what happens to all the information you have gleaned on these important matters. I understand the issues are retained in the minutes but I would suggest that there is a need for something more to happen – be proactive by issuing to staff/public/Cabinet some form of leading statement from the OS function that you have scrutinised the data and have for example called for “x” and “y” and will be monitoring “z” with a view to calling the executive to account over this.

12. I have written a separate and personal paper as a critique of the chair’s role at the meeting – with the chair’s agreement.

13. At a service panel I observed in this cycle, there was some confusion over the reporting of performance information and the remit of that panel relative to your remit to comment on that information. It seemed to me that the earlier panel deferred the matter to you and at your meeting you were advised that the service officers were not there to answer your specific concerns. Allowing for my possible misunderstanding of your process, it seemed that such information has the potential to fall between panels and not be picked up.

14. At the conclusion of the questioning on staff sickness, it seemed that the desire of the meeting for some more positive action through the chair and vice chair was deflected by the suggestion of the Cabinet Member to use the quarterly performance report to feed back. There was no challenge to this suggestion but I wonder if the intentions of the panel would be fully realised by this process. Members were satisfied so one presumes so.

Physical aspects of the meeting

15. In my other reports, I have commented on the room layout and the barrier it offers to effective engagement with speakers and between members.

16. Panels should not feel constrained in how they utilise this or any other room and I do feel there are better, more engaging layouts for the questioning type process.

Managing the Overview and Scrutiny role

17. My overall impression was that the panel demonstrated that it was acting as an effective scrutiny body – asking probing questions of speakers and determining monitoring actions for the future.

18. There is little evidence of task and finish group activity although I note the intention to launch such an exercise in February to review the impact of restructuring various central services. Even on central services, there is much added value for the authority from the more engaging process of task and finish groups. You can be more focussed on the people you call to give evidence and less structured in your approach, while still working to a clear brief/scope.

19. The panel identified an issue re the Lord Mayor's budget and debated whether this could come as task and finish activity or a report – chair to consider who the panel needs to hear from. I felt enthused that this might go down the task and finish route but this was not the case. It could have formed the subject of a quick task and finish group – even if only having one meeting. You could operate in a less rigid structure and probe the issues more deeply than at a normal meeting crowded with other agenda items.

20. As I said at the meeting, I applaud the tracking resolutions process combined with the bi-annual reporting. This closure process is often overlooked by other Councils. In Plymouth's case you have in place what appears to be a robust system for tracking the decisions you have reached, the actions of the member management board and the feedback from the Cabinet as appropriate. It closes the loop on each piece of OS activity, even if only on an action to inform or comment.

Conclusions

21. I was encouraged by the robust scrutiny by members of the sickness absence paper but as I say above, the panel needs to be clear as to who it is focussing its scrutiny on. I believe you are receiving excellent support from your officers and I could not fail to be impressed in particular with Mark and his robust engagement with you on some challenging and probing questions – of which presumably he had had no prior notice.

22. I offer this report as an independent and objective view of the meeting and the scrutiny process it is responsible for. I would be happy to develop any of these issues with the panel.

Graham Russell
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