

FLINTSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL

REPORT TO: **DEMOCRATIC SERVICES COMMITTEE**

DATE: **WEDNESDAY, 8 JANUARY 2014**

REPORT BY: **DEMOCRACY & GOVERNANCE MANAGER**

SUBJECT: **ISSUES ARISING FROM OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY
TRAINING**

1.00 **PURPOSE OF REPORT**

1.01 For the Committee to consider issues arising from the Overview & Scrutiny training provided by Julia Wright on the 31 October and 1 November 2013.

2.00 **BACKGROUND**

2.01 As part of the Member development programme for 2013/14 the external trainer, Julia Wright, facilitated training on Overview & Scrutiny. Three options were given for Members to attend on either the afternoon or evening of the 31 October or the morning of the 1 November 2013. Unfortunately only 15 Members attended one of these three sessions. The Member feedback from these sessions was as usual with sessions facilitated by Julia very positive. The details of that feedback appear as part of the report dealing with all Member development events held since the last meeting of the committee later on the agenda.

2.02 Whilst part of the training was to improve listening, questioning and chairmanship skills it also involved obtaining from Members present their views on the current Overview & Scrutiny arrangements and possible areas for improvement. Whilst many positives of the existing arrangements were commented on the purpose of this report is to consider the more significant areas for improvement that were identified.

3.00 **CONSIDERATIONS**

3.01 The first suggestion that the committee is asked to consider is having periodic informal meetings of the Chairs of Overview & Scrutiny Committees. This would provide a mechanism for committee Chairs to informally discuss issues of common interest, to learn from each others experiences and to coordinate forward work programmes of each committee. Historically in the early days of Overview & Scrutiny in Flintshire there was a coordinating body made up of Chairs and Vice Chairs of each of the Overview & Scrutiny Committees. This

later evolved into a formal Co-ordinating Committee and more recently that committee's role has been taken on by the Constitution Committee. The formalities associated with formal committee meetings may however inhibit the mutual sharing of experiences. The only informal meetings that Overview & Scrutiny Chairs (and Vice Chairs) are invited to at present is to meet with members of the Audit Committee two or three times a year to discuss matters of interest common with the committee.

- 3.02 The second significant issue arising from the training was to seek to improve questioning of those who attend before Overview and Scrutiny Committees. Julia Wright advocated more use of the questioning plan which is attached as Appendix 1 to this report. It was felt that this was particularly important where outside bodies were attending before the committee so that they knew beforehand the issues that would be raised and would be able to answer questions on those areas. It was also believed that it would enable the committee to work better as a team and for areas of questioning to be given to individual committee members to pursue.
- 3.03 The third issue the committee is asked to consider is the size of Overview and Scrutiny Committees and the use of substitutes. Having 15 elected Members on each committee (and 5 co-opted Members on Lifelong Learning) is slightly above the average size on Overview and Scrutiny Committees in Wales (14). Between 2001 and 2008 the size of Overview & Scrutiny Committees was 11/12/13 Members which worked well.
- 3.04 Overview and Scrutiny Committees have no restrictions on the use of substitutes and at the sessions it was felt this can lead to a lack of continuity and duplication with substitute members raising issues that have been covered in previous meetings. The use of substitutes is restricted for both the Audit Committee and Planning Committee by provisions in the Constitution. In Audit Committee the committee has to agree that there is a good reason for the substitution at the commencement of the meeting and also that any proposed substitute shall have attended the relevant Audit Committee training. With the Planning Committee, in addition to the substitute member having had relevant training, the substitute has to be one of a maximum of three named by each political group. The committee may wish to consider whether any similar restrictions should be introduced on the use of substitutes at Overview and Scrutiny Committees.
- 3.05 The next significant issue arising from the training course is related to the number of formal committees and whether more use should be made of less formal member groups. The average number of Overview and Scrutiny Committees in Wales is 4.2 whereas currently in Flintshire we have 6. The committee may wish to consider whether work could more effectively be undertaken by small informal groups of members reporting back to fewer formal Overview and Scrutiny

Committees. One advantage of smaller groups is that the membership can be variable according to the number of members interested in the topic being examined. The less formal setting can also lead to less concern as to how comments may be reported. The work of groups is under the control of the formal committee with its work being reported back to the appropriate committee.

3.06 The last significant area identified during the training course was the need for more focus on the topics that should be examined by Overview and Scrutiny. It was recognised that one of the advantages of Overview and Scrutiny is that it is member led and it is for members to choose their topics rather than officers or any external bodies. Whilst some of our Overview & Scrutiny Committees have an annual forward work programme workshop this needs to be kept up-to-date. The forward work programme is normally the last item on each agenda and this is perhaps the most important item on the agenda. Once a topic has been identified for examination it then involves a lot of member and officer time in pursuing it. It is important that any topic selected merits the resources that will then be devoted to it. It is also important that no major topics are overlooked in preparing forward work programmes and that there is capacity to consider any current major issue that arises.

3.07 Members who attended the training may have other issues that they would wish to be raised when considering this report. The committee's views are sought on not only the specific issues raised in this report, but any others arising from the Overview and Scrutiny training.

4.00 RECOMMENDATION

4.01 For the committee to consider issues arising from the Overview and Scrutiny training.

5.00 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

5.01 None as a result of this report.

6.00 ANTI POVERTY IMPACT

6.01 None as a result of this report.

7.00 ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT

7.01 None as a result of this report.

8.00 EQUALITIES IMPACT

8.01 None as a result of this report.

9.00 PERSONNEL IMPLICATIONS

9.01 None as a result of this report.

10.00 CONSULTATION REQUIRED

11.00 CONSULTATION UNDERTAKEN

11.01 None as a result of this report.

12.00 APPENDICES

12.01 Appendix 1 – Questioning Plan

**LOCAL GOVERNMENT (ACCESS TO INFORMATION ACT) 1985
BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS**

None

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