

DEMOCRATIC RENEWAL SCRUTINY PANEL
Thursday, 3rd February, 2011

Present:- Councillor Austen (in the Chair); Councillors Currie, Dodson, Hughes, Parker, Pickering and Sims,

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Cutts, J. Hamilton, Johnston, Littleboy, Mannion and Tweed.

Also in attendance was Joanna Jones (Community Representative) and Councillors Ellis and Turner.

50. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest to report.

51. QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC AND THE PRESS

There were no questions from members of the public or the press.

52. SCRUTINY REVIEW OF THE COUNCIL'S WEBSITE

Consideration was given to a review of the Council's website, with the aid of electronic means, since its refresh just over a year ago.

Whilst indirectly connected to the website, concern was expressed about the ability of some Elected Members' laptops to connect to the network wireless free. It was suggested that all laptops for Elected Members be reconfigured to ensure they could work remotely whilst in the Town Hall and the Eric Manns Building, which in turn may encourage the use of laptops in meetings rather than paper based agendas.

Jon Ashton, Online Services Manager, introduced the Scrutiny Panel to the website and explained the reasons why a "Google" search engine appeared on the home page with random images with markers of information, which in turned filtered search results. A demonstration of the various filters, explanations of the most popular and most searched for subjects, the ability to register for weekly bulletins, local councillor and property postcode searches, e-petitions, forms that could be filled in online and the most popular.

As a result of the demonstration and the practical navigation around the website by the Scrutiny Panel the following issues were raised:-

- Ease of accessing planning permission information – a demonstration was made to how simple this was to locate.
- Number comparisons between hard copy and online forms submitted – this information was to be provided.
- Advertising on the website as a means to income based revenue and its viability – this had been discounted previously and not considered value for money.
- Links on the website to the Council's partners and organisations – the Council did host a number of links to relevant partners and organisations.

- The need for more simplicity in the searches for vacant properties – this would be improved once the new I.T. system for housing was introduced.
- Webservice restrictions and accessibility for Elected Members – this would need to be addressed via a “Change Request” to RBT.
- Contents on “Google” – the Council was not responsible for some borough information provided via “Google Earth”.
- Access to Crime Data – it was suggested that this should be made available via the Area Assemblies.
- Links to supportive sites and the need for these to be U.K. based only.
- Levels of satisfaction and the “comments” facility on every webpage.
- Reference to be made in the complaints section for complaints against Councillors/Parish Councillors.

The Chair thanked Rachel O’Neil and Jon Ashton for their support to this Scrutiny Review and any further comments or concerns with regards to the website should be forwarded on for their attention.

It was pointed out that should any Elected Member require any further support in their navigation around the Council’s website and Intranet they should contact the Head of Scrutiny and Member Support for this to be arranged.

53. FOCUS GROUP - SCRUTINY OF OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY IN ROTHERHAM

The Chair outlined the reasons for the Focus Group, which would feed into the review of overview and scrutiny in Rotherham. The review, with support from Caroline Webb and Sheffield Hallam University, would consider how efficient and effective scrutiny was given the changes being made by the new Coalition Government and the declining resources that were now available.

Scrutiny in Rotherham had been in operation for ten years and it was now opportune to review the process. A number of questions would be asked and the comments made would be fed into the review process.

Question 1 – What do you think the public expects from scrutiny?

Various comments were made and these included:-

- The public did not fully understand what scrutiny was.
- Did expect the scrutiny process to be value for money.
- Expected political leads to have checks and balances against them.
- Little faith in the call-in process and biased opinions given the Labour majority.
- Supported the scrutiny process with co-opted representatives.
- Focused intervention through scrutiny reviews.

Question 2 – Views on the three areas that had been identified as important from the questions circulated to Members – holding Council and its partners to account, need to provide challenging budget proposals and reflection and articulation of public views.

- There is a need to hold decision makers to account through the scrutiny process.
- Need to consider whether it was value for money by entering into long-term contracts with partners.
- The ability of scrutiny to achieve results and effect change.
- Scrutiny's involvement in the changes to public health.
- Scrutiny playing a greater role in policy development.
- Capacity of scrutiny to deal with issues and be consulted in decisions to be made under delegated powers.
- More defined links between Scrutiny Panels and the delegated powers areas.

Question 3 – Views on how effective the monthly or six weekly Scrutiny Panel meetings are.

- The agendas can often be weak in content.
- Meetings are often poorly attended despite adequate notification for a meeting.
- Value of debates provided by co-opted members.
- Scrutiny is now less effective given the Strong Leader and Cabinet operating model adopted.
- Opportunities for co-optees to be involved with how the Council works.
- Need for better structured agendas.
- Confidential items should be avoided where necessary to ensure adequate input.

Question 4 – Three things liked about scrutiny and three things dislike.

- Performance and Scrutiny Overview Committee should have a more strategic role and direct groups to carry out various functions, rather than having designated Scrutiny Panels.
- Scrutiny should have a greater role in the budget process.
- Need for Panel meetings to be more strategic.
- Need for better agenda planning.
- Need for more public co-opted members.
- Need for scrutiny input before a decision was taken.

The Chair thanked the Scrutiny Panel for their input and asked that any further comments be made direct to Caroline Webb as soon as possible so they could be incorporated into the review.