

Overview and Scrutiny – Analysis of responses to Member Survey

Respondents

The survey was open to Councillors from 18 November 2019 – 9 December 2019. All Members were notified by an initial email and a subsequent reminder, alongside articles in the weekly Members' Update message.

Responses were received from 15 councillors from across the political spectrum, each of whom have attended at least one panel meeting since the start of the 2019-20 municipal year. The majority of respondents have attended between 1-3 panel meetings.

Respondents have attended Panel meetings in the following capacities: Chairman, Vice Chairman, Panel Member, Lead Member, call-in signatory and non-Panel member therefore providing a wide variety of viewpoints.

Member training

The training held in August 2019 was attended by 12 of the respondents.

The training, based on best practice in other councils, was seen as a good introduction, particularly for newly-elected councillors. Key learning points were the importance of cross-party scrutiny and collaborative working, including the option to appoint Opposition Members to Chairman/Vice Chairman positions, and the legal parameters of the Panel's remit.

Respondents made suggestions for additional training throughout the survey; these have been referred to in suggestions for improvement.

Panel meetings

Members identified numerous positives relating to Panel meetings under the new structure, brought in from the start of the 2019/20 municipal year.

The opportunity to present issues of concern and scrutinise evidence in public was greatly valued, along with the opportunity to identify issues and develop solutions, in partnership with Lead Members where appropriate. The ability for the panels to set their own work programme was a key benefit. Meetings were effective when the Chairman had a firm grasp of what they and the panel wanted to achieve.

Meetings, including special meetings, had provided time to enable in-depth scrutiny of specific issues. Reports had been made available in a timely manner with minutes acting as an audit trail. Lead Members had attended when appropriate. Meetings had provided the opportunity to engage with external agencies and partners, to get to know other councillors, to meet more officers, and to learn more about the work of the council.

The ability for panels to call officers to attend meetings was seen as very useful, to ensure Members made informed decisions. Officers were described as 'open', and were complimented on their professionalism and the depth of briefings provided.

Suggested improvements to make Panel meetings more effective

	Suggested improvement	Comments	Responsible party/parties
1.	Additional meetings to allow for more debate Ability of Panels to consider wide remits (particularly Adults, Children and Health)	Panels are able to agree additional meetings when discussing the 'Work Programme' item that is included in every Panel agenda Panels to consider additional meetings to ensure all issues can be addressed	Panel Members Panel Members (Full Council can amend terms of reference if it so wishes)
2.	Detailed information and briefings for Members before meetings Chairman to review the items prior to the meeting and highlight key questions to be asked/ key issues for scrutiny	Covering reports are provided for all items. Members to consider items as soon as the agenda is published and submit requests for further information in a timely manner	Panel Members /Chairman (officers to respond to requests)
3.	Task and Finish Groups to focus on policy creation rather than simply receiving briefings	Training on effective Task and Finish Groups to be arranged	Head of Governance to arrange training / Group Leaders to ensure Member attendance
4.	Create a facility for residents to be able to ask for matters to be scrutinised by the relevant panels	Residents are already able to do this via the website	-
5.	Removal of political balance	Not possible under current legislation	-
6.	Opposition Member to be appointed as Chairman Chairman to be elected based on skill set	Under the O&S Panel terms of reference in the constitution, the Panel is able to select its Chairman and Vice Chairman	Panel Members
7.	Improved Chairing Skills	Training on O&S chairing skills to be arranged	Head of Governance to arrange training / Group Leaders to ensure attendance of Chairman

8.	Increased panel sizes	Panel sizes were agreed following the 2018 constitution review in light of the reduced number of Councillors from May 2019	Full Council can amend panel memberships if it so wishes
9.	Scrutiny handbook for new Members	Best practice examples to be identified	Scrutiny Officer
10.	Training on local government / council finances	Training on local government / council finances to be arranged	Head of Governance to arrange training / Group Leaders to ensure attendance of Chairman
11.	Clarity on the purpose, objectives, responsibilities and function of panels including resources available. Effective scrutiny rather than just information gathering Focus on the purpose of discussions Setting of clearer objectives More challenging questions to be asked Panels to reconsider their terms of reference to identify wider issues for scrutiny	Training on effective scrutiny skills to be arranged All Panel meeting agenda contain a link to the latest Cabinet Forward Plan. Panels to regularly review this and identify issues for consideration well in advance.	Head of Governance to arrange training / Group Leaders to ensure Member attendance Panel Members; Lead Officers
12.	Clerks to be more proactive in advising on procedure and supporting the Chairman	Further training to be provided for all Panel clerks	Scrutiny Officer, Panel clerks

Call-ins

Respondents had attended Panel meetings considering call-ins in the following capacities: Chairman, Vice Chairman, Panel Member, Call-in signatory and non-Panel member.

The opportunity to present issues of concern and scrutinise evidence in public was highlighted again as being good for transparency. Officers could be questioned to enable Panel Members to fully understand the reasoning behind decisions. Call-in debates allowed for a 'deep dive' into a particular policy area that could then draw out other elements, for example relating to financing of projects or the overall strategic approach.

Suggested improvements to make Call-in procedures at Panel meetings more effective

	Suggested improvement	Comments	Responsible party/parties
1.	Removal of the potential for Panel Members to be whipped to enable debates (and votes) not constrained by party politics	Legal advice is awaited on whether this is possible.	Full Council can amend terms of reference if it so wishes
2.	Councillors who have been whipped to ensure this is declared at the start of the meeting.	This is already a requirement under Part 4A 17 of the constitution.	Panel Members
3.	Increase the number of Members required to initiate a call-in	The current requirements are: 3 Members (1 from relevant O&S Panel) OR 5 Members	Full Council can amend the terms of reference if it so wishes
4.	Members to ensure they are fully informed on the topic before the debate including asking questions/seeking information before the meeting. Chairman should be proactive in monitoring this.	Covering reports detailing options available under the call in process are published in the agenda, along with details of the relevant Cabinet decision. Members to consider details as soon as the agenda is published and submit requests for further information in a timely manner	Panel Members /Chairman (officers to respond to requests)
5.	Members submitting call-ins to ensure their requests are supported by clear evidence	Training on effective scrutiny skills to be arranged	Head of Governance to arrange training / Group Leaders to ensure attendance of Member attendance Members in their capacity as signatories to call-ins
6.	Ensure rules relating to Lead Member speaking are adhered to	Detailed in Part 4A 18 of the constitution	Chairman / Panel Clerk

Task and Finish Groups

Respondents have attended Task and Finish Group meetings in the following capacities: Chairman, Lead Member, Task and Finish Group member, and non-Task and Finish Group member.

15 Councillors responded to the question 'Have the O&S Panels been effective in instigating Task and Finish Reviews?': 13.3% answered 'yes' and 33.3% answered 'no'. The remaining 53.3% did not know, reflecting the small number of Task and Finish Groups that have been established so far.

Members identified positive aspects of Task and Finish Group meetings, including when a clear agenda had been set, and the welcome attendance of experts and external partners where appropriate. Allocating time in already busy meeting schedules was identified as a concern.

However, overall responses demonstrated a lack of Member understanding of the role of Task and Finish Groups, in particular that they should be driven by the Chairman and Panel Members themselves. There was also a lack of clarity on the resources available to Panels. This has resulted in wide-ranging Task and Finish Group scopes that are lacking in focus, and a subsequent lack of momentum.

Suggested improvements to make Task and Finish Groups more effective

	Suggested improvement	Comments	Responsible party/parties
1.	Improved understanding of the role of Chairman and Member of a Task and Finish Group Improved O&S Chairing skills	Training on effective task and finish groups to be arranged	Head of Governance to arrange training / Group Leaders to ensure Member attendance
2.	Clear objectives / work plan	Training on effective task and finish groups to be arranged	Head of Governance to arrange training / Group Leaders to ensure Member attendance Chairman/ Panel Members

3.	Ensuring minutes include action points for individual members of the group	TFG notes should capture context of the debate plus action points with identified responsible parties	Panel clerk / Chairman
4.	Make Task and Finish Group findings enforceable	Task and Finish Group reports are submitted to the full Panel for approval, then to Cabinet for consideration	Task and Finish Group and Panel Members / Cabinet for consideration