

Agenda Item No:	6	
Committee:	Overview & Scrutiny Panel	
Date:	30 July 2018	
Report Title:	Public Engagement in Overview and Scrutiny	

1 Purpose / Summary

Members of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee are keen to achieve wider public engagement with the Scrutiny process. This report sets out the current level of public participation in the scrutiny process in Fenland. Considers the broader principles in relation to public engagement and how levels of participation could be increased.

2 Key issues

- Overview and scrutiny committees were created by the Local Government Act 2000. With the exception of councils with a population under 85,000, the 2000 Act created a requirement for authorities to establish an executive of a leader and cabinet members system of governance, which is the model in operation within Fenland District Council. The Act also required the non-executive members of councils to scrutinise the executive by creating at least one overview and scrutiny committee.
- The Ministry of Housing Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) formerly the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) highlights that “To support local councils adopting good practice, the Department for Communities and Local Government issues statutory guidance, to which councils must have regard when developing their local scrutiny arrangements. This guidance includes an increased focus on external scrutiny as well as public participation.
- The Centre for Public Scrutiny (CfPS) has identified four principles of good scrutiny, in that it:
 - Provides a constructive “critical friend” challenge;
 - Amplifies the voices and concerns of the public;
 - Is led by independent people who take responsibility for their role;
 - Drives improvement in public services.
- Limited public interest is not uncommon for local authority scrutiny. The interest of the public and the media will most likely be stimulated by particular issues and not processes of the council.
- In order to maximise public engagement and participation in the work of Overview and Scrutiny the outcomes and potential impacts need to be clearly articulated, members of the public need to have an understanding about how any issues for consideration may be relevant to them and more directly how they may affect them.

3 Recommendations

- Members are asked to;
- Consider the options regarding public participation in relation to the Overview and Scrutiny Work Programme.

- Note the current levels of public participation in the scrutiny process.

Wards Affected	All
Forward Plan Reference	
Portfolio Holder(s)	Councillor Chris Boden – Chairman of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee.
Report Originator(s)	Anna Goodall, Head of Governance and Legal Services, agoodall@fenland.gov.uk 01354 622357
Contact Officer(s)	Carol Pilson, Corporate Director, cpilson@fenland.gov.uk , 01354 622360 Anna Goodall, Head of Governance and Legal Services, agoodall@fenland.gov.uk 01354 622357
Background Paper(s)	Fenland District Council Constitution

4 Background

- 4.1 Public participation in the Overview and Scrutiny function is diverse and varied. Whilst it is accepted that Officers tend to be the primary source of information to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee via the provision of formal reports and statistics, information is also provided in relation to the outcomes of public consultation on any given matter which helps to inform the resulting recommendations from the Committee. For example consultation submissions are shared with the Overview and scrutiny Committee in relation to the development of the annual Business Plan, members of the Committee received information in relation to the consultation on the proposed Selective Licensing Scheme in Wisbech and the proposed charging approach for the Garden waste Scheme.
- 4.2 Bringing in the perspectives of service users undoubtedly leads to more effective scrutiny, both in developing policy and in monitoring services and this has been evident from the comprehensive discussions which took place with Clarion Housing earlier this year regarding the issues Clarion residents were experiencing regarding heating and hot water issues.
- 4.3 The Overview and Scrutiny Committee is the Committee designated to consider appeals under the Community Right to Bid Policy regarding Assets of Community Value. During the appeal, members of the public are invited to attend in order to share the views in relation to the application, the Overview and Scrutiny Committee are then able to endorse the original Cabinet decision or recommend a reconsideration of the decision by Cabinet at a future meeting.
- 4.4 Members of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee inform the work programme for the committee for the municipal year, whilst the programme includes some standing items for consideration, Members influence the scope and scale of the work programme by considering issues which are aligned to the corporate priorities outlined in the Business Plan but also by putting forward agenda items which are of importance to their local community or of concern to local residents. Members are uniquely placed to successfully achieve this insight due to their Community representation role.
- 4.5 The Overview and scrutiny Committee undertake reviews in relation to specific issues. Previous reviews have included Local Markets, Public Conveniences, Access to Services – health provision, Domestic Violence as well as a review of the Grounds Maintenance provision. These specific projects have involved press releases promoting the topic and encouraging public participation, supporting public meetings at different locations to maximise public engagement and attendance, questionnaires, feedback from specific user groups etc. Engagement with specific issues has historically generated greater levels of public interest than in the general Scrutiny process, which is not an uncommon picture across Scrutiny Committees nationally.
- 4.6 Furthermore the Overview and scrutiny Committee produce an annual report the objectives of which are to demonstrate the outcomes achieved by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee therefore raising the profile of the committee and the importance of the role they fulfil. Raising the profile and prominence of scrutiny will encourage greater future levels of public participation and engagement.

5 Future considerations

- 5.1 The Overview and Scrutiny are not complacent regarding the levels of public participation and whilst currently few topics for the work programme come directly from members of the public, residents currently have an indirect influence via their democratically elected member. The Overview and Scrutiny Committee are however ambitious regarding future levels of public engagement and in particular members wish to facilitate greater levels of public participation in the formulation of the work programme, with members of the public having a greater direct influence over future topics.

- 5.2 Public participation and stakeholder engagement is a key way to achieve independence from the Executive. As such there is an opportunity for a wider public appeal for scrutiny topics via any of the Council access points including the Contact Centre, One Stop Shops and Community Hubs as well as via the digital front door with scrutiny topics being encouraged via the corporate website. This approach could be further promoted via liaison with the parish and town councils.
- 5.3 The wider publication of public involvement has had some success in other areas but the biggest shift in public engagement continues to be in relation to specific issues, where local residents understand the implications for them personally.
- 5.4 Members will require a mechanism for considering work programme topics with feedback to any respondents informing them of topics being included and those which were not successful. The Overview and Scrutiny Committee have utilised a scoring mechanism previously to ensure topics were aligned to matters of strategic importance and the corporate priorities. This prevented specific localised issues from being a focus, which may result in members of the public not affected becoming increasingly disenfranchised from the process. There is also a requirement for clear guidance that reviews in relation to specific planning and or licensing applications will not be considered nor will topics which are considered vexatious or discriminatory. The Committee may however wish to streamline the scoring mechanism and agree a ratio of public topics versus member/officer lead work programme items to ensure the work programme is a balance of public and corporate considerations.
- 5.5 It is suggested that the Chairman of the Committee in conjunction with the Scrutiny Officer consider Overview and scrutiny topic suggestions in accordance with the agreed mechanism and inform the Committee via the updated work programme accordingly.
- 5.6 It is suggested that any process is reviewed after 6 months to ensure the process is meaningful and effective whilst achieving the desired objective regarding wider public engagement in relation to work programme topics. The key measurement of success will be that scrutiny is striking the right balance between issues of concern to the Council and those raised by the public
- 5.7 Further public participation and engagement will be facilitated via the promotion of outcomes accomplished directly as a result of the Overview and Scrutiny process and the influence public participation has achieved. Whilst outcomes are promoted via the annual report this approach may not be sufficiently timely to outline the outcomes achieved against each meeting and therefore it is suggested that outcomes are promoted on the Council's website and press releases provided where appropriate.
- 5.8 Members recognise that we continue to work in an environment where resources are finite and as such agree that topics put forward for the work programme via the public and other stakeholders may result in postponement of other standing items.

6 Recommendations

- 6.1 Members are asked to consider the following recommendations
- A wider public appeal for scrutiny topics is undertaken via the Council access points including the Contact Centre, One Stop Shops and Community Hubs as well as via the digital front door with scrutiny topics being encouraged via the corporate website
 - A mechanism for considering future work programme topics is devised which encourages participation and is transparent.
 - The Chairman of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee and the associated Officer consider the work programme topic suggestions and inform the committee via an updated work programme accordingly

- Feedback regarding the inclusion or otherwise of work programme topic(s) is provided to the individual or stakeholder
- The process is reviewed after 6 months to ensure the objectives are being realised.
- Publicity of the outcomes and achievements of Overview and Scrutiny Committee are promoted in a timely manner in order to raise the profile and the committee and facilitate wider public engagement