

LGC OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY CONFERENCE 2009

21st October 2009, Hallam Street Conference Centre, London
Run by Local Government Chronicle, Chaired by Paul Wheeler

Attended by Emma Nangle (EN), Scrutiny Officer and
Trevor Lewis (TL), Vice Chairman, Scrutiny Committee

Additional comments by Christopher Kemp (CJK), Chairman, Scrutiny Committee

Approx 120 delegates, split approximately 50-50 between councillors and officers.

Summary of main issues of interest and possible action points, listed by Speaker (not all of which are commented on)

ALISON KELLY – Strategic Advisor, Audit Commission Scrutiny, and CAA

TL summary: Focus on Scrutiny work programmes being strategic, informed by risk, and measuring outcomes. Must have oversight of Comprehensive Area Assessment (CAA) process, and of Use of Resources, based in each case on relevant and reliable data.

EN adds: Research is currently being conducted regarding the role of Audit Committees. It is hoped that guidance on good practice will be available soon as a result.

TL: A question – does SNC Scrutiny have a handle on CAA?

TL: A suggestion – for work programme development, our agenda papers could include the latest risk register summary as presented to Accounts and Audit

EN comment – I too believe that it would be beneficial to link the work programmes to the risk register.

JOHN TIZARD – Centre for Public Service Partnerships, University of Birmingham Scrutiny of Partnerships

TL summary: These can be the LSP, the 3rd Sector, and Businesses. Some are by nature 'hard', well-defined and quantifiable, others less so. But even when accountability is difficult, responsibility must be pinned down. Discussion of 'TOTAL PLACE' concept, giving Worcestershire as an example, where total public expenditure within the County is £4 billion, but of that Worcs County Council is only £1 billion. The biggest spender is Dept of Work and Pensions, which is not strictly accountable to local authorities. Nevertheless, the DWP should be urged to co-operate locally, especially as concerns its public face of Job Centre Plus.

Ensure accountability of the LSP. LSPs are increasingly commissioners of services performed by others, and to spend too much effort reviewing the final outcome may miss the point that the commissioning / procuring process may be substandard. (TL: here is my own analogy from a completely different sector: When First Great Western took on its rail franchise, the service in both the Bristol area and on Cornish branch lines took a dive. That was mainly because FGW was simply carrying out the service

specified by the franchising authority, with the resources allocated by the franchising authority).

LSPs should build a provision for Scrutiny into their contacts / agreements, so that it happens as a matter of course, and is not used as stick with which to beat either the LSP or its partner / contractor in individual cases. Relations with Health providers are particularly important here.

TL Question: The big beast in Norfolk is the Norfolk County Strategic Partnership Board, of which Dr Kemp is a member. How relevant is it to the workings of SNC Scrutiny, what more do we need to know? Should its papers (agenda, documents, minutes) be circulated to SNC Scrutiny members?

CJK comment: I have no objection and will raise this at the Joint Meeting on 02/11/2009.

TL: A suggestion - SNC Scrutiny's relationship is with the South Norfolk Alliance. All meetings of the Alliance should be attended and observed (and, where necessary reported on) by a councillor or by the Scrutiny Officer.

EN comment: I currently monitor the South Norfolk Alliance minutes in order to identify any areas of interest or importance to Scrutiny.

CJK comment: I have attended a handful of meetings of the Alliance by invitation as Scrutiny Chairman. Any question of regular attendance would have to be handled tactfully as the Alliance are very jealous of their autonomy.

TL: Question – 'TOTAL PLACE' is the current buzzword, apparently a logical development of the CAA process. Apparently, there are pilot schemes in operation. What's the background, what are the implications for SNC?

EN comment - Total Place is a new initiative that looks at how a 'whole area' approach to public services can lead to better services at less cost. It seeks to identify and avoid overlap and duplication between organisations. There are currently 13 pilot schemes in operation, each focussing on different areas. Additional information can be found at: <http://www.localleadership.gov.uk/totalplace/>

EN question: One question that arose was "do the public and partners understand Overview and Scrutiny?". I think that it is important that we ask ourselves this when we are scrutinising partners (especially the smaller organisations) and trying to engage the public. Perhaps public involvement in the Scrutiny process would increase if Scrutiny was better understood – the question is: How do we achieve this?

JOHN CADE – Director of Scrutiny, Birmingham City Council Community Call for Action

TL Summary: 50% of local authorities had yet to have one, mainly because it is in essence a backstop when the usual channels haven't worked. Also, people are not alert to its scope for addressing really broad problems (often place-related) beyond the scope of a single service in a Council, or indeed beyond the scope of a single council.

Scrutiny is the body to react to such calls. (A later presentation from Sunita Sharma evidenced Scrutiny involvement in a disagreement in Hounslow between the Primary Care Trust and a medical practice over the right place for the medical practice to be relocated – not an unknown problem in Norfolk).

EN comment: CCfA was deemed as a last resort – Councillors should have exhausted all other channels in an attempt to resolve the issue before raising it with Scrutiny. It is not always appropriate/necessary to consider the issue at a Committee meeting, but can be dealt with satisfactorily by officers – the majority of CCfA's received by Enfield were resolved outside of Committee.

MIKE AHUJA, Head of Corporate Scrutiny, London Borough of Enfield, and DAVE OSBORN, Metropolitan Police
Crime & Disorder Reduction Partnerships (CDRP) – Successful Enfield Experience

TL Summary: In Enfield, the police and the Council have built up a very close working partnership, and Enfield Scrutiny Councillors have led initiatives that arose from CDRP issues.

EN adds: It is not just crime that is important, but “Grime and Cleansing” and “Place and Fabric”. Clean streets is something that the Council can actually deliver.

TL Observation: Is SNC Scrutiny close enough to crime and disorder issues? The Enfield presentation picked up on the need for an oversight of the issues arising from SNAPs, and considering action where there is a pattern. This struck a chord with me, as I had a few days earlier attended the latest Alliance meeting, at which the police presented a summary of local policing issues, regrettably a ‘restricted’ round-the-table document. (Why?). I think I can however safely report that it included an analysis of crime / disorder issues arising at our SNAP meetings. I noted for instance that Speeding was an issue at nearly every SNAP. Why does it take the police to analyse this? SNC officers should be compiling this type of data and presenting it to Scrutiny. Speeding is a case in point, since I believe that there is a strong disconnect between police policy and public perceptions – it’s an issue I would like SNC Scrutiny to address.

EN suggestion: I think that it would be extremely helpful to receive a report after each round of SNAP meetings (one round usually takes a month to complete) to inform members of the reoccurring themes/strategic issues throughout the five neighbourhoods. It will also be important to learn of the actions that are being taken to address these concerns and issues as this is what Scrutiny will be most interested in.

CJK comment: Is not the revival of the CDRP coming before Scrutiny Committee shortly?

ROSIE WINTERTON MP, Minister for Local Government

TL Summary: A new Bill strengthens the Scrutiny Process, and current consultation may extend it even further. Scrutiny must rise to the challenge. At regional level, Regional Leader Boards will give oversight of (Regional Development Authorities - GO East in our area.

EN Adds: Emphasis was placed on Scrutiny holding to account the spending of public money, especially in light of the recession.

Comments from the floor included frustration at the lack of funding for the Scrutiny process and of the inability in some places of getting Scrutiny recommendations acted on. Winterton's view was the obvious one that it was for Scrutiny to recommend and for Cabinet to decide – you cannot have Scrutiny as an executive body.

CJK question: Was any explanation given why the Government have dropped the idea of entrenching the post of Scrutiny Officer on a similar basis to the Monitoring Officer and the s.151 Officer?

OTHER MATTERS ARISING

Bevis Ingram, Assistant County Treasurer, Hampshire County Council, highlighted the usefulness of benchmarking against peer councils / areas when assessing issues.

EN Suggestion: Hampshire County Council have "finance briefings" with members to discuss the budget and service performance management. It may be worth considering having a briefing with members each year to discuss the budget and its implications ahead of the consideration at the formal Committee meetings.

TL suggestion: Picking up on an aside made by a speaker, I took advantage of a Q&A session to take a straw poll of delegates on the appointment of external independent members to Scrutiny Committees and Sub-Committees. About 10% had independent external membership on the main Scrutiny Committee, and 20% had such membership on at least one Sub-Committee. At SNC, we have strong independent involvement in Standards, and one independent (Alan Squirrel) on Accounts and Audit. Should we extend this to main Scrutiny and/or OSCs? It might help address the question of majority party control of the Scrutiny process.

CJK comment: I am instinctively uncomfortable with having non-councillor voting members of Scrutiny Committee though I see scope for outside co-options onto Task Groups (as we did successfully, eg- with the Towns and Parishes Task Group). My concern is with the dilution of democratic accountability but I would welcome a debate on the matter.