

**COMMITTEE:** SCRUTINY BOARD

**DATE:** 30TH JUNE, 2004

**SUBJECT:** CfPS PARLIAMENTARY SEMINAR

**REPORT BY:** DIRECTOR OF SCRUTINY

**CONTACT OFFICER:** GEOFF. BOCUTT 546073

**IMPLICATIONS:**

**LEGAL** COMMUNITY SAFETY

**EQUALITIES** ENVIRONMENT

**FINANCIAL** CONSULTATIONS

**STAFFING** OTHER

**WARDS AFFECTED: NONE**

---

### **PURPOSE**

1. The purpose of this report is to summarise for the Board the recent Parliamentary scrutiny seminar attended by the Chair and myself.

### **RECOMMENDATION(S)**

2. Scrutiny Board is recommended to note the report and consider the merits of the methods used by Parliamentary select committees and their applicability to local authority scrutiny.

### **BACKGROUND**

3. At the meeting of the Board on 14<sup>th</sup> April it was agreed that the Chair and I would attend the seminar on 28<sup>th</sup> April organised by the Centre for Public Scrutiny and report back to enable the board to decide whether further places should be booked for other scrutiny Members to attend the further round of seminars to be

arranged by CfPS this autumn or whether to try to arrange a visit to parliament through on of the MPs.

## **REPORT**

4. The programme for the day included a talk by David Natzler, the Principal Clerk to the House of Commons followed by a talk by Ian Gibson MP – Chairman of the Science and Technology Committee. David then led a question and answer session. In the afternoon Jane Gordon, committee specialist to the Home Affairs Committee, presented on the role of staff in supporting a select committee. The delegates then had the opportunity to attend a meeting of the Treasury Sub – committee that was considering the merger of Customs and Excise and the Inland Revenue. The seminar concluded with a question and answer session with David Natzler and Dr. Jane Martin, Chief Executive of the Centre for Public Scrutiny.
5. The key points about the select committee process arising from the seminar are summarised below:
  - Preparation
    - This is done at a private meeting of the select committee with its support officer(s). The scope is discussed as are the aim of the topic and the lines of enquiry that Members wish to pursue. The interested parties are identified and the evidence required by the committee is determined. Specialist advisors may be identified and appointed.
  - Taking evidence
    - A background paper on the subject is prepared by the select committee support officer (this is not a public document)
    - Evidence is always taken in writing but
    - Witnesses are not allowed to present the evidence they have submitted in writing.
    - The select committee support officer prepares a brief for each meeting of the committee. The brief consists of prepared questions supported by an explanation of what the question is about, what it is trying to elicit and what further questions might be asked depending on what answer the witness gives. This brief will have been prepared based on a private meeting. The brief is not a public document.
    - Members ask questions in turn (who is going to ask which question is sorted out at a private meeting beforehand) and may ask supplementary questions at the discretion of the Chairperson. The Members are not tied to their script and will rephrase the questions in their own style and may even depart from the prepared question altogether
    - Proceedings of the committees are recorded both on tape and by a stenographer and they are webcast on the Parliament website
    - The record of the meeting is not published.

- Reaching conclusions
    - This is done in private session with the support officers
  - Reporting
    - The evidence and the conclusions form the basis of the committee's report.
    - The report is prepared by the support officers in consultation with the Chairperson
    - The whole committee gets to see and comment on the draft report in private.
    - The report is submitted to parliament as a published document
    - The Government has a limited time to respond
  - Other points
    - Policy overview is not a strength of the system
    - There is no process for evaluating the effectiveness of Parliamentary scrutiny
6. Discussions with delegates from other authorities (Cambridgeshire, Dacorum, Fenland, Gloucestershire, Redditch, Norfolk and Suffolk) indicated that they have encountered similar problems to those we have been tackling and that Luton is by no means laggard in developing and implementing good scrutiny practice.
  7. Points that the Board might usefully consider are around the level of support given by scrutiny officers to the committees and panels and the extent to which the work of the committees around planning and preparation could be done in informal sessions in private.

### **PROPOSAL/OPTION**

8. The Board is asked to consider whether the opportunity to attend future Parliamentary seminars should be extended to other scrutiny Members or whether a visit should be organised for all Members through one of the MPs.
9. The Board is also asked to consider the learning points from the seminar and whether any changes should be made to our arrangements or whether other scrutiny Members should be consulted before considering any changes.

### **LIST OF BACKGROUND PAPERS** **LOCAL GOVERNMENT ACT 1972, SECTION 100D**

10. Notes of the CfPS Parliamentary seminar on 28<sup>th</sup> April 2004