

COMMITTEE: SCRUTINY BOARD

DATE: 26TH OCTOBER 2004

SUBJECT: SCRUTINY BEST PRACTICE

REPORT BY: DIRECTOR OF SCRUTINY

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IMPLICATIONS:

LEGAL	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	COMMUNITY SAFETY	<input type="checkbox"/>
EQUALITIES	<input type="checkbox"/>	ENVIRONMENT	<input type="checkbox"/>
FINANCIAL	<input type="checkbox"/>	CONSULTATIONS	<input type="checkbox"/>
STAFFING	<input type="checkbox"/>	OTHER	<input type="checkbox"/>

WARDS AFFECTED:

PURPOSE

1. The purpose of this report is to inform the Scrutiny Board of key findings derived from visits to Scrutiny Committees at other Local Authorities.

RECOMMENDATION

2. Scrutiny Board is recommended to note the report and decide whether any of the key findings could be adopted at Luton.

REPORT

3. Members and Officers of the Council visited neighbouring authorities of South Bedfordshire District Council, Bedford Borough Council and Mid Bedfordshire District Council. Visits were also made to the London Borough of Camden and Maidstone Borough Council, as these two authorities are nationally regarded as examples of Scrutiny Best Practice by the Centre for Public Scrutiny.
4. The key learning points that have come out from all these visits are listed below.

- The room layout for the meeting was in the shape of a horseshoe, with members of the Committee seated round the horseshoe and a table at the end for witnesses. (South Bedfordshire District Council, Bedford Borough Council, London Borough of Camden and Maidstone Borough Council.)
- Committee meetings are often held outside the Town Hall and in venues that are relevant to the review. (Maidstone Borough Council).
- Individual members are appointed to lead review panels and report back to the Committee on the progress of the review. Therefore the majority of the review work, eg, taking evidence from witnesses, is done outside of the formal Committee. (South Bedfordshire District Council and Mid Beds District Council)
- Presentations and briefings are made to the Committee by Officers, which replaces lengthy reports being attached to agendas. (Maidstone Borough Council and South Bedfordshire District Council) Additionally at Bedford Borough Council witnesses were invited to give a statement of their view and questions are then asked about their statement. No reports are submitted.
- Members of public are given the opportunity to raise questions with the Committee and for a formal response to be made. Although there is a deadline for the submission of questions. (Bedford Borough Council)
- When giving evidence members of public and external organisations are invited to give evidence first, as opposed to waiting until Officers have given evidence. (Bedford Borough Council)
- Members are invited to ask questions and not to comment. Comments can only be made when summing up. (Bedford Borough Council)
- Direct questions are posed to Officers at the meeting for a response to be made there and then instead of the officer having to return to a future meeting of the Committee to provide a response. (Mid Bedfordshire District Council)
- The constitution is used to enforce compliance if an Officer refuses to attend or to provide the report that they have been requested to provide. (Maidstone Borough Council)
- Pre- meetings are set up to discuss any issues before witnesses are invited to join the Committee. Officers / witnesses wait outside until they are called in by the Committee (Maidstone Borough Council)
- Prepared questions – help provided by Scrutiny Officers (Maidstone Borough Council)

- When a topic is completed and has been submitted to the Executive an Officer and Councillor are nominated by the scrutiny committee to see through recommendations (Maidstone Borough Council)
- Decision making delegated to Executive portfolio holders ensures more accountability – scrutiny committees hold portfolio holders to account for decisions they have made (Maidstone Borough Council)
- Stage 3 Reports include only key findings and all evidence is attached in appendices (Maidstone Borough Council and London Borough of Camden)
- Party Discipline (Maidstone Borough Council)
- Good press relations – internal and external. Press officer attends meetings. Scrutiny committees issue press releases (Maidstone Borough Council)
- Executive decisions on scrutiny recommendations are reported back to the Scrutiny Committee by the Executive Members responsible (Maidstone Borough Council)

PROPOSAL/OPTIONS

5. The options for the Board are to consider the key findings from the visits to South Bedfordshire District Council, Mid Bedfordshire District Council, Bedford Borough Council, Maidstone Borough Council and the London Borough of Camden, and to decide if any could be adopted at Luton.

LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

6. Whether there are legal implications arising from consideration of practices elsewhere depends on which, if any, are proposed for adoption by the Council. For example, a proposal to restrict access to Scrutiny Committee pre-meetings needs to be carefully considered in the light of current standing orders giving public access to committee meetings and the suggestion that individual members of the Executive should have delegated powers would clearly involve an amendment to the Council's Constitution. Changes to seating arrangements and meeting venues etc. would be matters for the Board and Scrutiny Committees to decide and would not normally give rise to legal implications. These comments were supplied by the relevant solicitor in Legal Services on 7th October 2004

APPENDIX

None

LIST OF BACKGROUND PAPERS

LOCAL GOVERNMENT ACT 1972, SECTION 100D

Notes taken at visits to other authorities.