

## Centre for Governance and Scrutiny

### OPINION ON PROPOSALS FOR CHANGES TO SCRUTINY AT NORTH NORTHAMPTONSHIRE COUNCIL

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#### Introduction

This paper has been prepared at the request of North Northamptonshire Council officers to provide assurance and advice to councillors on proposed changes to the operation of the Council's scrutiny function.

Absent a detailed review of the Council's current arrangements, CfGS can only provide general advice on these points.

#### Comments

##### In general

- Committee structure  
Reviewing the structure of committees is an important way to enable improvement in scrutiny – but it is not the whole story. Other systems and processes (such as work programming) need to be addressed in order to make changes “stick”. We cover this in more detail below.
- Duplication around performance and finance information  
Clarifying who will lead in reviewing this information regularly is important; we agree that otherwise duplication will be an issue.
- Opposition chairing  
In our experience there is a case for ensuring that opposition parties hold chairing positions, and we have encouraged councils to experiment with this approach. It is important that chairs demonstrate independent of character and a commitment to the function, whatever party they are from. Scrutiny of course should not be a place for purely political opposition, but opposition chairing can demonstrate clearly that the function is independent from the executive.

Research is inconclusive when it comes to the point of whether opposition chairing leads to better scrutiny overall.

- Call-in  
We think that having a single space for call-ins is likely to prove most productive – we have not looked in detail at the Council's call-in arrangements but convening special meetings of Corporate Services to consider call-ins would ensure a degree of control over the system.
- Meeting frequency

If responsible for financial and corporate services issues, the Corporate Services committee might usefully meet monthly. Other committees would probably only require quarterly meetings, but this assumes that the Council will make use of task and finish working as part of their usual operations.

- Committee size

The Council committee responsible for children's services / education scrutiny will need to be larger than the others to account for the presence of the statutory education co-optees.

That aside we would suggest an optimum committee size of between 9 and 12. Larger committees can work, but there is not always the opportunity for all members to contribute. More opportunities can arise through the careful use of task and finish working.

### The committee structure

- Role of scrutiny management board

The establishment of an informal grouping of members, solely to oversee the scrutiny function rather than to conduct any substantive work, has the potential to make the scrutiny work programme more coherent. It is important both that the work of this Board does not become bureaucratically intensive, and that the products of its work are reported to formal committees (as appropriate) in the interests of transparency.

- Health scrutiny

Proposed arrangements for health scrutiny are sensible and will provide a focus for a function which is not currently thought to be working well. Although some crime and disorder functions do engage with the health and care agenda, in a strategic sense this is an awkward fit, and we think it is possible that if C&D issues are located alongside health they will be crowded out. It may be better for these responsibilities to sit elsewhere.

- Place and Environment

These are subject areas that combine well.

- Corporate scrutiny

We agree with the principle of bringing together corporate activity with finance and resources, especially given the creation of a separate scrutiny management board. We think that this will provide the space for discussion of important corporate issues. It will be important to consider exactly how this committee will review financial information, with particular reference to the intersection between its role and the role of the Audit Committee.

We are aware that some members feel strongly that there should be a scrutiny committee focused entirely on the budget. In our view that would be unnecessary (having a standing committee devoted to such matters has not proved necessary in other councils) but we do recognise that, especially at the moment, financial issues are critically important. Financial scrutiny (in-year, and budget-focused) should be a continuing workstream with the Corporate Scrutiny work programme.

A reason \*not\* to establish a separate Finance Scrutiny Committee is that doing so potentially creates barriers between financial scrutiny and scrutiny of "other" matters. As far as possible, an awareness of financial issues should be integral to scrutiny's wider work.