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External review gives thumbs up for O and S task groups but committees need to change

Richmond Council's Overview and Scrutiny (O and S) function has received mixed feedback from a leading scrutiny expert.

Professor Steve Leach, a consultant with considerable experience in local government overview and scrutiny processes, has been carrying out an independent assessment of O and S to establish what is working well and what areas need to be improved.

Professor Leach met with members of the five committees, Cabinet members, Council officers and studied minutes, agendas and reports to investigate whether Scrutiny is operating effectively, contributing to improved service delivery and successfully engaging with external agencies and the public.

Overall, Professor Leach's findings were positive. For example, he particularly praised the work of task groups. He described many of their final reports as impressive and commended their imaginative approach to the recruitment of co-opted members and the enthusiasm and commitment of members.

However, the review highlighted a number of areas that need to be improved. For example, Professor Leach found that Overview and Scrutiny Committees are still operating in a similar fashion to the 'service committees' they replaced seven years ago. They are also linked too closely to the structure of directorates, which can influence their priorities and agendas.

He suggested a series of changes that would help O and S to improve. These recommendations include moving away from the existing five-committee system and focusing each committee meeting on a limited



Professor Steve Leach

number of substantive items to ensure value added. He also suggests that the role of co-opted members and the co-ordinating group should be strengthened.

In his report Professor Leach says:

"Although there are a number of problems to be overcome, the current climate in which overview and scrutiny operates in the London Borough of Richmond upon Thames provides a good basis for tackling these problems and introducing requisite changes."

To see a copy of the report or for more information contact Christian Scade on 020 8891 7158

Alcohol Task Group

Tackling binge drinking

The Alcohol Scrutiny Task Group have made a series of recommendations aimed at countering alcohol-related problems in the borough. The Group investigated matters such as licensed premises, health, education of young people and support for those with long-term alcohol problems.

Chair of the Task Group,
Cllr Liz Jaeger, says:

“The misuse of alcohol continues to be a real problem both in our borough and around the country. Our recommendations aim to help reduce the health harms and anti-social behaviour associated with excess alcohol consumption. If accepted I’m sure these will improve the well-being of all and address a considerable financial burden.”

The Task Group report will be circulated to a wide range of organisations and submitted to the Council’s Cabinet for a formal response in April.

*For further information contact
Christian Scade on 020 8891 7158*

Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services Task Group

This task group has held three meetings, during which it has considered the Joint Area Review report and the draft CAMHS strategy. It has commented on the strategy and is now considering further work on youth engagement and ensuring that those who need CAMHS support are accessing services.

*For more information contact
Christian Scade on 020 8891 7158.*

News in brief

Meals for the Community

The Community Meals Task Group has received a wide range of information over the course of the review. Members have considered a number of options in relation to (a) Meals delivered to individual homes – hot and frozen and (b) Meals served in Day Centres.

Task Group Chair, Cllr Anna Davies, said:

“Every effort should be made to improve the quality and choice of meals available.”

The Task Group will be reporting back to Adult Social Care and Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 29 April. Cabinet will be asked to respond to the groups findings on 12 May.

Moving forward for SEN

The Special Educational Needs Statementing Task Group has been reviewing parental satisfaction, therapy provision and partnership working. Members have liaised with parents of children with statements and interviewed Council officers, special educational needs coordinators, the Primary Care Trust, special schools, the parent partnership worker and SOS!SEN. Members are currently formulating recommendations and will report in April.

Kew Road Bus Lane

There was a major success for Scrutiny in February when the Cabinet Member for Traffic, Transport and Parking cancelled his decision to modify Kew Road on the recommendation of the Environment and Sustainability Overview and Scrutiny Committee. A number of local traders had addressed the Committee to present their concerns about the decision.

For further information contact Christian Scade on 020 8891 7158

Flooding Task Group

Flood risk prompts action

So far, the task group has found that there is insufficient information on surface water flood risk.

The Task Group has interviewed Council Officers and representatives from the Environment Agency and Thames Water as part of its investigations. Members are meeting shortly to consider the borough’s flooding options for the Local Development Framework.

Early successes include obtaining agreement from Thames Water that it will meet regularly with Council Officers and it will share its historical surface water flooding records. All the Task Group’s findings will be reported in April, with recommendations being made to the Council’s Cabinet and other responsible organisations.

*For more information contact
Alastair Round on 020 8891 7813.*

Focus on: Changes in local government scrutiny



Ron Schrieber

There have been a number of changes in Government legislation surrounding local government scrutiny. Ron Schrieber, the new Head of Democratic Services explains more. The Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007 extends Council Scrutiny powers in a number of ways. These include:

Councillor Call for Action

This will enable any Member of the Council to refer to an overview and scrutiny committee a “local government matter” which falls within the committee’s remit. A referral made in this way ensures that the matter is included on the agenda. If the committee decides not to take up the matter, it must explain the reasons why.

Requiring the Attendance of Decision-Makers

Overview and Scrutiny Committees already have the power to require relevant Cabinet Members and Officers to attend meetings to answer questions. Because the Act also enables councils to devolve some powers to Councillors to exercise within their wards, O and S Committees will also be able to require the attendance of any Councillor who has been given such powers.

Information from Partner Authorities

O and S Committees will be able to require relevant partner authorities (e.g. primary care trust, Transport for London etc.) to provide information.

Reports, Recommendations and Responses

The Act places a duty on the Council and its Executive (Cabinet) to respond to the Committee’s reports and recommendations. The Act also places a duty on certain partner authorities to have regard to a report or recommendations.

In summary the legislation encourages (and in some cases requires) a new emphasis on the scrutiny of partnership working and the operation of scrutiny at a local level.

For more information contact Ron Schrieber on 020 8831 6274.



Feedback questionnaire

To help us make sure this newsletter is useful and informative, please help by filling out the below questions.

Did you find this newsletter useful in understanding the role of Overview and Scrutiny? If not, why?

Is there anything about this newsletter that you would like to change?

Which article did you find most interesting?

Contact information

Email address: _____

Name: _____

Address: _____

Postcode: _____

Please tick this box if you do not wish to receive information from Richmond Council regarding Overview and Scrutiny.

Thank you for filling in this questionnaire

Committee Calendar

All committee meetings start at 7 pm at York House, Twickenham.

For more information about meetings go to:
www.richmond.gov.uk/calendar_of_meetings

New Scrutiny Team

Thayyiba Shaah joined Richmond Council in December as the Principal Democratic Services Manager. Thayyiba manages the Scrutiny Team, which currently involves overseeing five Overview and Scrutiny Committees.

The team is currently made up of scrutiny officers who provide policy advice and research support to committees / task groups and committee staff who primarily advise Members on procedural matters and facilitate meetings.

Thayyiba said:
"I am very pleased to be working at Richmond and look forward to the new challenges

ahead. In the future I would like to see scrutiny officers and committee staff working in a more integrated manner, and hopefully the findings from Professor Leach's review on the scrutiny arrangements in the borough will give a positive steer in this direction."

At present there are two vacancies in the team. It is hoped that a full complement of staff will be achieved by the beginning of the new municipal year.

For further information please contact Thayyiba Shaah on 020 8891 7191

Get involved in Scrutiny

Scrutiny's aim is to give people living and working in Richmond upon Thames the opportunity to engage with the issues that affect the borough. If you are interested in any of the issues outlined in this newsletter or have any queries please use the contact details below to get in touch with us.

Contacts for Scrutiny

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You can find agendas, minutes of previous task groups and committee meetings and more information on our website:
www.richmond.gov.uk/scrutiny

