

**West of England Joint Scrutiny Committee**

**13<sup>th</sup> February 2009**

**TITLE: Proposals for Dedicated Scrutiny Support to the Committee**

**OFFICER PRESENTING REPORT: Helen Ball, Service Director, Strategy and Performance, Bristol City Council**

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**RECOMMENDATION**

The Committee is requested to discuss the proposals for dedicated scrutiny support for this Committee proposed in the report and agree the recommendation at Paragraph 15.

## **Policy**

In July 2008, each Authority in the West of England sub-region agreed to establish a scrutiny body comprising 3 non-executive members, with responsibility for the overview and scrutiny of the functions and actions of the West of England Partnership.

It was agreed that whilst the scrutiny bodies may meet individually in their own right and as and when necessary, to consider a component authority's position on a particular issue, they would meet in joint session on a regular basis to carry out joint strategic scrutiny of the West of England governance arrangements. The joint meeting would be known as the West of England Joint Scrutiny Committee ('the Committee').

## **Consultation**

Officers representing Bath and North East Somerset Council, Bristol City Council, North Somerset Council, and South Gloucestershire Council have been consulted.

## **Context**

1. The Chair of the Committee has asked for this report to be prepared to inform the debate about allocation of resources for scrutiny support to the Committee. In this report, the current situation regarding support is outlined and proposals put forward for possible solutions.
2. Bristol City Council's Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee (OSM) discussed a progress report on the operation of the Committee on 18<sup>th</sup> December 2008. Key issues were raised regarding support and working arrangements and are summarised below:
  - The Committee is new and members are getting to grips with a huge agenda. The agenda has been set and prioritised by the West of England Partnership and is geared towards 'pre-executive scrutiny' rather than policy development or addressing issues of public concern- the other key areas of a scrutiny function.
  - Some members have expressed concerns about the methods used; they would prefer separate committees or sub-committees/ working groups to examine particular issues;

- Neither the Committee nor the West of England Executive Committees set up recently have discrete officer support arrangements in place. WEP officers are providing the main technical support to the Committee at present, but there is no consistent independent scrutiny support on an agreed basis, apart from providing a minimal service to the Chair and Vice-Chair supporting agenda briefings, etc.
- There is some duplication of work between the Committee and the City Council's Sustainable Development and Transport Commission, but this does enable a Bristol view to be taken of issues being put forward at the Committee meetings.
- The Chair's view is that the Committee is operating quite well in spite of the array, complexity and technical nature of the issues that it was required to consider. However, the lack of dedicated democratic services and scrutiny personnel and the need to work with 4 different sets of staff from the 4 unitary authorities, made the role of Chair quite difficult;
- The Chief Executive of WEP pointed out that it was difficult to achieve a balanced work programme for the Committee because of government imposed deadlines for responses and submissions, particularly on the waste and transport agendas. Responding to these had to take priority over other things. Whilst there was and would be an opportunity for the Committee to be selective and plan its own programme of scrutiny, it would inevitably be faced with having to scrutinise projects and interact as they were being developed from time to time and particularly at the moment regarding waste and transport initiatives.

### **Proposal for WEP Officer Support**

3. Following the Bristol OSM discussion, the WEP Chief Executive has outlined his initial proposals for officer support to the various WEP Executive Committees and officer meetings. This will also offer much needed support to the Joint Scrutiny Committee regarding consistency of logistics such as liaising on report production, covering arrangements and minutes of meetings, communications, financial and legal support.
4. However, scrutiny support in terms of a dedicated scrutiny officer role per se is not a priority for WEP and the Chair is concerned that this will compromise the quality of work the Committee is able to do.

## Aspirations for the Committee

5. The Committee is carrying out mainly pre-decision scrutiny at present. The Chair has suggested enhancements to this role to include:

**Examination of the performance of WEP.** An early example of this was scrutiny of the JLTP draft progress review in October.

**Scrutiny of outside bodies and issues** e.g. FGW/First Bus/Wessex Connect, the Homes and Communities Agency; flooding, energy security, the recession, an integrated transport authority. This would involve operating as a generic joint committee rather than focusing on WEP itself.

**Development of policy.** The Committee has already contributed to the development of the Core Waste Strategy DPD draft now out for public consultation and the Joint Waste Strategy OBC; it has also commented on the RFA2, RSS and the MAA.

**Furthering public involvement and engagement.** There is an opportunity for the Committee to be a mechanism for engaging more effectively with the public and other bodies on issues of public interest. The Joint Health Scrutiny Committee has done this very successfully when examining particular PCT proposals and this Committee is well-placed to do similar work if it prioritises its workload and is involved at an early stage in developments.

**Methodological Issues-** rather than relying on the Bristol 'standing committee' format, it is possible that the Committee could set up informal task and finish working groups or similar to do discrete pieces of work. The Committee has made a start on this by bringing in witnesses to discuss the Local Transport Act and its implications for the area.

## Funding Models

6. A solution to improving the quality of the work of the Committee is to provide more scrutiny capacity to support it. 2 funding models used elsewhere in scrutiny are described overleaf.

## **A) Joint Health Scrutiny Committee**

7. The Joint Health Scrutiny Committee (JHSC) currently operates on a recharging basis. A Bristol Scrutiny Officer records the time she spends supporting the Committee and the costs are then recouped along with Democratic Services and other costs from the other authorities.
8. Based on the experience and funding model of the JHSC, the estimated costs per council for scrutiny support to this committee is £6,500 per annum. Bristol City Council is prepared to undertake this work during 2009-10, with other Councils' agreement, and Councils will be recharged at year end. Full records will be kept, and it may be that costs will be less than estimated.

### **Advantages/Disadvantages of Model**

9. This model has operated successfully for the last 5 years. It provides consistency in support, increased officer knowledge and expertise in the subject area and enables the other authorities to release their officers for other tasks, thus giving value for money. Hours are monitored on a regular basis so that the authorities are only charged for the work that is done.
10. The disadvantages are that this model can be expensive if extensive or concurrent reviews are being carried out. Bristol's pay rates for scrutiny officers are also at a higher grade than the other unitaries, so they are paying slightly more than they would for their own officers to do the work.

## **B) Rotation by Time/Task**

11. Another model to provide scrutiny support is to rotate it around the relevant authorities, either on a timed basis, e.g. for 6 months at a time, or by individual meeting; or by task, e.g. a review of a topic would be allocated to each authority in turn.

### **Advantages/Disadvantages of Model**

12. Although this model could appear to be more cost-effective as the costs wouldn't be recognised as a separate recharge on councils' budgets, officers report that in practice it would not work well as the work would have to be absorbed on an ad hoc basis into already heavy workloads.

