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Title:	Evaluation of Policy & Scrutiny
Report of:	Policy & Scrutiny Manager
Cabinet Member Portfolio	Leader of the Council
Wards Involved:	All
Policy Context:	Better City Better Lives
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1. Executive Summary

In 2012, the Westminster Scrutiny Commission instituted a transformation of the Policy & Scrutiny function. This short report outlines some of the results of the changes and outlines some potential areas for further development. At this stage, this report is for information.

2. Key Matters for the Committee's Consideration

This report is primarily for information, but Members may like to consider the following when considering the paper:

- What further steps can be taken to evaluate the changes made to Policy & Scrutiny (i.e. asking non-executive Members of the Council for their view)?
- Are there any further developments which could be made to the function to ensure that Policy & Scrutiny is as effective as it can be?
- In consultation with non-executive Members, could the Policy & Scrutiny function benefit from a further 'whole-reform', or realignment?

3. Background

- 1.1 At the 19th November 2011 meeting of the Westminster Scrutiny Commission, officers were tasked with preparing a report on best practice relating to the statutory overview and scrutiny function of local authorities. At the 20th March 2012 meeting of the Commission, a report was presented entitled '*Enhancing the Effectiveness of Policy and Scrutiny.*' Within the report a series of recommendations were made relating to the organisation of Policy & Scrutiny at Westminster.
- 1.2 At the same meeting, Members of the Commission agreed to move forward with changing the function and, at the Chairman's request, officers prepared a short consultation on the recommendations put forward in the report. The consultation received a number of responses from Councillors, officers, providers, stakeholders and members of the public in Westminster.
- 1.3 A consultation report was published shortly afterwards, which contained a series of suggestions based on consultation responses. The consultation responses on the recommendations were brought into a report presented to the General Purposes Committee on the 10th May and subsequently this was presented for adoption at Westminster's Annual Council Meeting on 16th May 2012. The Council agreed to the propositions presented in the report.
- 1.4 As such committees at Westminster met more frequently in fewer committees (whilst maintaining the overall number of meetings) in order to become:
 - § **more strategic** (for input into the Council's business cycle)
 - § **more focused** (for specific outcomes),
 - § **more visible** (promoting their work)
 - § **more accountable** (calculating the 'return-on-investment').
- 1.5 As part of the rolling evaluation of the P&S changes, a survey was run with the Senior Leadership Team of the council and all external witnesses who appeared before committees in previous financial year. In September 2013 the report outlined the following results:
 - § 85% of senior officers considered that P&S committees had become more strategic as a result of changes.
 - § 77% of senior officers considered that reducing Agenda improved the operation and outcomes of P&S.

- § 77% of senior officers considered that routine sets of recommendations from Members were useful in providing depth and steer.
- § 62% of senior officers agreed that fewer Committees but more frequent meetings had been a positive step.
- § 46% of senior officers agreed that P&S Committees refusing 'update papers' has improved the function.
- § 88% of external, expert witnesses felt that Members of the Committee were receptive to the issues that they raised.
- § 82% of external, expert witnesses found the discussions helpful for their own professional needs and / or organisations.
- § 82% of external, expert witnesses would attend a Committee again to give evidence, should they be invited by Members.
- § 68% of external, expert, external witnesses considered that the recommendations and / or conclusions made by the Committee reflected the balance of evidence provided at the session.
- § 53% of external, expert witnesses thought that they positively influenced the discussions of the Committee.

2. Potential areas for improvement

2.1 Whilst it could be argued that the Policy & Scrutiny reforms has led to a more focused, strategic, public and accountable overview and scrutiny function, there are still areas that the Commission may consider would improve the function:

2.2 **Increasing the strategic role of Policy & Scrutiny**

2.3 Whilst the Committees are increasingly involved in '**pre-scrutiny**' of decisions, such as the Council's *Sustainability Strategy*, *Cycling Strategy* and the *Highways and Transportation Contract* re-let et al., there is scope for further work in this area. In acting in this advisory role, P&S Committee Members have an active input in policy development before a formal recommendation is put to the Cabinet Member.

2.4 Further to this, whilst Committees are involved in **policy review** through the accountability mechanism of Cabinet Member Q&A and ad-hoc Agenda items on current policies of the Council, P&S Committees may wish to look to reviewing more of the Council's current policies (i.e. such as flagship programmes) to examine achievements and outcomes for local residents.

2.5 **Increasing the focus of Policy & Scrutiny**

2.6 Committees have been increasingly successful in focusing on one or two major items per meeting; in order to conduct a more rigorous ‘deep dive’ examination into issues under consideration. Mechanisms such as ‘**urgency meetings**’ have diverted potential larger items into different settings to ensure that no item is missed throughout the municipal year. Other committees may choose to delegate similar items to task groups supported in a more informal, yet more in-depth way.

2.7 **Increasing the visibility of Policy & Scrutiny**

2.8 Committees have ensured that where an item has a great deal of public interest in the Westminster community, there has been a plan to publicise the work undertaken to broaden access to the Committee’s work. Recent coverage on the BBC and in the Evening Standard has ensured that Westminster’s Policy & Scrutiny function remains one of the most visible in London and across the UK. The Commission may wish to further consider whether to hold public meetings when scrutinising external partners and providers in order to enhance the role of the function as a tool of accountability.

2.9 **Increasing the accountability of Policy & Scrutiny**

2.10 Westminster has also been at the forefront of ‘return on investment’ scrutiny; ensuring investigation and recommendations are strategic by aligning with the current financial climate. Recent task group investigations into violence against sex workers and assessing the use of non-traditional drugs have been conducted with the assistance of the Centre for Public Scrutiny and their ‘return on investment’ scrutiny model.

If you have any queries about this Report or wish to inspect any of the Background Papers please contact Mark Ewbank x2636
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BACKGROUND PAPERS