

## Improvement Theme Strengthening the Scrutiny Function

### Context

Cambridgeshire & Peterborough Combined Authority has developed an ambitious and significant governance improvement programme in response to concerns identified within an independent review of governance, concerns raised by its external auditor and by DLUHC. The governance improvement programme also seeks to ensure that the Combined Authority is prepared for future devolution opportunities through the demonstration of robust governance arrangements.

As an integral part of the governance arrangements, improving the Scrutiny function was a key component within the initial phase of the improvement programme, noting the significant role that Overview and Scrutiny can play in holding an authority's decision-makers to account, making it fundamentally important to the successful functioning of local democracy. The Combined Authority therefore concluded that getting Overview & Scrutiny right is therefore key to efficient delivery and the success of the overall Improvement Framework.

The initial workstreams within improvement were focused upon putting in place the necessary building blocks to improve and enable its governance arrangements, this included:

- Development of a clear Corporate Plan that set out the agreed strategic objectives of the Combined Authority
- An agreed purpose and vision for the region
- Plans to develop a state of the region report to identify the key issues within the region

These building blocks were supported through the development of significant improvements within the Combined Authority Governance Framework.

### The Governance Framework

In March 2023 the Board unanimously supported a new Governance Framework designed to significantly enable robust decision-making, partnership working and positive ways of working to drive delivery at pace. The new Governance Framework included

- Amended CPCA Board functions and responsibilities (to drive strategic role and remit)
- New Business Board role and functions to become an advisory and partnership business engagement body and better represent the business voice
- New Thematic Committee structure with new terms of reference aligned to the CPCA Corporate Plan
- New Delegations to Thematic Committees to support implementation and operational decision-making
- Repurposed terms of reference for Leaders Strategy Meeting (informal Board)
- Supporting '2-way' Officer Advisory Groups to drive effective partnership ways of working
- Repurposed Human Resources Committee with Terms of Reference
- New cadence in Meeting Calendar for 23/24

These changes provided opportunity and enablement for the scrutiny function as:

- The clarity on strategic direction through the Corporate Plan with an aligned Medium Term Financial Plan (MTFP) creates the definition and data required to hold the Board to account in delivering its strategic objectives and the required budget
- The Clarity on Mayoral Ambitions creates the basis for holding the Mayor to account on delivering their manifesto
- The detail created around the role of the Mayor, Portfolio Leads and Thematic Committees creates the basis for holding individuals and strategies to account
- New performance dashboards and major project dashboards provide the basis for performance scrutiny and identification of policy gaps
- The strategic focus role of Board and commitment to a 6-12 month Forward Plan will allow O&S to focus on pre-scrutiny of strategic decision-making supported by the clarity around the call-in function

These changes were supported through further work undertaken to strengthen the Overview & Scrutiny function.

## What we did...

The specific work undertaken to improve the scrutiny function at the Combined Authority centred around fully establishing the unique focus required for Combined Authority scrutiny that differed from the approach taken at County, City and District Councils that our Elected Members were more accustomed to. These discussions utilised existing CfGS guidance and help set out the key differences as:

- Combined Authority scrutiny has tended to be more strategic, focusing on the long-term investment issues that are the primary object of Combined Authority work
- The scope of Combined Authority work is, overall, more limited – Local Authority scrutiny involves oversight of a very wide range of service issues
- The ‘sense of place’ is arguably weaker at Combined Authority level, this can impact on a committees’ ability to operate collectively
- The nature of financial / budget scrutiny is different – at the Combined Authority it is less about the finances of the organisation
- Partnership is a bigger focus at Combined Authority level

2 workshops were held with scrutiny membership to discuss and develop core roles for Combined Authority scrutiny that would become the basis for activity by the Overview & Scrutiny Committee, taking on board the specifics of Combined Authority scrutiny. This work resulted in agreements that help set a new approach to Combined Authority scrutiny at Cambridgeshire & Peterborough that included Agreement that Scrutiny Members have a clear opportunity to make a difference through:

**Accountability** – Ensuring decision-making is effective, aligned to strategic objectives and not taken in isolation

**Performance** – review and oversight of performance against strategic targets and key indicators

**Policy** – early involvement in decision-making and detailed review of performance can identify areas for policy development or existing policy gaps

**Cross-Cutting issues of significant concern** - there will be issues which cut across a range of portfolios and across the CA and other organisation’s responsibilities as well as areas of significant regional public concern where scrutiny review is required

There was agreement that scrutiny specific tools would be presented by the Combined Authority to support scrutiny, these included:

- Corporate Performance Dashboard – Identifying performance data and trends in relation to the strategic objectives of the Combined Authority to maintain strategic focus and set out in a scrutiny consumable format
- Major Projects Dashboard – Identifying the strategic/ major projects and programmes in development and delivery that involve Combined Authority funding and setting out status and performance information
- Forward Plan – Commitment to provide an extended forward plan of 6-12 months to better enable scrutiny identification of future decisions for early pre-scrutiny

Agreement that the Overview & Scrutiny Committee adopt a key principle to apply to all of its activity - ***‘to examine all decision-making through the lens of integrated decision-making, to drive out silo approaches and ensure CPCA strategy is not operating in isolation, considers wider impact across corporate plan priority areas, and considers future devolution opportunities and benefits.’***

Finally agreement on structure changes to:

- create an informal planning meeting of Overview & Scrutiny Committee with timetabled dates to review the Forward Plan and performance data in order to identify areas of focus for the formal Committee meeting
- focus on deep dive reviews where evidence requires more detailed scrutiny or where there is a regionally impactful issue
- use of scrutiny rapporteurs to shadow Board lead Members and Thematic Committee Chairs to ensure scrutiny is key part of development process for strategy and policy

## The impact...

Although it is still early days the impact of the new approach to Scrutiny is starting to be seen. The clarity on roles and responsibilities across the governance framework has led to greater focus on the strategic objectives in support of the strategic nature of the Combined Authority, this approach has also seen scrutiny focus on partnership ways of working in delivery and holding the Combined Authority to account in driving strong partnership working.

The informal meeting is being utilised to identify areas of strategic focus in formal Committee meetings and providing early test and challenge of the new tools that have been developed such as the Corporate Performance Dashboard.

The changes have also led to enhancements within officer ways of working, with all strategy development now required to be reported to Scrutiny at early stages to help enable effective pre-scrutiny that can have a genuine impact.

Continual review of the new approach alongside ongoing improvements to strengthen accountability arrangements across the whole of the Combined Authority will drive the scrutiny function to operate even more effectively in support of the overall governance arrangements of the Combined Authority.