

scrutiny frontiers 2020-2021

Experiences from the scrutiny frontline



Foreword

The onset of the Covid-19 pandemic changed the way local authority governance and scrutiny operated in 2020. At the Centre for Governance and Scrutiny we believe that effective scrutiny results in robust governance - and maintaining scrutiny at times of crises is even more vital. Throughout the pandemic, this has been evidenced by scrutiny providing oversight of substantial decisions impacting the lives of residents, by identifying improvements and learning lessons in real-time. Where scrutiny activity continued, it supported decision-making by drawing in broad perspectives and testing assumptions to create focused and meaningful conversations about the services local areas need.

Scrutiny can challenge councils to be innovative and creative, but this depends on a strong organisational commitment to scrutiny. Now that we reflect on the experience of the pandemic it is clear that where scrutiny is seen as part of the collective effort, it has found it much easier to engage and make an impact. Effective scrutiny is built upon an understanding of its purpose, positive working relationships and the key components of transparency and accountability.

This third edition of Scrutiny Frontiers captures some of the scrutiny success stories from the experience of Covid-19 and beyond. We hope this provides a platform upon which to share the value that scrutiny can add to council decision-making and the communities it serves.



Lord Bob Kerslake

Chair, Centre for Governance and Scrutiny



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CfGS would like to thank all councils who contributed to this publication. These submissions were compiled by Charlotte Crowley and Kate Grigg.

Stories from Covid-19

London Borough of Waltham Forest

Councillor Richard Sweden and Rosamund Cox

Scrutiny Chair of the Adult Social Care Scrutiny Commission, and Scrutiny Officer



Evolution

Scrutiny has evolved in Waltham Forest and is now carried out by eight focussed committees reflecting the authority's responsibilities. Chairs meet through the year to oversee work in general and to check against the Cabinet's forward plan to ensure vital issues are covered. There is a collaborative culture with input from relevant portfolio holders and partner organisations plus commissioned services.

Detailed work, previously undertaken by time limited panels, now falls to themed reviews which develop throughout the municipal year. I have overseen both models. An example of time limited panel success followed a poor Ofsted report. The panel took evidence from officers, foster carers and of course young people

themselves. This facilitated precise scrutiny of the progress made against the action plan agreed with Ofsted and members' involvement in the nuts and bolts of recovery. The scrutiny report figured in the subsequent inspection which showed an astonishing leap in standards, in which scrutiny was seen as playing a significant role.

An example of a themed review was one jointly covering Health and Social Care on provider failure. Prompted by the closure of local residential and nursing facilities, plus the sudden failure of an innovative midwifery initiative, questions of due diligence were scrutinised in assessing the sustainability of commissioned services. In addition to commissioners and providers themselves, the CQC gave evidence.



Covid-19

In the early days of the pandemic, decisions were made at pace. It was imperative that councillors had oversight of events. Since the whole Council was involved in the response with a resultant redefinition of roles, it made sense to join up scrutiny into one review. Members focussed the reports, such as the Adult Social Care committee's concerns around mortality rates of learning-disabled people.

It was impractical to scrutinise operational decisions; instead, committees analysed service priorities, pulled out the lessons learnt and reviewed possible improvements.

Where relevant, external witnesses attended, including headteachers on reopening of schools and the collaboration of schools with the Council. Members of the Council's Young Advisors scheme contributed. Some committees took a longer-term approach to recovery – for example, job support required for unemployed residents or how highway infrastructure during the pandemic could inform future transport policy.

Owing to the interaction of services during the pandemic, some members of different committees attended each other's meetings. Alongside the review, normal work, including pre-decision scrutiny continued.

A report with the committees' interim recommendations and findings will go to Cabinet in the spring. Chairs have decided to continue this work into the new municipal year, as the effects of Covid-19 will clearly be ongoing. In 2021/22 the themed review is expected to comprise longer-term consequences.

Hertfordshire

Councillor David Andrews

Chairman of Overview & Scrutiny, Hertfordshire County Council



The Covid Step Back Review was an opportunity to scrutinise Hertfordshire's response to the pandemic. The prospect of trying to unpick one of the most impactful events in modern history provided several challenges, with the most obvious being scale. We based our approach to this scrutiny on a hugely helpful CfGS webinar hosted in May 2020 which advised scrutineers to concentrate on a key service or service to ensure much more focus and stronger recommendations.

My vice chairmen and I agreed to narrow our focus to examine how the county council's services have responded to Covid-19, specifically Adult Care Services and the council's Resources directorate which includes both finance and communications. Our key lines of enquiry for this scrutiny were to identify lessons learned and establish how innovations developed as part of the

council's response to the pandemic can be adapted to improve services.

We conducted the review virtually which enabled our voluntary sector colleagues to participate fully. It also meant we could hear from our Director of Public Health around his other pressing commitments. Being able to hold these meetings virtually throughout the pandemic has ensured that the quality of our scrutiny has not suffered despite the significant changes to our working practices.

Over a one-day scrutiny, five county councillors heard evidence from officers from local authorities, the chair of the Community Reassurance Cell of the Local Resilience Forum and chief executives from community and voluntary sector organisations. The latter had been instrumental in ensuring



services were maintained to our most vulnerable residents. One commented:

“It was an honour to be asked to present evidence to this important review and to contribute to the report the impact that Hertfordshire charities made working together as part of Operation Sustain should not be underestimated.”

Simon Aulton, Chief Executive Officer – Community Action Dacorum.

Councillors recognised that services and staff continued to work in challenging circumstances. They were particularly impressed with the quality of partnership working and identified some notable innovations. Members commended that the approach taken by the authority in its work with the VCSE was based on trust and mutual respect and was instrumental in maintaining vital services to our most vulnerable citizens.

Members were also impressed by the way officers redesigned services and how approaches were modified in real time.

What I noted most during the review were the formidable challenges associated with ensuring the wellbeing of our most vulnerable residents. I was impressed with the efforts, pace and adaptability shown by all our witnesses. Officers of local authorities and the NHS have worked determinedly to safeguard citizens and the enormous effort and achievements of the voluntary sector was impressive to hear.

The Review made five recommendations all of which are being implemented by the authority and its partners.

1. That the authority maintains and builds on existing and new partnerships for agile working and clear evidence of this is shared at Impact of Scrutiny Advisory Committee
2. That Adult Care Services (ACS), Children's Services and Public Health look at creating opportunities for greater joint working with the community and voluntary sector; in addition, ACS, Children's Services and Public Health reviews existing funding allocation processes to engender co-operation rather than competition in the Voluntary, Community & Social Enterprise sector (VCSE)
3. That the authority revisits its resilience planning in light of the pandemic to prepare for future sustained emergencies and clear evidence of this is shared at Impact of Scrutiny Advisory Committee (ISAC)
4. That the authority identifies how the innovative and more agile practices developed during the pandemic can be built into Shaping Our Future and specific service initiatives
5. Hertfordshire County Council (HCC) ensures that the Communication Strategy maintains multiple approaches to reach all citizens so that no one group is left behind or marginalised. Evidence to be presented at Impact of Scrutiny Advisory Committee (ISAC) in six months)

The Executive Member for Adult Care & Health, Richard Roberts, commented:

“I’ve been incredibly pleased with the work of our Adult Care Services throughout the pandemic and welcomed Scrutiny’s in depth look at the overall performance. The review showed that the service has performed admirably under incredibly difficult circumstances, with some fantastic opportunities to improve going forward. The review’s recommendations can only improve our service delivery as we transition out of the pandemic.”

Cheshire West and Chester Councillor Martin Barker

Chairman of Cheshire West and Chester Scrutiny Committee/Pandemic Response and Recovery Scrutiny Committee



Normally, my role is to Chair the Cheshire West and Chester Scrutiny Committee. However, in March 2020 the Council's four substantive scrutiny committees were paused to allow council officers and members to respond to the immediate crisis of COVID-19. Many officers found themselves being redeployed to assist in responding to the emerging pandemic.

However, scrutiny members felt this pause should only be temporary, as the pandemic was the biggest challenge this Council has ever faced. The Council was at the heart of the local response, protecting vulnerable residents, supporting businesses and schools, delivering vital services and most importantly it was incurring large expenditure all of which had not been previously budgeted for.

Given the scale of the challenges, scrutiny members felt it was important that they should hold decision makers to account and that they learn from the public's experiences, particularly as Cabinet planned its recovery from the immediate crisis.

Every part of the Council and the borough had been impacted by the pandemic and at the time of writing this article, the challenges are still very much ongoing.

After the initial three months of lockdown, it was agreed to establish a time limited Scrutiny Committee, the Pandemic Response and Recovery Committee, which would focus on life and limb issues. It was also felt that the Scrutiny Committee should also help to shape the Council's thinking on how it and the wider borough were going to recover from the crisis and seize new opportunities for the future.

Little did I know, when I accepted the role to Chair, the breadth and depth of what would be covered in a relatively short period of time. The Scrutiny Committee met seven times between June and October 2020 and established four Task and Finish Groups. The findings of these Groups, along with all the recommendations made by the Scrutiny Committee (a total of 103) were presented to the final Scrutiny Committee in October 2021, and then to Cabinet.

It was an intensive six months and scrutiny members spent many hours in meetings (68 in total!) listening to astonishing accounts about

how thousands of Council and partner staff, voluntary and community groups, businesses, young people, schoolteachers and local people were grappling with the impacts of the pandemic.

One of the main differences of the work of the Pandemic Response and Recovery Scrutiny Committee was the insight from partners, witnesses and members of the public. Through witness statements, press releases, and members of the public addressing scrutiny members, greater public engagement was achieved. Before every Scrutiny Committee or Task Group press releases were issued and witnesses were invited to address the scrutiny members and tell their stories.

Every meeting started off with evidence gathering sessions, where witnesses addressed the Committee and provided their reflections. Enabling witnesses, the opportunity to address the meeting provided them with a chance to share their experiences and be heard by decisionmakers.

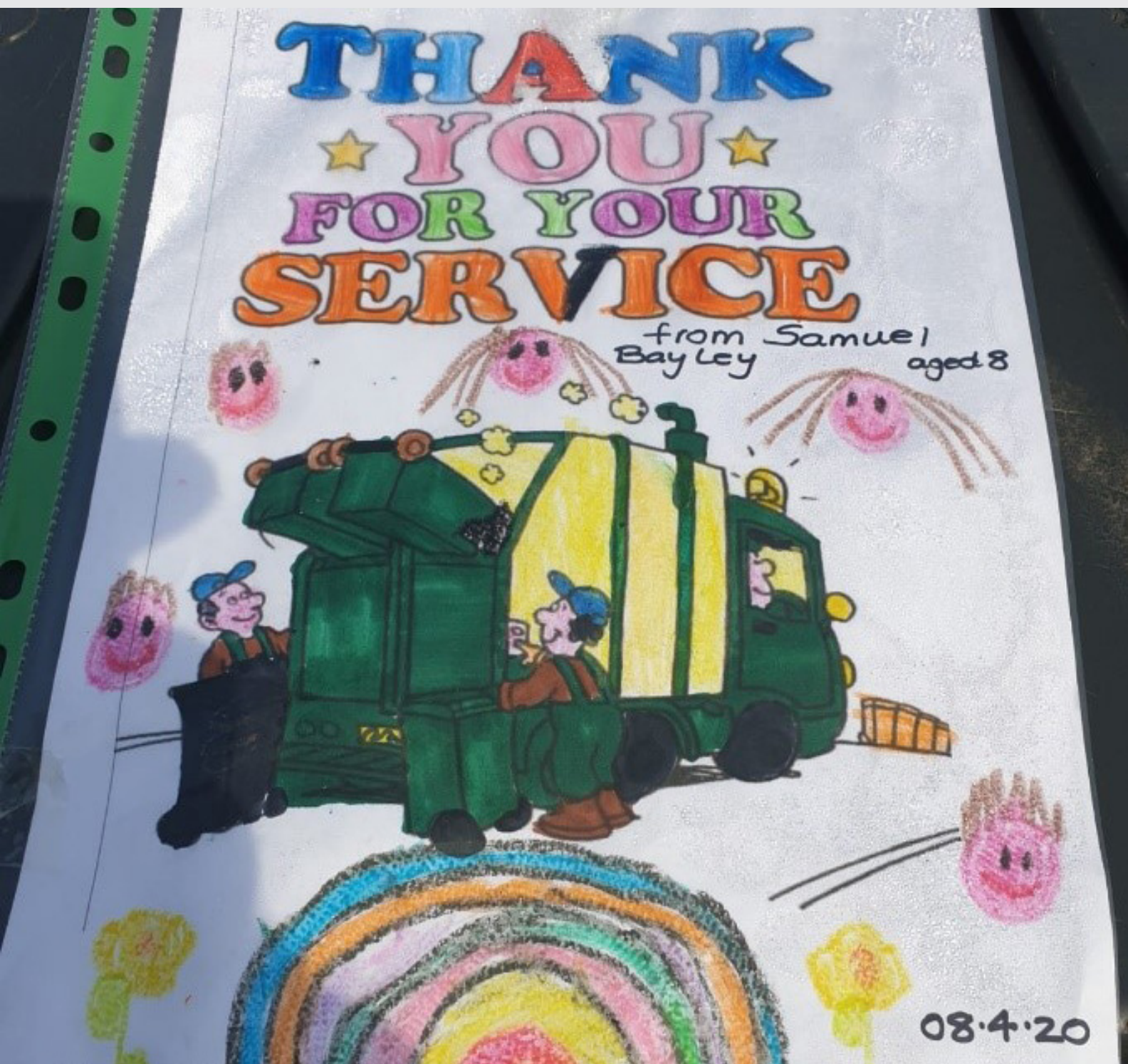
Prior to each meeting, scrutiny members submitted their primary questions and supplementary questions were allowed at the meeting. This approach really allowed the challenges that were being faced by residents, businesses or organisations to come alive and to be fully understood.

Scrutiny members were keen to learn and understand how COVID-19 was impacting on its residents, what had been the biggest challenges, identify any areas where things could have been done differently and also celebrate where things had gone well.

When the Pandemic Response and Recovery Scrutiny Committee developed its recommendations, it was keen to ensure that these were evidence-based and SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, and timely). However, given the fast-changing nature of the pandemic, some of the recommendations were either implemented prior to Cabinet's approval in November 2020 or some had to be adapted to meet the ongoing changes.

I believe that everyone who addressed the Committee found the oversight and challenge constructive and that their attendance enabled them time to reflect on their own performance. Overall, I think participants felt the experience was useful, timely and positive.

William Blake's quote "Hindsight is a wonderful thing" was a fitting way to end the journey of the Pandemic Scrutiny Committee. As Chair, I do hope that the recommendations and challenges brought forward contributed in a positive and constructive way to helping our borough come back stronger and more resilient.



Calderdale

Councillor Roisin Cavanagh

Chair of the Economic Inequalities Working Party & Place Scrutiny Board

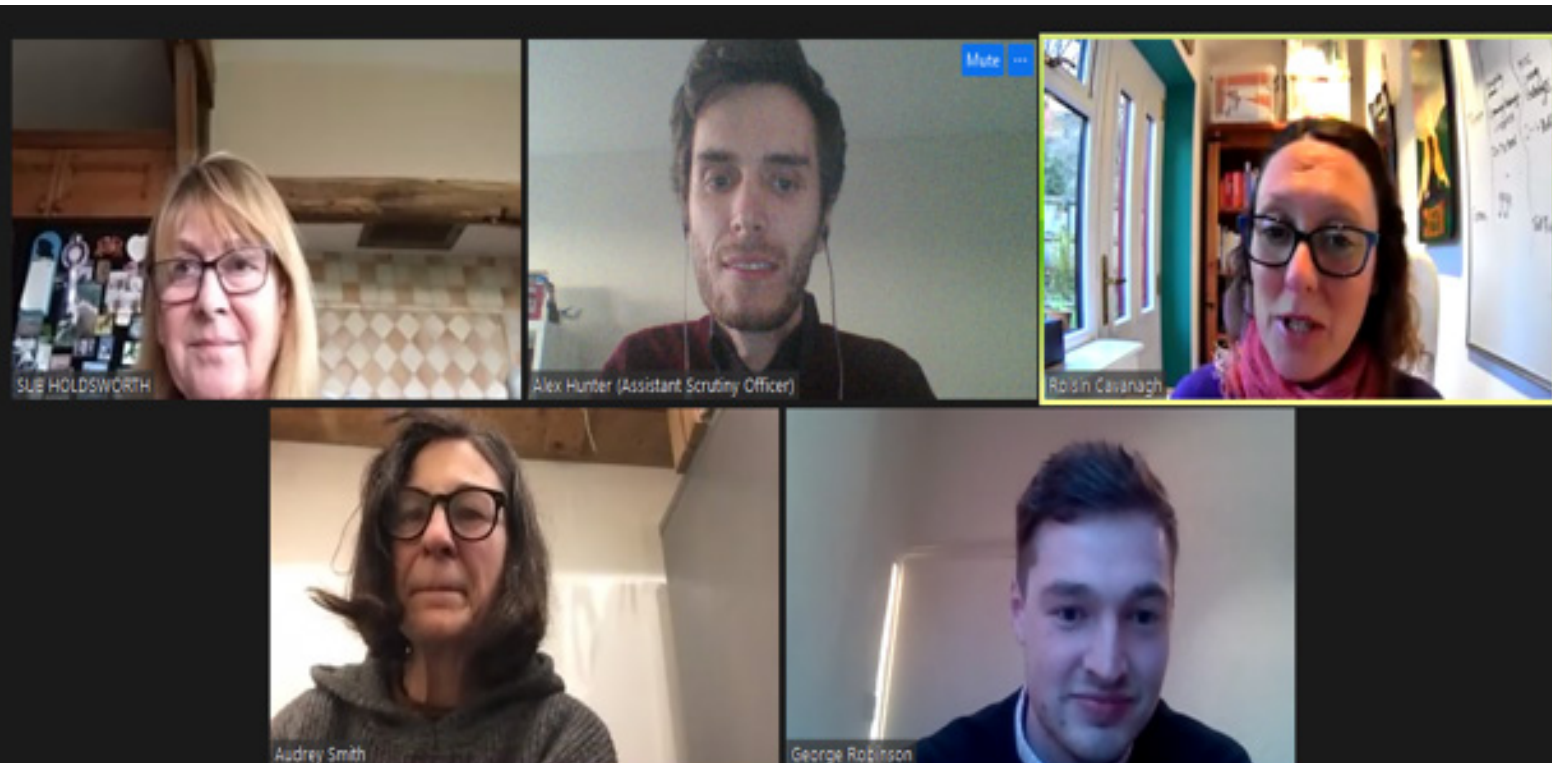


In Calderdale we have increasingly tried to make sure that our scrutiny work is informed by different people and organisations, so recently we have heard from the National Farmers Union, Calderdale's Youth Council and a peer of the realm, amongst many others. But the most important people for us to listen to are the people we serve – Calderdale residents. So, when we saw local and national evidence that the Covid-19 pandemic has impacted in a very unequal way, we decided to listen to what local people had to tell us about their experiences. I chaired a cross-party group of four councillors to discover the Calderdale experience.

Our primary aim was to listen to young people, women, disabled people, people from minority communities and people on low incomes or in insecure employment to understand their lived experience during the pandemic, focusing on the impact on their economic situation. Our aim was to feed into the Council's Recovery Plan by preparing and amplifying the voices of people who might not normally be heard. We felt it important that – as elected representatives – we were the ones who should listen to what people had to tell us.

So we arranged 17 focus groups where we could talk with small groups who had direct experience themselves or were front-line workers providing services to the people we identified.

We supplemented the rich data from the focus groups using SurveyMonkey to ask Calderdale residents 25 questions about how the pandemic impacted their; education, training and employment; overall financial stability; experiences of accessing financial support; as well as anything else they wanted to tell us. We expected to get around 50 responses but were blown away to get over 350 replies. All our work has been done under the current restrictions through Zoom or other electronic means.



Here are a few things people said.

- We are trying to live more frugally, but despite efforts, the fact that I have to shield and have online deliveries has pushed up even basic shopping bills by approximately £30 a week.
- I become anxious when technology goes wrong or I can't understand it.
- I put off using the food banks for ages but eventually just had to ask for help. Calder Community Cares was amazing when I spoke to them - very helpful caring and the food we receive has been good.
- The pandemic has cut our household income in half.
- My boyfriend and I moved back in with his parents as he lost his job, and we could no longer make ends meet.

We concluded:

- Covid-19 has exacerbated existing inequalities and created new challenges for those already struggling and new issues for certain groups such as young people. Intersectionality means some vulnerable groups, particularly BAME and people from a refugee and asylum seeker background are facing a double disadvantage around their financial stability.
- The digital divide has demonstrated that increasing digital literacy and access to equipment and data should be considered as important as providing basic utilities, essential for modern life in 2021.
- Disabled people and families of SEND children have experienced increasing challenges during Covid.

- The ability for women from different backgrounds to work, earn more money and access career progression has been detrimentally impacted through 'lockdown' where they have provided most of the home schooling and caring work.
- It is essential support is provided for parts of the community hardest hit as part of our recovery plan.

What did we learn from our approach:

- **Speaking directly to people in the community, the VCS and public sector staff provides a good picture of the impact of Covid-19 on the community from different perspectives.**
- **People in the community are willing to speak about their experience if they feel it makes a difference, in particular informing the policies and practice of the Council.**
- **Having a project plan, and a good working relationship and ongoing community between scrutiny officers and councillors leads to 'good work.'**

Stories beyond Covid-19...

Mid Devon District Council

Councillor Chris Daw

Chair of the Mid Devon District Council Scrutiny Working Group on customer experience



As elected members we know that residents expect a high-quality service when dealing with their local authority. At the same time, however, there is growing pressure on resources in local government. Balancing the complex nature of councils and the range of departments, with provision of a seamless service on a tight budget can be challenging. Members of our Scrutiny Committee had been made aware by residents of problems and failings in communication when reporting issues to the council. The committee agreed to form a Working Group to look at customer experience to improve systems and response times. Ensuring that the people we represent have a positive experience when contacting the council was a priority and a clear outcome for this review.

Members of the Working Group were clear that to improve the customer experience, the customer journey across all channels and products must be understood. We undertook site visits to follow enquiries from initial point of contact (customer services) to other departments. During a site visit, Members would follow a real customer enquiry from beginning to end and see systems in action. Our report includes case studies from a number of these visits. The Group also engaged other members of the council regarding issues that residents were raising with them, as well as reviewing performance and complaints reports. We also took a comparable look at systems in other local authorities and were given a highly valuable look at the North Devon District Council system by their Customer and Corporate Communications Manager. This review ultimately considered the customer experience with the council, and members therefore regularly drew upon their interactions with their own constituents and feedback they had been given on actual experiences.

From the review, it was clear that the council is committed to ensuring that customer service excellence is an integral part of the planning,

resourcing and delivery of all services. The report focused on three elements of customer experience: technology – which the review revealed is outdated and not meeting the needs of the customers; processes – which we felt could benefit from being reviewed to ensure the customer is always at the heart; and staff – who we found to be delivering an excellent service to customers of the council and that, despite any system pitfalls, used innovation to get round some of the technological issues they are faced with.

Our key finding was that a digital transformation in Mid Devon District Council would streamline processes and ensure customers are fully and effectively served. Customer responsiveness could be improved because the current technology deployed does not enable officers to seamlessly follow up enquiries or provide the information required. Replacing the existing Customer Relationship Management (CRM) system would enable all systems and services to be improved. Customers could then receive a timely response and/or satisfactory resolution in the first instance, which would also save officer time.

The Group also felt that the council may benefit from a fuller understanding of customer satisfaction. As a result, we recommended that a survey is carried out with members of the public regarding their experience as customers of the

council. This survey is now coming to a close and the results will be considered by the Working Group when available.

We were pleased that all recommendations in the report were accepted by the Cabinet, and work is now going into developing a business case for a CRM system. There is real progress being made in ensuring that all customers have a positive experience when contacting the council. We recognise that this is ongoing and have committed to continuing to monitor closely the work and will receive regular updates in Committee meetings.

Stockton On Tees

Councillor Louise Baldock

Vice Chair of Place Select Committee, Stockton Borough Council



Back in 2018 I wrote to officers in the Highways team and asked them to consider implementing some measures to help pedestrians to feel safer walking along a particular back street in my ward, a street on a rat run, with no pavements.

I received a single sentence from council staff which said: “our records show there have been no injury collisions in the last 3 years (December 2015 to November 2017), therefore no action is proposed at the present time.”

Given council budget constraints, this has been the standard (and rather depressing) response to virtually every request for road safety measures in recent years. Rationing has dictated that only accident hotspots can be tackled.

My only chance of success to remedy this would have been to submit a bid to a pot of money held by the council, which had been separated out from the general highways budget, and which was subject to an annual ballot of councillors, prioritising local schemes that were important to residents and councillors but would otherwise not happen. In an average year, 40 schemes might be proposed using this – the Area Transport Strategy – but perhaps only half a dozen might be taken forward. Readers will understand this little piece of road was not my only ward priority and I had been obliged over a number of years to lobby for other schemes with greater impact for residents. So it simply never happened.

In 2019/2020, as Vice Chair of Stockton Council’s Place Select Committee, I played an active role in the scrutiny of this devolved budget and the way in which it was managed through the Area Transport Strategy. We held considerable deliberations and consultations not just with officers and other councillors, but also town and parish councils, residents groups and everyone who had a view about road safety, and a passion for devolution. We put out a survey to a wide range of people and groups, and then invited keen responders to address the review in person where they could go into more detail. Together we devised an improved scheme. In future the same £200k pa would be split into equitable amounts and each ward would be able to spend its share on its own priorities as determined by councillor and resident in partnership.

I was delighted to successfully present the proposals to our Cabinet in January 2020, they gave the new scheme – the Ward Transport Budget – their full support.

And I was even more delighted earlier this year when I raised the same issue about the same little road, and instead of the sorry little sentence about accidents, I received a seven-

page report containing a set of costed alternative measures that my co councillors and I could consider funding out of the new devolved budget. I expect the works to be undertaken any day now.

It is wonderful to be part of a scrutiny exercise where you can deliver real and tangible change. It is especially satisfying that the people who will be directly affected by the change, the people of the borough, were encouraged to be participants in the process.

Monmouthshire

Councillor Paul Pavia

Chair of the Economy and Development Select Committee



Monmouthshire is a rural authority rich in history and heritage with outstanding countryside, bordering rural counties and in close proximity to Bristol, Cardiff and the Midlands. Monmouthshire is the 'gateway to Wales' and after Cardiff, is the most competitive economy in Wales (UK Competitiveness Index 2019). The council is a key partner in the UK's largest City Deal for the Cardiff Capital Region and plays a strategic role in securing benefits for the county and region. We benefit from a small but dedicated scrutiny resource who oversee the workload of our five thematic Select Committees. Our corporate culture is positive and scrutiny activity is apolitical and professionally conducted. We have an established Scrutiny and Executive Protocol which has afforded scrutiny and the executive a clear and shared understanding of the role of

scrutiny. We constantly strive to improve our practice through honest self-evaluation.

A recent review highlighted that Task and Finish Groups were failing to add value because:

- They were significantly resource intensive for both officers and members
- They took too long to complete, leading to missing the boat in terms of impact
- The subjects were of interest to a small number of individuals


The review concluded that the complex and dynamic environment of our modern council did not lend itself to resource intensive Task and Finish Groups. The council needed greater public accountability for performance and focussed pre-decision scrutiny on major policy decisions. We had a clear strategic Corporate Plan and officers needed far greater engagement in the design of services and – crucially – member ownership of major policy.

We reassessed how we could add value to the strategic direction of the council and recognised that our approach needed to be more flexible. We felt retaining ownership of our agenda was critical, however, there was sense in aligning our scrutiny activity with the strategic direction of the council to add value, requiring a fundamental shift in how we operated. We agreed to call additional committee meetings to scrutinise emerging issues in a timely manner and we established workshops for topics requiring a

deeper debate than committee meetings allow. We redefined the parameters of the distinct roles of members and officers: members would set the policy direction; officers would facilitate, enable and deliver the direction set by members.

The key benefits we have experienced are:

- **Subjects are aligned to the corporate direction of the council, and add value**
- **Workshops are scrutiny led, however all elected members can attend, ensuring cross party engagement in, and ownership of, major policies that span administrations**
- **A positive relationship built with the executive, who are able to participate**
- **Thematic workshops enable the setting of clear objectives to ensure outcomes**
- **A more participative debate on options via option appraisals**



‘Modern Day Slavery’ workshops led to the development of a multi-agency protocol and ‘Gypsy and Travellers Needs Assessment’ workshops enabled members to talk directly to the community about their needs, to undertake site visits and to work with representatives and various council departments to identify suitable locations. The largest series of workshops is currently being led by my committee on one of the most fundamental decisions the council will make – the agreement of a new Local Development Plan. Monthly workshops over 2 years focus on economies of the

future, climate change, health infrastructure, transport networks, growth and spatial options, employment, carbon neutral housing and broadband infrastructure, calling in experts to ensure we have a sound evidence base. Sessions are recorded and are well attended. Scrutiny’s forward focus is to improve public participation in decision-making, engaging people on the right topics to ensure ‘value added scrutiny’ and timely outcomes.



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