Practice guide 3
Demonstrating and enhancing impact

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This is one of a series of practice guides produced by the Centre for Public Scrutiny to assist those working in the overview and scrutiny functions of local authorities.

What is this guide about?

This guide is about the importance of being able to demonstrate that scrutiny is effective, and that it has an impact. It sets out why this this is important, and sets out some non-bureaucratic ways to do it, along with ways in which impact can be enhanced. This is based in part of the "return on investment" model for scrutiny developed as part of our health programme, and on which more information is available in our publication "Tipping the scales" (2012, http://ow.ly/wzLGY).

Why is it important to demonstrate the impact of scrutiny?

When we talk about scrutiny having an "impact" we mean that the work of councillors sitting on scrutiny committees should translate into better outcomes for local people. A scrutiny investigation of an issue should lead to services provided to the public improving. If scrutineers are unable to demonstrate either to themselves or others that their work adds value and makes a positive difference to local people, it is more difficult to justify expending resource on it in difficult financial times.

How should scrutiny's impact be demonstrated?

Being able to demonstrate your impact is a multi-stage process.

1. Firstly, you need to develop ways to establish what impact your work has currently;
2. Then, you have to identify ways to maintain or improve that level of impact – being aware of the need to work with others to do so;
3. Finally, you need to implement those improvements.

Establishing what impact your work has currently

- Looking at recommendations you make, and whether they are accepted and implemented. See Guide 1 for more information about this. Our Annual Surveys of overview and scrutiny in local government (2013 edition, http://ow.ly/wzKBf) provide empirical data on how councils have engaged in this in the past.

- Having a broader performance management system for scrutiny. Some councils have a performance scorecard for the scrutiny function. However, this kind of approach should be undertaken with great care – officers and members will need to understand how performance management works, and how to avoid the common pitfalls of recording only process and activity in scorecards, instead of outcome and impact. On balance, although we recognise that some councils find them useful, we wouldn't recommend the establishment of such scorecards.
- Speaking to people inside, and outside, the council about work you've previously carried out. Going back and speaking to council managers, frontline staff and service users about work you've previously undertaken can often give you tangible examples of scrutiny's impact in a way that more formal management updates can't. Importantly, such discussions will help to disaggregate what might have happened anyway from the changes that scrutiny has been instrumental in bringing out – in effect, the things that would not have happened but for scrutiny's involvement.
- Looking at return on investment. The return on investment model can be a powerful one in establishing the "added value" that scrutiny brings to a topic.

Our "Accountability Works For You" framework (which you can find at http://ow.ly/wzL7w) suggests ways in which you can muster the evidence so as to get an effective understanding of how your work translates into impacts on the ground, and what those impacts are. Our research on appreciative scrutiny (http://ow.ly/wzLhS) also provides you with tools you can use to carry out this evaluation.

Identifying ways to enhance impact

Once you have established what impact your work currently has, you can set out to enhance that impact. Common analytical tools, such as SWOT (to analyse strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats) can help to identify ways in which you can make things better – as long as this analysis is based on clear evidence. SOAR (strengths, opportunities, aspirations and results) is a more positive way of looking at the same issues. The "thinking hats" technique developed by Edward de Bono provides you with a means of identifying solutions by looking at problems and issues from different perspectives.

These techniques will help you not only to identify ways to improve the impact of your work, but to assess the realism and practicality of those measures. So, using the "thinking hats" example:

- White hat: information known (based on your earlier research): Scrutiny struggles to demonstrate its impact;
- Red hat: gut feelings, and instincts: Scrutiny isn't taken seriously by the authority;
- Green hat: possibilities, alternatives, new ideas: Tightening up work programming by liaising more closely with the executive and being more self-critical about the way that work is put on the programme;
- Yellow hat: values and benefits, why things might work (optimism): The executive will be happier that they have an opportunity to influence the work programme, it'll be easier to plan and deliver work within tight resources;
- Black hat: what might go wrong (pessimism): There is no guarantee that the executive will engage, or they may take the opportunity to cynically influence what scrutiny looks at to further neuter it. Scrutiny councillors may be unwilling to engage the executive in this way;

An exercise involving the six hats generally begins and ends with a consideration of the blue hat, which provides a way for participants to think about their thinking itself. "Blue hat" thinking is about providing an opportunity to consider the parameters of the discussion and the way in which you will engage in it (individually, or as a group).

Using the "six hats" to go through the various options for enhancing scrutiny's impact may also be a useful tool for involving those other than scrutiny officers and members in the discussion.

Implementing measures to enhance impact

Any measures to change or augment the operation of overview and scrutiny should be led by scrutiny members themselves. It is not the role of the council's leadership or senior officers to unilaterally change scrutiny's methods of operation – although it is their responsibility to ensure that the structures and systems are in place to permit effective scrutiny to happen. In addition, the implementation of changes to scrutiny will require executive (and partner) buy-in. Positive change will usually require decision-makers to change their behaviour and attitudes towards scrutiny. This will be more important than any structural changes which might be agreed on. There needs to be a recognition that there is a collective responsibility to make scrutiny work.

What will good, effective scrutiny look like?

It's not possible to set out a definitive description of what good scrutiny work looks like, but we can give some examples of it. There are some common factors:

- Good scrutiny tackles issues of direct relevance to local people;
- Good scrutiny tackles issues where, through the unique perspective of elected members, it can add the most value;
- Good scrutiny is about talking to a wide range of people, drawing them together and building consensus;
- Good scrutiny is about challenging the accepted ways of doing things and acting as a champion for developing a culture of improvement in the local area.

Examples

These examples are all taken from our "Successful scrutiny" series of publications between 2009 and 2013.

- **Gloucestershire:** a review of flooding which affected the area in 2007 led to significant lessons being learned, along with a completely revised approach to local community engagement being adopted by the Environment Agency nationally;
- **Warrington**: councillors carried out a review of cemetery provision in the borough; local people were distressed at the poor maintenance of the town's cemetery, and the council was planning to spend a significant capital sum to bring into use additional space for burials. Scrutiny's work resulted directly in significant maintenance improvements, and a substantial cash saving for the authority as scrutiny demonstrated that better use and maintenance of existing land would make additional space unnecessary for the time being;

- **Bassetlaw**: a review into plans for service changes at a local hospital resulted in the local NHS trust changing its standard procedures and arrangements for consultations in the future;
- **Boston**: a review looking at the nature and impact of migrants from other countries on the local community contributed to the building of better cross-community relations.

What are the potential pitfalls, and how can they be avoided?

Demonstrating scrutiny's effectiveness on an ongoing basis

Trying to demonstrate the effectiveness of scrutiny can be difficult.

- Fundamentally, a lot of the impact of scrutiny is difficult to quantify. This is for a few reasons:
  - It is difficult to establish when something might have happened anyway, and when it happened because a scrutiny recommendation/investigation made it happen. In a number of instances the fact of a forthcoming scrutiny investigation will lead officers to review their own outcomes, systems and processes, and make changes as a result – this is "scrutiny having an impact" but is often something you'll only realise during informal discussions with the officers in question;
  - Success in scrutiny depends on more than the assiduity and skill of the scrutineers involved. There can be a number of highly motivated scrutiny councillors, supported by some effective officers, carrying out high-quality work – but with a defensive cabinet and partners and obstructive senior officers, impact may be minimal;
  - Scrutiny is about more than a relentless focus on impact. The act of scrutiny is itself of value – shining a light onto policy making and decision-making can itself lead to improvements in the quality of decision-making without you being aware that these have occurred. Deciding what things you do and don't look at involves an element of risk, too – at the beginning of a piece of work its final impact can be difficult to discern. But the more planning you do at the outset, the more confidence you can have that the work you do will make a difference.

For this reason, we don't necessarily recommend the use of performance indicators for scrutiny (we discussed their use in depth in our publication "Global challenge, local solutions" (2009, http://ow.ly/wzKjr, pp33-36). They can focus the mind on the need to gather data for the benefit of the scorecard, rather than for the benefit of improving scrutiny. Besides, putting in place clear, unambiguous indicators to measure outcome is particularly difficult.

We consider that a focus on return on investment provides the best model for demonstrating scrutiny's impact.

Securing agreement in a political environment

The process of enhancing scrutiny's impact (often carried out via a review of the scrutiny process) must be seen as a conversation between the executive and the scrutiny function. Scrutiny members should lead, in defining the function and their expectations of it, but the executive must work to ensure that it is doing all that it can to ensure that effective scrutiny can be carried out. This requires openness on the part of the executive, and a responsibility on all involved to be constructive and candid when considering scrutiny's impact on individual services, and the area as a whole. Political circumstances can make such candid discussions difficult, and as such, political factors need to be recognised and managed. We explain more about the political dimensions around scrutiny in Guide 11.