

REVIEW OF SCRUTINY ARRANGEMENTS IN SUNDERLAND

REPORT OF THE SCRUTINY, MAYORAL AND MEMBER SUPPORT COORDINATOR

**1. Purpose of Report**

- 1.1 The report provides the formal response and findings from the Centre for Governance and Scrutiny to their independent review of scrutiny in Sunderland.

**2. Background**

- 2.1 The review was commissioned to develop a clear and shared understanding on the role, purpose and objectives of the council's scrutiny arrangements.
- 2.2 The Independent Review was conducted by the Centre for Governance and Scrutiny (CFGs), engaging with all political parties and key officers before finalising their report with recommendations. A member led steering group will oversee the process and establish any necessary improvement activity or formal recommendations to strengthen the scrutiny function in Sunderland.

**3. Current Position**

- 3.1 The review was completed using a prescribed CFGS framework for discussion and debate on those issues and areas most important to Sunderland. These were:
- Organisational commitment and clarity of purpose
  - Members leading and fostering good relationships
  - Prioritising work and using evidence well
  - Having an impact.
- 3.2 The review was undertaken by Ed Hammond, Deputy Chief Executive CFGS, and Kate Grigg, Senior Research Officer CFGS, and conducted during the latter part of 2021 and completed in early 2022.
- 3.3 The full CfGS report has been circulated previously and is attached at appendix 1 of this report for Member's reference.

**4. Findings from the Review**

- 4.1 The summary of the report found that scrutiny was performing well overall with some actions required to strengthen certain ways of working. The emphasis was very much on ensuring that scrutiny remained focused on those issues that were important to local people. As well as new approaches to work programming and how that impact is monitored.

***Organisational commitment and clarity of purpose***

- 4.2 The review found a strong commitment to the support of scrutiny from both Cabinet Members and senior officers within the Council. However, there was a realisation that there needed to be a greater clarity on the role and purpose of scrutiny in the organisation.

- 4.3 The review also recognised the importance of Cabinet-Scrutiny relations and recommended the development of a protocol that could set out mutual expectations and responsibilities. As well as potentially providing an opportunity to formalise feedback on scrutiny recommendations to provide an ability to monitor progress on committee outputs.
- 4.4 It was also recommended through the review findings that improving work programming alignment with the City Plan and forward plan will ensure that the work of scrutiny remains relevant to the Council's main priorities and objectives.

***Members leading and fostering good relationships***

- 4.5 There is a collegiate way of working within scrutiny in Sunderland but can often favour detail over strategy and the potential to overlook the bigger picture. Therefore the review highlights the importance of better information sharing possibly through triangulation between Scrutiny Chairs, Cabinet Members and Directors to consider future issues and the part that scrutiny can potentially play.
- 4.6 The report also recommends that further work is undertaken to better support members in developing their skills and improve cross-party working. As well as training and development sessions for all Members to understand what is meant by 'good' scrutiny and the use of technical expertise in more complex reviews or task and finish working.

***Prioritising work and using evidence well***

- 4.7 Work programming is fundamental in ensuring that scrutiny remains focused on strategic issues where it can make the most impact and strengthening the process for developing work programmes. The report recognises that the most important criterion for any scrutiny issue is by looking at the issue what difference it can make to people's lives.
- 4.8 The review also recommended the greater use of briefings and the development of information digests to help in providing information to Members and reducing the number of information items going to Committees. As well as looking at different ways of improving engagement with the public, be that through communications, site visits or social media channels.

***Having an impact***

- 4.9 As in many Councils the impact of scrutiny is often difficult to discern, and this can be in part due to recommendations often not arising from scrutiny's consideration of an issue. To help improve this the review advises that scrutiny looks at how recommendations are made, and how their impact is measured. As well as increasing the use of task and finish groups which can provide more opportunities for Members to develop recommendations in a considered way.

**5. Next Steps**

- 5.1 There are a number of recommendations arising from the CfGS Scrutiny Review and they vary in their complexity, time required and involvement of scrutiny members. It will therefore be important to develop an action plan that can monitor the progress of recommendations from the review. It would be for the Scrutiny Coordinating Committee to develop and monitor the action plan as part of the ongoing development of the scrutiny function in Sunderland.

## **6. Recommendations**

The Scrutiny Committee is recommended to:

- (a) Note and agree the Review of Scrutiny as conducted by the Centre for Governance and Scrutiny on behalf of Sunderland City Council.
- (b) Agree to develop an action plan for recommendations.
- (c) That the Scrutiny Coordinating Committee continues as the steering group for the development of the actions in terms of the scrutiny review.