Information/Discussion Paper

Overview and Scrutiny Committee – 12 January 2015
Scrutiny of projects

This note contains the information to keep Members informed of matters relating to the work of the Committee, but where no decisions from Members are needed

1.   Why has this come to scrutiny?

1.1   Between 16 and 19 September 2014 an LGA peer challenge review was undertaken. Peer challenges are improvement-focussed and tailored to meet individual council's needs. They are designed to complement and add value to a council's own performance and improvement focus.

1.2   The peers used their experience and knowledge of local government to reflect on the information presented to them by people they met, things they saw and material that they read. The team provide feedback as critical friends, not as assessors, consultants or inspectors. They were very positive about the council saying that we have clear ambitions for place and are driven by the needs of the customer and community. They recognised that there is a clear demonstration of community leadership by members and an empowered organisational culture with a dedicated, passionate, focused and motivated workforce.

1.3   They did however make a number of suggestions as to how we could improve our performance and this included the suggestion that Scrutiny reappraise its work programme with particular reference to the opportunity to play a part in scrutinising the progress of critical programmes and projects (the term 'project' as used in this report should be interpreted as including both projects and programmes).

1.4   Overview and Scrutiny reviewed the findings at their 3 November meeting, but concluded that they needed more time to consider the action plan, which had not been available prior to the meeting itself. Members were invited to submit any comments by email, after the meeting. No feedback was received.

1.5   Given that the LGA is scheduled to undertake a follow up review in six months' time, officers used the period between meetings of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee to consider how efficient and effective scrutiny of critical projects could be undertaken in the future.

2.   Summary of the Issue

2.1   In the past the committee has considered project updates at scheduled meetings; dates for which do not always dovetail well with significant milestones for projects. This results in one of the following scenarios; either information may be presented to the committee too late for the committee to have any influence on the decision being taken, or key reports on decisions coming up are not at a stage at which they can be shared outside of the project board. It has also proved difficult for O&S to add value

when it considered projects updates if it has had no previous involvement and has not been in a position to build up a knowledge and understanding of the project (e.g. a business case could be a large and complex document and it would prove difficult scrutinise effectively within a 30 minute slot at a scheduled meeting where other business was being considered).

3.   Summary of evidence/information

3.1   Officers concluded that inviting one or two representatives of the committee to take part in gate reviews within major projects was one option for getting O&S more involved in the project life cycle. This would enable members to undertake timely scrutiny of up to date information as well as causing no unnecessary delay to the progress of a project.

3.2   A gate review is a process for reviewing key project decisions. It's based on the division of projects into stages with each stage separated by a 'gate' through which the project must pass. A gate review is undertaken at the request of the Project Sponsor to assess whether the project is ready to move to the next stage. The gate reviews are independently chaired.

3.3   CBC's gate review is a version of the central government 'gateway' process (which is mandatory for their major projects) adapted for the smaller sized projects CBC typically undertakes. Those involved in the process must commit to preparing for and attending a structured meeting in which key documents (e.g. a contract or a proposal to move to the next stage) are reviewed. At the close of the meeting attendees agree on a red/amber/green rating for the review. 'Green' indicates that the project can proceed, 'amber' that it can proceed subject to specified changes being made and / or risks being addressed, 'red' that it cannot proceed. In the event of an amber or red rating a follow-up meeting may be required.

3.4   By committing time to preparing for and participating in a gate review a representative of O&S could have the potential to make a valuable contribution and provide a fresh, independent view of the project.

3.5   The representative could alert the O&S Committee to any issues or simply provide an update at the next scheduled meeting of the committee. If there was anything that needed a more in depth scrutiny then a scrutiny task group could be set up by O&S either at the scheduled meeting or by convening a Sub-Committee if it was a more urgent matter. O&S could decide that briefings or updates at a regular or agreed interval basis, were sufficient (e.g. O&S could ask to consider the risk register for a particular project).

3.6   Members would continue to be given the option of participating in Cabinet Member working groups where they are performing a different role working in an advisory capacity.

3.7   The project initiation document (PID) would be revised to include an instruction to alert scrutiny to new projects classified as 'large, complex and high risk'. Scrutiny would consider the PID and the project's plans for gate reviews and would take a decision as to how it wished to be involved in that particular project. A representative would be nominated as necessary. The committee would reserve the right to adopt a different approach at any time.

3.8   The Business Development Manager and the projects sponsors that were consulted

were comfortable with the suggested approach, which integrated scrutiny into the existing processes and timescales.

3.9   The lead members of scrutiny (Councillors Harman, C. Hay and Payne) were consulted and in agreement that what was being proposed was sensible and would allow for effective scrutiny of critical projects.

3.10   The Cabinet Member Corporate Services, with accountability for Scrutiny, reviewed the report and consulted with his Cabinet colleagues. He considered that the other actions arising from the LGA peer review in relation to management of projects and prioritisation of the scrutiny work plan should be completed first before deciding how scrutiny should be more involved in projects.

4.   Next Steps .

4.1   Members are asked to give their views at this meeting.

4.2   Scrutiny could consider requesting that Cabinet Members ensure that scrutiny is asked to nominate representatives to attend upcoming gate reviews for existing projects. This will give Members a better understanding of how the gate process works and how they might contribute more to projects in the future. This step could happen in parallel to any review of the project management processes that has been initiated.

Background Papers	LGA Peer review – O&S 3 November 2014
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Accountability	Cabinet Member Corporate Services, Councillor Jon Walklett