

PART A

Report to: Overview and Scrutiny Committee
Date of meeting: 7 March 2012
Report of: Head of Legal and Property Services
Title: Scrutiny Task Groups – Access to meetings and papers

1.0 SUMMARY

1.1 This report follows on from a referral by Constitution Working Party regarding access to meetings and papers in respect of Scrutiny Task Groups.

2.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

2.1 that Overview and Scrutiny Committee consider the officer's report and that any changes to the procedures be recommended to Council for approval.

Contact Officer:

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Report approved by: Carol Chen, Head of Legal and Property Services

3.0 DETAILED PROPOSAL

3.1 Constitution Working Party met on Thursday 23 February 2012 to discuss a number of issues relating to the Constitution.

3.2 One of these issues had related to access to Task Group meetings and the publication of agendas and minutes to the web. The relevant extract from the report is attached as Appendix 1.

3.3 The Constitution Working Party discussed Task Groups and requested that it was referred to Overview and Scrutiny Committee for further discussion. The relevant extract from the minutes of the Constitution Working Party is attached as Appendix 2.

3.4 Officers have contacted other local authorities in order to ascertain if they have Task Groups (also known as Task and Finish Groups) and if so whether they are treated as formal meetings. The responses are attached as Appendix 3 to this report.

- 3.5 Subsequent to the meeting of the Constitution Working Party the Head of Legal and Property met with the chair and vice chair of overview and scrutiny and the issue of task groups was discussed. The proposal stemming from that meeting is that task groups should have sufficient flexibility to allow them to meet as frequently as they need to over a short space of time without the constraint of requiring the requisite 5 clear days notice of each meeting to be published, but still allow the public the ability to attend, unless the task group was genuinely considering an item that would be classified as exempt information.
- 3.6 At the start of the task group it would agree the period over which it wished to meet, which would be published, and as soon as meeting dates were fixed these would be published.
- 3.7 If a task group needed to undertake a visit then this would be treated as an informal meeting.
- 3.8 Minutes of task group meetings would not be published until the task group had concluded its work to give an accurate picture of the entire process..
- 3.9 If members of the public or press were in attendance for a particular meeting it would be the responsibility of the chair to explain the purpose of the task group and its role in either promoting policy development or scrutinising actions (depending on the nature of the task), and where it had got to in that task.
- 3.10 If Overview and Scrutiny wishes to accept this as a way of working for task groups this will be formulated into a protocol.
- 3.11 Overview and Scrutiny Committee is asked to consider this matter and make any recommendations to Council for approval.

4.0 **IMPLICATIONS**

4.1 **Financial**

- 4.1.1 The Head of Strategic Finance comments that any financial implications will be evaluated once firm proposals are being finalised. There is an expectation that any identified expenditures can be contained within the Council's overall budget.

4.2 **Legal Issues** (Monitoring Officer)

- 4.2.1 The Head of Legal and Property Services comments that if task groups are treated as informal meetings then the access to information provisions of the Local Government Act 1972 will not apply, and attendance at task groups will not count towards a members attendance under the Act with regard to the disqualification rules.

4.3 **Potential Risks**

None identified.

Appendices

Appendix 1 – Extract of the report to Constitution Working Party in respect of Scrutiny Task Groups.

Appendix 2 – Extract from the Constitution Working Party minutes – 23 February 2012

Appendix 3 – Responses from local authorities in respect of Task and Finish groups

Background Papers

Constitution Working Party report dated 23 February 2012

Responses from local authorities in respect of Task and Finish groups

File Reference

None