

Extract from Constitution Working Party minutes – 23rd February 2012

Access to meetings and papers in respect of Scrutiny Task Groups

When the current scrutiny arrangements were introduced it was determined that scrutiny task groups should be treated in the same way as formal committees with agenda and minutes being published on the web and the meetings open to the public.

One of the problems which occurred following a meeting of the Hospital Parking Charges Task Group at which the press was present was that an inappropriate quote was published in the paper.

The purpose of task groups was to brainstorm ideas and thoughts on a specific topic with a view to making recommendations to the Overview & Scrutiny Committee. If the press and public were present there was always the risk that a comment made as part of the discussion may be taken out of context and presented as a firm proposal. It was also important to encourage a good flow of ideas at Task Groups to ensure that all aspects of the topic were covered and having the press and public present could stifle such debates.

Officers had consulted other local authorities to see what they did with regard to task groups and most responded that they did not treat them as public meetings. All task Group minutes, along with its recommendations, would be made public once they were reported to the Overview & Scrutiny Committee

A Member said he did not agree with this approach and considered that task group topics were a matter of public interest. He considered that the meetings should be held in public. He added that councillors were public representatives and it was important to demonstrate openness and transparency.

Another Member, however, said she felt that it was important to be able to speak freely at task group meetings and having the press there would stifle debate.

The Chair agreed that there was a need to be more guarded if the press were present. He agreed, however, that task groups did not fit easily with Council Procedure Rules. He suggested seeking the views of the Overview & Scrutiny Committee.

The Working Party AGREED that the question of access to meeting and papers in respect of scrutiny task groups be referred to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee for consideration.