

Draft - Developing a Scrutiny Approach to QA (16 February 2016)

Proposal

1. The Proposal aims to:
 - ensure each Scrutiny Panel incorporates a consideration of assurance of quality in respect of services being scrutinised.
 - heighten the Overview and Scrutiny Performance Board (OSPB) and the Overview and Scrutiny Panel's understanding of the Council's current approach to Quality Assurance (QA) of its delivered or commissioned services; and

Background

2. Currently OSPB, via its Scrutiny Panels and its own critical friend challenge process, has the opportunity via the Work Programme to look at every service provided or commissioned by the Council; and through the work of the Corporate and Communities Overview and Scrutiny Panel to look more closely at services that are in the process of being commissioned.
3. An understanding of the current financial context, the state of the most recent quarterly performance measures and evidenced outcomes should underpin any scrutiny undertaken. Worcestershire County Council's focus on QA has to date been less developed in that process.
4. In Summer 2014 the Centre for Public Scrutiny sought bids to be a Scrutiny Development Area in Commissioning – which Worcestershire were successful in gaining and as a result were given 6 days of free support between October 2014 and April 2015 which was used to support scrutiny to have a positive impact on transformation and commissioning.
5. It was subsequently decided that an alternative mechanism to the pilot QA Group should be sought and in May 2015 the new Vice-Chairman of the OSPB was tasked by the Board to look at this issue and make an alternative recommendation. Progress to date:
 - Stage 1: Outline scope discussed by OSPB on 7 July 2015
 - Stage 2: Carry out further work July to November 2015
 - Stage 3: A go live date 1st December 2015.
6. Stage 2 has been achieved with full co-operation of the Directors, OSPB and Panel Chairman.
7. Stage 3 was redefined by OSPB comments and a further draft was circulated for comments.
8. Refining how each of the Directorates quality assure has taken longer than expected but the work was carried out at a time when Directors had a clear imperative to deliver a balanced budget in very challenging circumstances.

Findings

9. Focussing on quality, drilling down in this area is challenging both for Scrutiny and the Council. It is, as expected, reassuring to know that each Directorate does have robust mechanisms to quality assure its provided and commissioned services. (See Appendix A). It is noted that in some cases Cabinet Members are engaged in the process and others are less so.
10. Generally members have not been privy to most of these arrangements, though some quality information has been shared with Scrutiny and the Corporate Parenting Board on occasions.
11. Moving to the 2020 Council Vision where the Council envisages the number of individuals commissioning services (personal budgets) should be higher and the Council's role in terms of QA for these high risk services has to be further defined, QA for low risk services will be self-managed through customer feedback.
12. It is right that the County Council has a high ambition for its directly provided or commissioned services. QA, as a growing component of the Council's work, reflects its ambition for excellence.

Commissioned Services

13. When commissioning services:
 - Quality is one factor reflected in the award criteria of a tender process. To what percentage it is a Council determinant is balanced by the officers?
 - Quality certification is the process which covers the systems in place, the standard and details of monitoring, by whom and when – this forms or should form part of our procurement pre-qualification questionnaire.
 - Any commissioning cycle has four parts to it. The review stage should be heavily quality orientated.
 - Agreed monitoring arrangements always include qualitative measures for deliverables.
14. The Corporate Business Board is ultimately responsible for QA in respect of delivered services, outcome realisation, quality accreditations, and legal service compliance. The design of the delivery model of a service is determined through analysis of many factors not least of which is quality.

The Introduction of QA to Scrutiny

15. It is important that members are clear on the Council's current and developing QA tools and mechanisms. (See Appendix A).
16. In addition, there is the role of and the understanding of the Balanced Scorecard which links directly.
17. It is important to respect the community right to challenge and appreciate the impact quality can have on the Council's reputation.
18. Any approach to QA should be robust, proportionate and consistent with agreed professional standards.

19. Objective measures of quality are quite tricky. The reality of life in a complex, multifaceted organisation, such as Worcestershire County Council, where spending £1million per day is that occasionally some aspect will not function as well as it could or should.
20. Worcestershire County Council aims high. It has high standards. There is considerable value in aiming high even if the standard is never reached rather than following a bottom up 'adequacy' approach.
21. Appropriate Scrutiny can add to the Council's QA process, however an enhanced level of engagement between the Directorates and Scrutiny will be required to maximise its engagement around QA.
22. It should be noted that, there will be a small number of times when sensitive personal data can and should only be shared in a confidential non-public forum. **It was agreed that information considered confidential and discussed in a confidential non-public forum will require the unanimous agreement of all members of the Overview and Scrutiny Performance Board, informed by discussions with the relevant Director and Cabinet Member.**
23. If an issue is regarded as confidential, the member's code of conduct will apply. This factor is added security to information being treated appropriately. Members will appreciate if confidences are broken it breaks the trust of transparency.

Recommendations:

1. A step change is required in scrutiny - this could be achieved through training for both members and democratic services officers covering:
 - a. the importance of understanding service budgets, service scope, Key Performance Indicator's and QA data
 - b. an introduction to the current Directorate QA arrangements (Appendix A),
 - c. a brief familiarisation with the Council's complaints procedure and reports to facilitate interpretation of the quarterly complaints data.

It is suggested that training could be provided as part of 2017 Council's Induction training programme.

2. Within 2 months of the training, each Panel should meet with the Director and the CMR so that members could check their understanding of the information available from the Directorate and be given appropriate examples (this should not be a public meeting - A closed session is suggested to allow for the sharing of detail which is either resident/individual sensitive or commercially sensitive with respect to contractual arrangements.
3. The Corporate and Communities Overview and Scrutiny Panel should discuss with the Director whether their overview of a specific providers **planned** quality arrangements prior to commissioning might add value.

NB: The setting up of additional new panels or groups should be avoided to reduce over complication, bureaucracy and delay.