

# FAREHAM

## BOROUGH COUNCIL

### Report to Policy and Resources Scrutiny Panel

**Date**                    **17 June 2024**

**Report of:**            **Assistant Chief Executive Officer**

**Subject:**              **INTRODUCTION TO POLICY AND RESOURCES PORTFOLIO**

#### **SUMMARY**

The Policy and Resources Scrutiny Panel was formed to assist the Council in undertaking effective scrutiny of activities and performance of the Executive, the Executive Member for Policy and Resources, and Officers. The purpose of scrutiny is to improve the lives of local people through improved public services.

#### **RECOMMENDATION**

Members are asked to note the information contained in this report and take it into account when considering items for the Scrutiny Priorities.

## **INTRODUCTION**

1. The local Government Act 2000 introduced a new political management system for local councils in England and Wales, requiring them to have a separate 'executive' function in the form of a leader or elected mayor, and cabinet.
2. As a counterbalance to this, the Act introduced the requirement of an 'overview and scrutiny committee'. This enables the rest of the council to scrutinise the executive function by investigating their decisions and policies, issuing reports and recommendations where any shortcomings are identified.
3. Whilst The Localism Act 2011 provided an alternative framework of governance it remains an expectation that scrutiny would take place to identify where improvements need to be made.
4. The Policy and Resources Scrutiny Panel was formed in November 2018 and its purpose is to hold the Executive, the Executive Member for Policy and Resources and Officer Delegated Decisions to account in respect of its decision making, activities and performance.
5. Scrutiny is an essential part of ensuring that local government remains transparent, accountable and open, resulting in improved public polices and services.
6. The principal power of a scrutiny panel is to influence the polices and decisions made by the council in delivering public services. It has no formal power to compel changes to be made or enforce recommendations to be implemented.

## **THE PANEL'S RESPONSIBILITIES**

7. The Panel's responsibilities include:
  - The consideration of and Review of Executive Business
  - Review output and finding of Member Working Groups
  - Call-In Duties and Responsibilities
  - Scrutinise strategic plans and performance of services
  - Scrutinise external organisations
  - Hold the Executive (and the Council's Executive functions) to account.

## **POLICY AND RESOURCES EXECUTIVE PORTFOLIO RESPONSIBILITIES**

8. The Executive Member for Policy and Resources has the following areas responsibilities under their portfolio:
  - Finance Strategy
  - Corporate Vision and Priorities
  - Capital and Revenue Budgets
  - Communications and Customer Engagement
  - Council Tax
  - Commercial Property Portfolio

- National Non-Domestic Rates (NNDR)
- Procurement
- Estate Management
- Economic Development
- Solent Airport @ Daedalus Vision
- Debt Recovery
- Town Centre Regeneration
- Equalities
- ICT and HR

9. Members of the Panel are able to request, through the Chairman or Officers, to have an item of scrutiny business on any of these topics to be brought to the Panel. However, there must be a clear purpose to the scrutiny.

### **CORPORATE STRATEGY AND CORPORATE PRIORITIES**

10. Another area of responsibility for the Policy and Resources Scrutiny Panel is to scrutinise the activities and performance of the Executive which includes focusing on the Council's Corporate Priorities and Improvement actions as identified in the Council Corporate Strategy 2023/2029.

11. This will also include Policy development and review, where Panel members can support local projects and initiatives by ensuring that these are considered at initial policy development stage.

12. The relevant Corporate Priorities for the Policy and Scrutiny Panel are:

#### **Priority Four – Promote Economic Development**

- Produce a Fareham Town Centre Regeneration Vision and Masterplan to attract investment, guide new development and public spaces, and ensure that the town centre meets changing needs.
- Deliver a £4.7 million investment Plan at Solent Airport at Daedalus to expand its commercial opportunities.
- Deliver a wide range of new employment floorspace at the Daedalus business parks to provide new commercial tenants and job growth.

#### **Priority Six – A Responsive, Inclusive and Innovative Council**

- Ensure effective property asset management across the Council's extensive property holdings.
- Produce a New Way of Working Strategy to ensure the Council works in a modern and flexible way and is complemented by major investment in the Council buildings.
- Redevelop our Local Service Agreements document so residents are more clearly informed about how Council services are performing.

- Launch a new Communications and Engagement Strategy.
- Transition Council systems to cloud based servers to enable the Council to work more flexibly and improve data security.
- Explore commercial opportunities available to the Council to support the Council's financial position.
- Update our Opportunities Plan to enable the Council to continue to generate additional revenue whilst reducing costs.

13. The Panel needs to consider these priorities when scrutinising decisions taken by the Executive to ensure that these priorities are given consideration as part of the Executive decision making process.

14. In the previous municipal year, the Policy and Resources Scrutiny Panel considered a number of items of pre-scrutiny which included:

- Opportunities Plan 2023-2027
- Corporate Strategy 2023-2029
- Finance Strategy, Capital Programme, Revenue Budget and Council Tax 2024/25
- Housing Revenue Account Budget and Capital Plans 2024/25
- Fees and Charges 2024/25

15. The Panel is also asked to undertake post Scrutiny of Executive decisions, and these are presented to the Panel as in the form of the Executive decision notices from previous meetings. This provides Members with an opportunity to ask questions of the Executive Member for Policy and Resources or Officers on any decisions that have been taken by the Executive that fall within the remit of the Panel's portfolio.

## **EFFECTIVE SCRUTINY**

16. For scrutiny to be effective it needs to be seen as a 'critical friend' and it is important to identify where decisions could be improved upon and mistakes prevented. The focus needs to forward thinking and on making positive changes which add value rather than on apportioning blame and negativity.

17. Effective scrutiny work relies on building positive working relationships and using 'soft' influencing power to help foster positive and constructive relationships. It should be seen as an essential partner in improving services. Scrutiny's effectiveness will be reduced if it is seen as aggressively critical as this leads to defensive behaviour and makes it difficult to influence change.

18. Whilst scrutiny work includes looking at issues which may be locally politically contentious and high profile, it is important that scrutiny is seen as impartial and not used as an opportunity to further party political objectives.

19. Appendix A provides the panel with advice and guidance for Members to use in developing their skills in questioning and listening techniques.

## **RISK ASSESSMENT**

20. There are no significant risk considerations in relation to this report.

## **CONCLUSION**

21. Members are invited to note the Corporate Priorities that are relevant to this Panel and the areas of responsibility that fall under the Policy and Resources Portfolio and take these into consideration when asked to consider items for the Scrutiny Priorities Plan for 2024-25.

### **Background Papers:**

### **Reference Papers:**

### **Appendix A : Useful Skills – Hints and Tips**

### **Enquiries:**

For further information on this report please contact Sarah Robinson. (Ext 4566)

## APPENDIX A

### USEFUL SKILLS – HINTS AND TIPS

#### QUESTIONING TECHNIQUES

Questioning is a crucial component of the 'critical friend' challenge and an important principle of good public scrutiny. The key to successful questioning is balancing the need to get answers with the need to build strong relationships. This can be achieved by a combination of good preparation, knowing what questions to ask and when to ask them, and understanding which style is appropriate for different situations.

Questioning is best carried out after listening to presentations and reading reports. This will enable you to target questions on the appropriate issues.

#### **Questioning Members and Officers on the topics to be scrutinised:**

How will speaking to this person help to achieve scrutiny's objectives?

How can we encourage this person to be open and willing to help?

Can this evidence be acquired from anywhere else?

Will it be necessary to balance this person's views with the views of others, as part of the wider evidence gathering? Who else should we speak to?

#### **Preparation:**

Each Member will indicate to the Chairman their wish to ask a question?

Should supplementary questions be asked as they arise or at the end of the round of questioning?

Which types of question will provide the best answers?

## **QUESTION TYPES**

### **Open questions**

Open questions allow people to open up and to share all the information they have. Encouragement for elaboration early on will allow them to speak and will calm their nerves. This will help them to relax, and can be helpful in ensuring people answer further questions in a more helpful manner.

Starters for open questioning:

How...?

Why...?

When...?

Who...?

What...?

### **Closed questions**

Where a simple yes or no answer will suffice it is advisable to stick to closed questions (such as when checking a fact). Closed questions are harder to avoid and easier to challenge.

Useful phrases:

Did you ...?

Have you told.....?

What I think I'm hearing is... is that right?

### **Reflecting questions**

These are used to clarify something which has been said, and/or to get the respondent to speak about a subject in more depth.

Useful phrases:

You said that...

You sound as if ....

I get the feeling that ....

### **Extending questions**

Extending questions invite people to offer more information, and to elaborate on what they have already said.

Useful phrases:

How else could...?

Could you tell me more about..?

Would you help me to understand .....

### **Comparative questions**

These can be used to compare situations (for example on a before and after basis).

Useful phrases:

What has it been like since...?

What difference has...?

### **Hypothetical questions**

The use of hypothetical frameworks allows the respondent to answer a question from a safer theoretical position and may encourage them to explore issues in more depth.

Useful phrases:

If...

Imagine...

### **Rephrasing or paraphrasing**

Another technique that can be used to clarify something that has been said, it may also encourage elaboration in previous answers and provide more detail.

Useful phrases:

Are you saying that...?

Let me see if I understand the problem completely...

Have I understood this correctly?

### **Linking questions**

Linking questions rely on active listening on the part of the panel member. By linking previous responses to other issues the panel member is able to demonstrate that s/he has valued the information gathered so far. This technique may then encourage further explanation

Useful phrases:

You mentioned earlier that...

How would you....?

### **LISTENING SKILLS**

Listening skills play an important part and are closely linked with questioning. Active listening ensures that respondents feel that they are being properly heard and understood, which can help to facilitate further questioning.

The basic principles of active listening are:

**Positive body language** – look attentive and show positive signs of encouragement; consider the body language of the witness to gain a fuller understanding of their response.

**Check understanding** – use paraphrasing and repetition to check that you have understood the answer.

**Take notes** – these can be referred to later to cross check or verify an answer to check it has been fully understood, or where there appears to be a contradiction.