**Support for regional scrutiny networking**

Introduction

CfGS has now agreed a funding package for 2022/23 which will focus ongoing support for overview and scrutiny on the operational of regional scrutiny networks, and on the two national networks that exist where scrutiny matters are discussed (the Counties and Unitaries Network and the Combined Authorities Governance Network).

In our view, providing additional capacity and resource for scrutiny networking will support practitioners (both members and officers) to learn from each other, to plan joint work and to work through problems. It will also ensure that CfGS’s support work feels more tangible and immediate to scrutiny practitioners.

This support will be provided by Meg Ingle and Annette Aiken, CfGS’s Research and Project Officers. They are now liaising with those leading regional networking activity to discuss what regions’ needs are likely to be. This paper is designed to support those conversations.

This support is predicated on the understanding that regional networking continues to be directed and led at local level, with CfGS playing a supportive role.

Overall offer

Our overall offer is:

* Support for agenda planning (including securing external speakers, for example). CfGS may be able to facilitate or support conversations on matters of concern by bringing in evidence from other parts of the country and securing attendance from national organisations;
* Providing short form training (for members and/or officers) as part of network meetings, or in separate sessions organised by the network. The volume and nature of training and development provided regionally would be driven by the needs of the network itself;
* Providing support for joint working within regions on substantive policy issues – for example, on support for joint working around health scrutiny matters;
* Providing some administrative support (where none may exist in a given area, and/or where regional networking has fallen into abeyance because of a lack of resource to make it happen).

Agenda planning

We can:

* Help secure the attendance of people from national bodies (the LGA, Government, think tanks, other organisations);
* Support network chairs/convenors in the facilitation of discussion around agenda items;
* Where necessary to write short briefs to support conversations at networks, which we would publish on our website.

Short form training

For 45 minutes of a network meeting, we would be able to provide some webinar-style training on matters of mutual interest. It might also be seen as necessary to run longer sessions separately. We anticipate that these sessions would be primarily designed for members, although where networks want to make an offer to officers that is also something we can support.

This might include:

* A verbal briefing on a substantive policy topic (a presentation and discussion on the Levelling Up white paper, for example);
* Training on practical elements of the scrutiny process (the development of executive-scrutiny protocols, the operation of call-in, the development and management of work programmes);
* Training on scrutiny skills (the provision of an introduction to overview and scrutiny; chairing and questioning skills; how to develop effective recommendations; how to analyse information effectively; effective budget and financial scrutiny; other subjects, depending on local need).

The overall intention of training support would be highlight the key elements of the 2019 statutory guidance on overview and scrutiny, and some of the contents of CfGS’s 2019 publication “The good scrutiny guide”.

Support on joint working

We know that practitioners are going to need support to discuss substantive matters of mutual interest. Councils may want to pursue joint working formally – for example where there is a need to set up joint scrutiny arrangements to investigate a substantial variation to local health services. There are also informal joint working opportunities – for CA constituent authorities, on scrutiny relating to local government reorganisation, scrutiny within two tier areas, or scrutiny relating to major infrastructure or development issues which cut across borders.

The reason for offering this support in particular is in recognition that the setup and management of joint discussions and arrangements – even when seen as a high priority – can be seen as onerous, and can be challenging for officers who have a range of other duties.

While scrutiny networks would provide the initial “spaces” to talk about these issues we would anticipate that individual “pieces” of joint work would involve fewer councils, and a smaller geographic area.

This kind of support might look like:

* The provision of general, technical advice. We anticipate producing short-form material which provides advice on joint working, particularly in respect of scrutiny of ICSs;
* Bringing together relevant officers (and where and when necessary, members) to set objectives and arrangements for joint working (including terms of reference for joint committees where necessary, and scoping of reviews);
* Support in liaison of individuals with whom scrutiny might want to engage as part of joint work;
* Ensuring that the outcomes of joint work are clear and deliverable – assisting with the production of reports and recommendations.

Providing administrative support

In some areas regional networking is not especially active, or responsibility for organising meetings rests on the shoulders of people who have little capacity. Under these circumstances we should be able to offer some administrative support. This is likely to include:

* Assistance in communicating within regions, including assistance in drawing together distribution lists where possible;
* Assistance in arranging, and chairing, meetings, and in preparing minutes.

Using insights from scrutiny networking to inform wider work

We will draw together good practice and other insights on scrutiny from regional conversations and use these to produce short national publications. We also envisage our work in support of networks involving the mapping of different approaches and practices on scrutiny, augmenting work currently carried out through our annual survey.

At the moment the LGA has asked us, as part of our agreement, to take forward short publications on the following matters.

* Updating on councils undertaking governance change (ie updating the Appendix to our 2020 “Rethinking governance” publication;
* Approaches to reviewing and improving council constitutions
* The operation of full council meetings
* Delegation and officer/member relationships

We would seek to put out regular, short-form publications on scrutiny in addition to the above.

How we see this being taken forward

We would like to:

* Continue conversations with those who lead scrutiny network activity across England;
* Use those conversations to get a sense about what the unique need might be for each region;
* Distribute a version of this paper to network attendees alongside a draft of what has been agreed between CfGS and networks’ leaders and seek, at the first available meeting and with the permission and support of those running networks, to confirm a potential support package.

EH 30/3/22, updated 11/5/22