

## North East Regional Joint Scrutiny Member/Officer Network

15 October 2020

### MS Teams

<b>Present:</b>	
Cllr Rob Crute	Chair, Durham County Council
Cllr Anne-Marie Curry Paul Dalton	Darlington Council
Cllr Alison Batey Tom Gorman Stephen Gwilym Clare Luery	Durham County Council
Cllr Maria Hall Angela Frisby	Gateshead Council
Angela Armstrong	Hartlepool Borough Council
Cllr Janet Thompson Caroline Breheny	Middlesbrough Council
Cllr Teresa Cairns Cllr Lara Ellis Cllr Wendy Taylor Janet Howard Karen Christon	Newcastle City Council
Liz Kerr	North of Tyne CA
Cllr Sandra Graham Cllr Karen Clark Emma Fagan	North Tyneside Council
Cllr Gregah Roughead Sean Nicholson	Northumberland CC
Cllr Rob Dix Paul Baldasera	South Tyneside
Cllr Louise Baldock Cllr Pauline Beall Cllr Carol Clark Cllr Clare Gamble Cllr Marilyn Surtees Cllr Sylvia Walmsley Gary Woods Rebecca Saunders-Thompson	Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council

<p>Cllr Doris MacKnight Nigel Cummings</p> <p>Katie Grigg</p>	<p>Sunderland Council</p> <p>Centre for Governance and Scrutiny</p>
<p><b>Apologies:</b> Cllr Mick Stoker</p> <p>Cllr Ian Bell Alison Hill</p> <p>Jenny Haworth</p> <p>Cllr Bernadette Oliphant Cllr Stuart Green</p> <p>Cllr Gerard Hall Joan Stevens</p> <p>Cllr Gareth Kane Cllr Jane Byrne Cllr Paula Holland Cllr Nick Cott Cllr Felicity Mendelson Cllr Steve Fairlie</p> <p>Cllr Gordon Stewart Cllr Peter Fairley Cllr Susan Dungworth</p> <p>Cllr Linda Bell Yvonne Harrison Michael Robson Paul Wheeler Dave Brown</p> <p>Cllr Jeffery Watson Cllr Guy Renner-Thompson Cllr Mark Swinburne Cllr Barry Flux Cllr Gordon Stewart Cllr Liz Dunn Jackie Roll</p> <p>Alison Pearson</p> <p>Cllr Paul Weston Cllr Chris Barlow Cllr Mohammed Javid Cllr Evaline Cunningham Margaret Waggott</p>	<p>Cleveland FRA</p> <p>Darlington Council</p> <p>Durham County Council</p> <p>Gateshead Council</p> <p>Hartlepool Council</p> <p>Newcastle City Council</p> <p>North of Tyne CA</p> <p>North Tyneside Council</p> <p>Northumberland County Council</p> <p>Redcar &amp; Cleveland Council</p> <p>Stockton Council</p>

Judith Trainor Gillian Robinson Charlotte Burnham	Sunderland City Council
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## 1. Welcome

Cllr Rob Crute welcomed everyone to the first ever remote Regional Member/Officer Scrutiny Network meeting. He also gave a warm welcome to Katie Grigg, Senior Research Officer from the Centre for Governance and Scrutiny who had stepped in at the last minute to deputise for Ed Hammond.

## 2. Apologies for Absence

As listed above.

## 3. Minutes of Last Meeting – 12 January 2018

The previous Chair had now stood down as an elected member. Cllr Rob Crute, as Vice-Chair, had been appointed the Chair with a two year tenure. However, as no meetings had taken place since 2018 it was agreed to roll over his appointment and tenure as Chair for two years starting from this meeting.

## 4. Appointment of Vice-Chair NE Regional Member/Officer Scrutiny Network

Expressions of interest had been sought from members for the position of Vice-Chair.

It was agreed that Cllr Wendy Taylor from Newcastle City Council be appointed to the position of Vice-Chair from immediate effect.

## 5. COVID-19 Impact on the Democratic Process and Scrutiny Work Programme

Tom Gorman made a presentation on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the democratic process and scrutiny work programmes across the region. The presentation was based on information provided by officers from the regional network and covered:

- Impact of remote committees on timetable of meetings
- Successful outcomes
- Outcomes to be improved
- Challenges to remote meetings
- Public participation in scrutiny meetings
- How do members of the public ask questions at scrutiny meetings
- Impact on work programmes
- Points to consider

He added that the health service preferred the term 'resetting' their services rather than 'restoration' of services as experience gained in working remotely and differently

through the pandemic influenced how new ways of working would transform future working practices.

Cllr Crute commented that remote meetings at DCC had been well attended and it was important to reflect on the opportunities new ways of working presented to us. It was not just time saved in attending meetings digitally but the environmental benefits of not travelling to and from them. He added that, although it was important to have interaction with people in person, virtual meetings offered scrutiny an opportunity to move forwards with remote working.

Cllr Taylor referred to the challenges in chairing meetings having to read papers whilst looking at a screen and managing the meeting. She added that virtual meetings at Newcastle had worked well with good attendance.

Cllr Crute stated that the challenge at DCC, as Chair of a committee, was using both an iPad for access to meeting papers and a laptop for the Teams meeting.

Tom Gorman added that several authorities had had to issue additional devices to members to enable them to participate in virtual meetings. Running virtual meetings was resource intensive in terms of officers working to support the proceedings.

Tom Gorman referred to the LGA website which featured case studies of various local authorities and their approach to remote meetings. Newcastle City Council had developed a mobile voting system for council meetings. York City Council had held a coronavirus Q&A session for the public via their Facebook page. Kensington and Chelsea had piloted virtual surgeries.

Cllr McKnight remarked that some members found the experience of having meetings streamed live on YouTube daunting. Cllr Crute acknowledged it suited some people better than others.

Cllr Thompson noted using technology for remote meetings had been a steep learning curve for many. Training had been intensive for those that were not used to using technology much previously. She added that the social aspect of seeing other members at meetings was very much missed.

Cllr Baldock asked how site meetings could take place as it was impossible to knock on doors and speak with people. She mentioned a review of brick-built flower planters that had been taking place in Stockton. Cllr Crute suggested that work which required site visits would have to be reprogrammed for now. Stephen Gwilym advised that planning officers at DCC had used a drone to enable the planning committee to view a site and added it might be possible for look at other options quasi-judicial functions had been using to facilitate their meetings.

Cllr Walmsley commented that with use, remote meetings had got easier to participate in and she referred to the benefits of time saved in travelling to meetings. For those members that worked full-time, the ability to join a meeting via their mobile whilst in their car was a step in the right direction. She added that hybrid meetings looked like the best route forward.

Cllr Crute stated that some scrutiny meetings with Cabinet Portfolio members such as the Exec/Non-Exec meetings for Scrutiny Chair and Vice-Chairs at DCC were scheduled for half an hour. Members were often travelling some distance to attend

County Hall for just this meeting. Currently the Exec/Non-Exec meetings were being held remotely, he acknowledged this was likely to continue to cut down on travelling.

Cllr Wright stated that Newcastle was looking to hold a remote site meeting shortly and gave details of the officer organising the visit.

Cllr Crute added that the role of the Network was to act as a conduit of best practice and ideas.

Tom Gorman added that regulations would have to allow hybrid meetings and it was anticipated that this would be explored as the regulations were due to expire in May 2021. Hybrid meetings would require additional IT facilities in all meeting rooms.

Cllr Walmsley advised that she had attended a Planning site visit. All members had made their own way to the site, respected social distancing and worn masks. Residents had also attended on site. Cllr Crute referred to the 'rule of six' for meeting others outside during the pandemic and commented that site visits very much depended on the circumstances, but he did not see how they were insurmountable.

## **6. Future Items**

Cllr Crute advised that the Terms of Reference for the Member/Officer Scrutiny Network were somewhat outdated and suggested these required refreshing. Tom Gorman stated that he would liaise with the Centre for Governance and Scrutiny and circulate a draft in due course.

A work programme is to be drafted although it was clear it would be dominated by the response to the impact of the pandemic. It was suggested the Member/Officer Network meet on a quarterly basis.

Paul Baldasera suggested that mental health, poverty and particularly child poverty, digital inclusion and the skills agenda were all topics that councils will be focusing on in. Sharing work and ideas will only improve our scrutiny of these topics. Cllr Crute added that the pandemic has had a massive impact on employment and will be a common theme for all scrutiny committees.

Cllr Taylor suggested climate change, improvement in air quality due to the reduction in traffic were all important and we needed to progress work on these issues. Cllr Crute commented looking at best practice on these issues across the region would be beneficial.

Cllr Crute asked that any other issues be forwarded to Tom Gorman for inclusion on the work programme.

## **7. Centre for Governance and Scrutiny (CfGS)**

Katie Grigg made a presentation updating members on changes at the newly renamed Centre for Governance and Scrutiny. The new name reflected the wider focus on governance across all sectors.

She highlighted some areas of potential change in local government in the coming months:

- Ongoing pandemic pressures
- Possible social care green or white paper
- Devolution white paper
- Financial challenges with developing 2021/22 budgets
- Post pandemic changes to strategic plans and priorities

The CfGS had been directly supporting councils on governance matters through the pandemic. Scrutiny would help many councils reset priorities and focus post pandemic and restated the critical importance of the four principles of good scrutiny. The CfGS had changed all training to remote training and continued to support council reviews.

In looking forward to developing the regional scrutiny network further, Katie Grigg confirmed the CfGS would be keen to support the network and could share information on terms of reference from other regions.

Cllr Crute thanked Katie Grigg for stepping in at the last minute to make the presentation.

#### **8. Any Other Business**

None.