

North East Regional Scrutiny Officers' Network

24 September 2020 via MS Teams

Present:

Tom Gorman	Chair - Durham County Council
Caroline Breheny	Middlesbrough Council
Joan Stevens	Hartlepool Borough Council
Janet Howard	Newcastle City Council
Angela Frisby	Gateshead Council
Paul Baldasera	South Tyneside Council
Gary Woods	Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council
Rebecca Saunders-Thompson	Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council
Michael Robson	North Tyneside Council
Emma Fagan	North Tyneside Council
Nigel Cummings	Sunderland City Council
Alison Pearson	Redcar and Cleveland Borough Council
Sean Nicholson	Northumberland County Council
Chris Angus	Northumberland County Council
Ed Hammond	Centre for Governance and Scrutiny
Stephen Gwilym	Durham County Council
Clare Luery	Durham County Council

Apologies: Liz Kerr (North of Tyne Combined Authority), Margaret Waggott, Judy Trainor (Stockton-on -Tees Borough Council), Angela Armstrong (Hartlepool Borough Council), Karen Christon (Newcastle City Council), Yvonne Harrison (North Tyneside Council).

1. Welcome

Tom Gorman welcomed everybody to the first virtual meeting of the Officer network. He also offered a warm welcome to Ed Hammond who was making his first attendance as a representative of the recently renamed Centre for Governance and Scrutiny.

2. Minutes of NEREO Regional Scrutiny Officers/Health Officer Network meeting 21 November 2019

The minutes of the previous meeting held on 21 November 2019 were agreed.

Subjects for future meetings - Tom Gorman advised that it had been hoped to hold four meetings for Officers and for Members each year. This had obviously slipped due to the coronavirus pandemic, but dates will be arranged for the coming year and be circulated in due course. It was expected meetings would continue remotely for the foreseeable future.

Combined Authorities – it was noted that some of the difficulties previously mentioned had now improved.

Topics listed for future meetings – the focus of future items would inevitably be on the impact COVID-19 although topics on Transformation, Climate Change, Waste would still be considered.

Tom Gorman suggested a Teams site for the Scrutiny Officers' network could be developed to enable Officers to discuss work programmes and offer a forum to swap ideas and queries etc.

3. COVID-19 – Impact on the Democratic Process – response from regional network

Regional members had been asked about their authority's response to the impact COVID-19 had had on their democratic processes. A summary and a more detailed report had been circulated.

Tom Gorman summed up the outcomes of the survey by stating all member authorities were operating meetings remotely – some were able to offer a full work programme and others a reduced work programme. In terms of Durham County Council's position, Tom Gorman stated that the number of meetings that could be held was restricted to those that Democratic Services could support once all quasi-judicial meetings etc had been scheduled in.

Paul Baldasera noted that the absence of participation by the public in scrutiny was concerning and suggested it was difficult to see how this issue could be resolved with virtual meetings. South Tyneside Council had not yet held a full Council meeting. The work programme had been reset to deal with current matters except in respect of poverty. An immediate concern was digital exclusion.

Stephen Gwilym stated that Member attendance at virtual meetings had been very good as they were more convenient due to the lack of travel to County Hall. He added that members of the public could be set up as guest participants in a virtual meeting. Prior notice was required if members of the public wanted to ask questions at a scrutiny meeting. He added that questions submitted had been shared on PowerPoint at a virtual Health meeting. The meeting chat function had also been used to enable questions to be asked.

Joan Stevens stated at Hartlepool Borough Council, one Scrutiny meeting had been held with three scheduled.

Nigel Cummings noted that Sunderland City Council's first virtual Council meeting held on 23 September 2020 had lasted four and a half hours. Business was continuing as usual, albeit with a COVID-19 centric work programme.

Janet Howard stated three committees had met seven times at Newcastle City Council. Pre-meetings had been held with Members prior to meetings.

Tom Gorman added that pre-meetings were used to emphasise the protocols in place for virtual meetings.

Paul Baldasera confirmed pre-meetings were held with the Chair and Vice-Chair as usual, but it was acknowledged it was challenging as normally he would sit alongside the Chair to offer advice discreetly. This was obviously not possible with virtual meetings. It could be problematic depending on the skills of the Chair involved. It was acknowledged that virtual meetings felt a bit sterile and rehearsed.

Alison Pearson stated all meetings were running now and two Council meetings and one AGM had been held. Participation was pretty good. A huge effort had been made in training Members. She felt that some Members who may have been reticent in commenting in meetings had seemed more able to contribute. In terms of public participation, members of the public could only participate if they have MS Office 365. Planning Committee had managed to facilitate access to public participation via mobile phones. It was noted that remote meetings were very draining. The chat function was used to manage the meeting.

Tom Gorman added that remote meetings were resource heavy, eg at Durham County Council, 2 Democratic Services staff, 1 IT and 1 Scrutiny Officer supported the meeting. Officers often doubled up where presentations were being made in case of connectivity issues.

Gary Woods referred to a socially distanced support hub which had been established at Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council. Chairs of committees attended in person and were supported by governance and IT officers.

Caroline Breheny stated that meetings at Middlesbrough Council were up and running. The Board had met six times since 21 May 2020 and other meetings had met a couple of times. She added that she acted as the technical officer at virtual scrutiny meetings enabling live streaming onto YouTube and FB live. Middlesbrough Council used Web Ex rather than Teams. A Health Scrutiny meeting had taken place with representatives from the Trust joining from a meeting room at James Cook Hospital. Members had responded very well to using remote meetings.

Virtual meetings offered the possibility to be innovative and clips from some of the virtual meetings had been used to update members at Middlesbrough Council. Tom Gorman added that footage from YouTube recordings had been used on local news reports. It was anticipated this would become more common as local elections were approached.

Joan Stevens stated that meetings at Hartlepool were taking place in the Council Chamber. She attends with Democratic Services and officers making presentations. She added that it was challenging to support the Chair if you were not sat next to them. In terms of scrutiny work she was mindful that other services were busy supporting the response to the pandemic and it was important to consider capacity when planning work.

Michael Robson stated North Tyneside Council meetings were livestreamed on YouTube. It was felt this had increased transparency around decision-making and scrutiny work. Once meetings were livestreamed, they could not be viewed again.

Tom Gorman asked Ed Hammond if he could share the experience of other local authorities using virtual meetings across the country. He confirmed that the North East experience was very similar to those of other authorities he had spoken with significant variability in approaches.

The main challenges were the technical ability to hold meetings and the logistics of supporting the Chair in meetings. Virtual meetings had prompted significant changes in behaviours from physical meetings and had altered the personal dynamics within the meeting. He questioned how this might affect how the scrutiny role is carried out.

He explained that most councils were trying to continue to do the same type of scrutiny. He highlighted the issue around public participation and suggested scrutiny meetings may need to consider how they transact meetings.

Ed Hammond confirmed that regular conversations were being held with government on remote meeting arrangements which were due to end in May 2021. He stated CfGS were working with partners to put the arrangements on a permanent footing. Tom Gorman commented that in Wales there had been legislation in place to enable remote meetings to take place for some time.

Reference was made to hybrid proceedings such as those held in Parliament but there was a need to ensure an equality of access as the centre of gravity in any meeting would always tend to be in the room where attendees were present.

Gary Woods stated that Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council had tried some hybrid meetings, but they have not been successful. This was due to the poor sound within the sports hall set up and some members struggled with the poor sound. Fully remote meetings were soon organised instead. Tom Gorman added that it would be difficult to find rooms the correct size due to social distancing and the costs of any additional IT requirements.

The issue of enabling public participating in meetings was discussed alongside the issue of engaging with the public through social media generally.

Paul Baldasera stressed the need to think seriously how to ensure the public had a voice at scrutiny meetings. Tom Gorman suggested it would be worthwhile looking at the viewing figures of remote scrutiny meetings. A template would be circulated to gather information from the network.

4. North East Regional Member/Officer Scrutiny Network 15 October 2020 – Agenda

It was agreed the agenda would feature an item on the impact of COVID-19 on scrutiny work programmes and an update from the CfGS

Tom Gorman questioned how the pandemic had changed how authorities consider any review activity and if any there were any COVID-19 focused reviews.

Paul Baldasera stated South Tyneside Council had planned a review on poverty and this had been reframed to look at aspects of immediate concern – digital poverty and the economic aspect of people losing their jobs.

Gary Woods stated that Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council had been planning a review of hospital discharges and the scope had now been revised. A review of burial provision was also in the work programme.

Stephen Gwilym mentioned the sensitivities around the subject of hospital discharges and the expectation of a national inquiry relating to discharges to care homes.

5. CfGS Update

Ed Hammond indicated that the national view on scrutiny work programming was that it was concentrating on COVID-19 response and task and finish groups were on a hiatus. He offered the CfGS support in any 'quick and dirty' reviews if support was required and there was LGA funding available for this.

As councils reset their plans and strategies in the face of the pandemic scrutiny can help frame and develop that work. There was a balance to be struck between burdening officers with additional work and continuing the important role of scrutiny.

Emma Fagan added that, at North Tyneside Council, review work had taken a back seat. She highlighted the major issue of identifying and supporting vulnerable children together with the role of school.

Rebecca Saunders-Thompson referred to work in Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council that had been looking at the cost of school uniforms for vulnerable children, this had been paused and was now looking at wider issues around children.

6. Role of Scrutiny and Flood Management

Stephen Gwilym asked about other authorities' approach to scrutinising flood risk management given the cessation of regulations giving scrutiny a statutory function on this. Durham County Council's Environment OSC continued to engage with the relevant bodies.

Ed Hammond confirmed that, although the broad statutory powers remained, the detailed regulations had lapsed, and this might cause some difficulties if relationships with the relevant risk management authorities is not good.

7. Any Other Business

None.