

North East Regional Scrutiny Officers' Network

11 March 2021 via MS Teams

Present:

Tom Gorman	Chair - Durham County Council
Caroline Breheny	Middlesbrough Council
Paul Baldasera	South Tyneside Council
Liz Kerr	North of Tyne CA
Angela Armstrong	Hartlepool Council
Karen Christon	Newcastle City Council
Gary Woods	Stockton Council
Rebecca Saunders- Thompson	Stockton Council
Michael Robson	North Tyneside Council
Nigel Cummings	Sunderland City Council
Alison Pearson	Redcar and Cleveland Council
Chris Angus	Northumberland County Council
Ed Hammond	Centre for Governance and Scrutiny
Stephen Gwilym	Durham County Council
Clare Luery	Durham County Council

Apologies: Joan Stevens (Hartlepool Council), Angela Frisby (Gateshead Council) Jackie Roll (Northumberland County Council) Judy Trainer & Margaret Waggott (Stockton Council), Allison Hill (Redcar and Cleveland Council), Paul Wheeler & Yvonne Harrison (North Tyneside Council)

1. Notes of NEREO Regional Scrutiny Officers Network meeting 24 September 2020

The minutes of the previous meeting held on 24 September 2020 were agreed.

Tom Gorman confirmed that the plan was to hold four meetings each year. A Teams site had been developed for officers although there were some teething issues currently.

The emergency regulations enabling virtual council and committee meetings were due to expire at the end of May 2021 and it was unclear what would happen after this date. In response to a query about whether other councils had restarted review work it was noted that most had resumed and were working with business as usual. Task and finish groups fall outside of the remote meeting regulations and it would be easier for these to continue virtually. It was felt that remote meetings were more inclusive and enabled a more diverse range of members to be involved.

A concern around task and finish groups was that subject areas may be reliant on support from officers in service areas where capacity was still involved in COVID-19 response and restoration and, therefore, limited the subject areas of reviews. Paul Baldasera agreed and commented that a commission on skills provision had not been completed as key stakeholders were concentrating on survival and recovery of the service. Another commission on poverty had begun but had to be mindful of the availability and capacity of officers for support.

2. Terms of Reference

The Terms of Reference had been refreshed to reflect changes in the legal status of the Combined Authorities. It was also timely to consider attendance at the network. With the introduction of virtual meetings, attendance had been much higher than when meeting in person. This change was welcomed although it was acknowledged that managing a virtual meeting with a large number of attendees was challenging at times. A draft terms of reference was submitted for discussion.

Karen Christon referred to the aim of the network which was to share experience and knowledge. If membership was restricted to two members it was felt this would limit the information sharing opportunities for members.

It was suggested the membership could be made wider by simply not naming members and it would then be up to authorities to nominate whoever they felt was the most appropriate to attend that particular meeting.

A maximum of three members from each authority was suggested and this would encourage members to share any information they received.

It was acknowledged that virtual meetings had a greater attendance, lessened the amount of travel and were more accessible for most. However, it was noted that remote meetings could be difficult to manage due to the large number of people on the call. Participants were not always identifiable as elected members or officers, and it was apparent that, in some cases, invitations had been forwarded onto other members. The anticipated attendance often bore little resemblance to the actual attendance.

It was noted that some authorities found the network meetings a good opportunity to support training new members to help build up their experience.

Officers were encouraged to support members from their own authorities to help manage the meeting. It was important to balance the need to share information widely with the need to manage meetings.

3. Future Work Programme

The future work programme for the network was considered. The impact of COVID-19, recovery and restoration would feature strongly in all topics.

- Housing – to be included on the next Members Network meeting
- Skills and Employment – development of National Industrial Strategy
- Poverty
- Climate Change
- High Streets – their decline exacerbated by the effects of COVID-19 and lockdown
- Transformation
- Arson and Deliberate Fires – County Durham and Darlington have highest rate of primary fires in the country, with Tyne and Wear and Cleveland close behind
- Transport

Other topics suggested

- Digital Inclusion linked with poverty
- Mental Health Adults and Children

It was suggested transport was a key issue for the region and should be high on the list.

It was commented that the response and recovery to COVID-19 could be a standing item on the agenda to help share good practice across the region.

A list of speakers on the topics would be identified and added to the programme. In the meantime, officers were asked for any suggestions for potential contributors.

It was noted that Cllr Martin Gannon was the lead for regional transport, and it was queried whether it would be appropriate to have an Executive members attend a scrutiny network. Phil Meikle was also suggested.

In terms of poverty, Heather Brown from Newcastle University had done some good work on the relationships between health and wealth. The charity Children North East had helped on some work on school uniforms, poverty proofing and Mental health,

4. CfGS update

Ed Hammond advised work was ongoing at a national level to clarify what would happen after May when the emergency regulations enabling remote local authority meetings to be held would end. It was of concern that at a time when social distancing was still in place councils would have to hold the annual meetings.

Hertfordshire County Council was bringing action with ASDO to ask for the Court's judgement to clarify the position on the wording of S4 of Schedule 12A of the LGA 1972. Their argument was that current legislation allowed for remote meetings depending on the interpretation of 'place'. It was hoped the judgement would enable remote meetings to continue after May. There was no date set for the case to be heard as yet. The Government has argued there would be a need to have primary legislation in place to allow remote meetings to continue and there was not enough Parliamentary time for this to happen.

Ed Hammond updated the meeting on plans for health scrutiny under the new arrangements set out in the recent Health White Paper. He stated the assumption was that scrutiny would be transacted at a system level which was of concern. The best option would be for it to be transacted at the place level that is to be carried out locally. The removal of the power of local health scrutiny committees to make a referral to the Secretary of State for a significant change to services was also a worry. Although it is a power that is used sparingly it is an important facet of health scrutiny.

There is a planned wider power of intervention by the Secretary of State over ICS. The Secretary of State is expected to keep a watching brief on every variation of service and this would require a substantial resource to do this effectively. This function is currently provided by health scrutiny at a local level.

Stephen Gwilym added that documentation on the future of ICSs had been put out discreetly without local government knowledge and it had been a challenge to submit a collective response. The size and scope of the ICS was a matter of concern and an emphasis on place arrangements was a missed opportunity. In terms of commissioning, the development of commissioning power and resources from the centre to the region would be a positive.

The withdrawal of power back to the Secretary of State would inevitably mean that accountability would also be drawn back to Whitehall and Ed Hammond questioned whether it would have the capacity or skills required.

Ed Hammond referred to what appeared to be missing from the White Paper. It seemed to have been written from an NHS perspective and partnership was on NHS terms. It was unsure at this stage what the Bill would look like, but it was expected to come forward quickly. Any opportunity to influence what is in the Bill was limited. The CfGS had been in conversation with the Bill Team. He

suggested that he may be able to secure some representatives from the Bill Team for the next member Network meeting.

5. North East Regional Member/Officer Scrutiny Network 26 March 2021 - Agenda

- Housing – including impact of COVID-19 on service
- Regional Scrutiny Terms of Reference
- Future Work programme
- CfGS update including update on health scrutiny

6. Any Other Business

None.