



Coventry City Council

# 15

## Public report

### **REPORT BACK ON CONFERENCE/SEMINAR**

**REPORT TO:** Scrutiny Co-ordination Committee                      **Date:** 13<sup>th</sup> December, 2006  
**REPORT OF:** Councillor Williams and Corinne Steele (Scrutiny Co-ordinator)  
**TITLE:** Centre for Public Scrutiny Parliamentary Seminar Series 2006-2007  
Safer and Stronger Communities  
**DATE:** 25<sup>th</sup> June, 2006  
**VENUE:** London

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#### **1. Recommendation**

The Committee is recommended to note this report.

#### **2. Background**

**2.1** The Centre for Public Scrutiny runs a Select Committee seminar programme each year and places are always extremely limited - we have applied for places in the past and been unsuccessful. The programme for the seminar is attached as Appendix 1 to this report.

**2.2** We attended the morning Select Committee Session and found it both interesting and informative. We noted particularly that the Committee confined their input to asking questions and receiving information and did not make statements about their own opinions.

**2.3** This was followed by presentations by Dr. Phyllis Starkey and Jessica Mulley (respectively Chair and Joint Clerk of the Communities and Local Government Select Committee) on their roles.

**2.4** The main points made by Dr. Starkey were:

- Committees aimed for consensus in their work and particularly in their reports, as this made their recommendations more powerful and influential.
- Committees should carry out enquiries only when they could add something useful.
- Enquiry topics were limited to about 3 per year, decided by the members themselves (by negotiation).
- Committees are provided with briefs about the topics and have pre-meetings before questioning sessions, to decide who will ask questions. They do not have political pre-meetings.
- Recommendations must be well argued and evidence-based. The Government must respond to Committees' recommendations, but do not have to accept them.
- Committees have the right to insist that witnesses attend questioning sessions, but rarely need to do this because witnesses are invariably keen to attend.

## **2.5** The main points made by Jessica Mulley were:

- although Committees had forward plans for their work, their programmes were subject to frequent change when urgent issues arose.
- she re-emphasised the need for Committees to work consensually and for Committees to add value to the political process.
- Each Committee has up to 6 support staff, including researchers.
- One of the main constraints on the work of Committees is the amount of time members can commit.
- Committees do not normally carry out primary research. Their main function is to find out about people's experiences of how policies are working in practice.
- Committees' objectives are to effect change in policies and perceptions and provide a forum for those views which might hitherto not have been heard. Success could be measured by changing policies for the better; but it would not be a failure if a policy was found to be working well, as this would still show that the Government was being held to account.

## **2.6** The afternoon was devoted to a Scrutiny Clinic relating to scrutiny and the Safer and Stronger Communities block of Local Area Agreements. Group discussions were held on the following:

- Holding partners and partnerships to account
- Evidence and impartiality in assessing the delivery of Safer and Stronger Communities
- The "Community Call for Action" (included in the Police and Justice Bill)

A list of the main points coming out of these discussions is attached as Appendix 2.

## **3. Cost of Attendance**

The Seminar itself was free. Travel costs totalled £188.

## **4. Benefits of attending**

**4.1** The main benefit was seeing and hearing about how Select Committees do their work: we were able to see at first hand how effective skilful questioning can be. It showed particularly the importance of probing issues by following up initial questions and answers with further questions.

**4.2** It also provided the opportunity to share experiences and to discuss issues with representatives of other local authorities.

## **5. Date of Cabinet Approval**

17<sup>th</sup> October, 2006 (Minute106/06 refers).

List of background papers

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Papers open to Public Inspection : Nil

## APPENDIX 1

**The Centre for Public Scrutiny - Parliamentary Seminar Series 2006-07  
Safer and Stronger Communities, 25<sup>th</sup> October 2006  
Portcullis House (House of Commons), London  
MacMillan Room**

### PROGRAMME

Participants are encouraged to attend one of the optional live select committee sessions as detailed below, either before or after the formal seminar sessions, in order to experience committee activities first hand.

<p><b>09.30 – 10.45 OPTIONAL: Live Select Committee Session</b></p> <p>09.30 Education and Skills Select Committee: Sustainable Schools, The Wilson Room</p>
<p><b>10.45 – 11.00 Welcome refreshments</b></p>
<p><b>11.00-12.35 – How Select Committees Work</b></p> <p><b>Jessica Mulley, Joint Clerk, DCLG Committee, House of Commons</b> Jessica will give a 'start to finish' view of the Parliamentary scrutiny system, including an insight into Select Committee activities.</p>
<p><b>12.35 – 13.35 – Dr Phyllis Starkey MP, Chair: Communities and Local Government Select Committee</b></p> <p>The Chair will explain their role in the Select Committee system and how Parliament's scrutiny system contributes to improved democracy.</p>
<p><b>13.35 - 14.00 – Lunch</b></p> <p>A modest sandwich lunch will be served</p>
<p><b>14.00 – 15.15 – Scrutiny Clinic</b></p> <p>CfPS will moderate a 'scrutiny clinic' session, in which participants will discuss specific challenges around scrutinising the LAA block that has been selected for the day's discussion. Participants will be asked to submit challenges anonymously in advance of each seminar.</p>
<p><b>15.15 – 16.00 OPTIONAL – Select Committee Hearing</b></p> <p>15.30 Public Accounts Committee: Child Support Agency: implementation of the child support reforms (participants may need to be directed to main House – the room has not yet been confirmed)</p>

## APPENDIX 2

### CfPS Parliamentary Seminar: Safer and Stronger Communities

#### Scrutiny Clinic Results – “Top Tips”

##### **1) Working with partners and partnerships**

- It is important to regularly review the aims of partnerships and to ensure that all targets are clear
- Ensure that all roles and responsibilities and terms of reference are brought up to speed with any changes that may occur over time
- Develop systems to effectively collect feedback from the partnership and to communicate its achievements to the Council, e.g. via an Annual Report.
- Do not underestimate the importance of good communication in terms of building relationships and increasing the general level of understanding of scrutiny’s role.
- Maintain a strong focus on what the partnership is charged with achieving.
- Ensure all members work in an open and transparent manner and that all information is shared.
- Make use of examples of good/best practise.
- Recognise the importance of public perceptions: what is going on on the ground is important!
- Allow the public to quiz partnerships – i.e. the Police, Council and Community partnerships – so that all sides understand the aims of the partnership and the benefits of such procedures.

##### **2) Evidence and Impartiality**

- Ensure a wide breadth of evidence is presented and that partial evidence is properly challenged.
- Talk to residents and community groups in order to get an indication of levels of unrecorded crime etc – the police only work on reported crime figures. How does scrutiny have the capacity to uncover other evidence? Ensure Members make the best use of their ward roles.
- Make good use of publicity: the (local) press are very good at reporting what’s wrong in a locality so provide them with evidence of positive developments, and encourage them to report it! This will have a knock-on effect on public perceptions of crime/the fear of crime.
- Draw on the community leadership role of Members in order to dissect statistics and get to the heart of an issue.

##### **3) Community Call for Action**

- Overview and Scrutiny committees must be swift in responding to Community Calls for Action (CCfA), otherwise engagement with

communities will be lost. Response approaches must also lead to a solution.

- Make use of informal processes, such as working groups, to really understand a community.
- Make use of interest groups: use their evidence to calibrate the extent of a problem as there may be wider implications than those indicated in the CCfA – analyse the extent of problem.
- As a CCfA will, by its nature, focus on a very specific issue, use it as a “strategic lever” to look at an issue from a wider perspective, for example on a Local Area Agreement level.
- Consider that there are likely to be a number of localised committees where such work is already being undertaken: could the CCfA cut out this level? Encourage OSC Members to draw on the experiences of these local committee members. Consider using these committees as a “filter system” for complaints coming up.
- Consider developing an assessment system/ set of criteria by which Members can progress a CCfA: draw up a defined and accessible system by which complaints will be handled.
- Ensure broad representation on the committee, preferably representation that can be flexible according to issue. Consider co-opting members as appropriate, i.e. somebody from the Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnership when dealing with crime –related issues.