



Coventry City Council

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Public report

REPORT BACK ON CONFERENCE/SEMINAR

REPORT TO: Scrutiny Co-ordination Committee

REPORT OF: Councillor Clifford

TITLE: Small Print, Big Picture

DATE: 22nd July 2008

VENUE: London

1. Recommendation

Scrutiny Co-ordination Committee is recommended to note the launch of the guide for Scrutinising Public-Private Partnerships at the Conference.

2. Background

The Centre for Public Scrutiny (CfPS) promotes the value of scrutiny in modern and effective government - not only to hold executives to account but also to create a constructive dialogue between the public and its elected representatives - to improve the quality of public services.

It organised this conference on 22nd July to consider the role of scrutiny in scrutinising services that are supplied by a range of providers and used the Conference to launch a new guide.

3. Cost of attending

The costs of attending the CfPS Conference were:

Registration fee	£150.00
Train ticket to London	£75.50

4. Benefits

John Tizard's foreword to the guide, shown below, summarises the key messages from the seminar that no service provider should be immune from being scrutinised and provides helpful advice for both members and officers.

4.1 Public-Private Partnerships & Scrutiny

I welcome this publication which is one of the first manifestations of a new strategic partnership between the Centre for Public Scrutiny and the Centre for Public Service Partnerships.

Local authority accountability for the use of resources and the delivery of local public services is a fundamental element of local democracy. This accountability should not be diminished when a local authority decides to procure services from providers other than itself. Increasingly local services are being supplied by a range of public, third and business sector providers; and being commissioned and procured either directly by local authorities or in partnership with others such as the local Primary Care Trust or the Police; or by communities and individuals using monies delegated by the local authority.

Scrutiny is critical to any local authority's accountability and its leadership of place. Scrutiny and overview are to be championed as political activities which empower communities and contribute to their well being.

No service provider should be immune from being answerable for performance and behaviour both contractually and through questioning by councillors. Equally no client – commissioner or procurer – should be exempt from scrutiny. Traditionally the prime accountability has been a contractual one and this should remain paramount but there is scope, as many authorities have demonstrated, to involve business and third sector providers in the scrutiny and overview process. The benefits are many.

Such action enables councillors to be satisfied or not that the services represent value for money; are meeting the needs and choices of local people; and the client function of the authority is fit for purpose. Scrutineers should also want to test commissioning, procurement and client competencies (managerial and political) and achievements within their authority.

Provider engagement in the scrutiny and overview process also provides access to specialist knowledge and experience when considering new service provision or major change; and for policy development. Providers that are wishing to be partners and not simply contractors will be keen to contribute to these processes and many do.

The CfPS has identified some exemplar practice in some local authorities and we are sure that there is much more. However, there are still some authorities and some providers which seek to avoid exposure of the providers to the politicians, especially through the scrutiny and overview processes. All should be encouraged to see this as a positive and normal part of partnering or contracting between various providers, local public sector partners and local government. This can be mutually beneficial. It can, for example, enable a provider to explain what it has been contracted to deliver and how it is performing against these requirements; and to share challenges as well as successes.

There is a need for protocols on how to:

- engage providers in scrutiny and overview
- promote transparency of performance and commercial issues whilst recognising that there may be need to handle commercially sensitive matters
- engaging service users, staff and other informed and interested stakeholders in the process
- balance the needs of commercial contractual client management with councillor scrutiny

- enable service providers to contribute to policy development without prejudicing procurement and probity regulations
- train and equip those engaged in these processes from all parties to maximise the benefits

The Centre for Public Scrutiny and the Centre for Public Service Partnerships are ready and keen to work with local government, other public sector bodies and business and third sector providers to develop such protocols in a manner which enhances both accountability and service outcomes.

John Tizard

Director of the Centre for Public Service Partnerships and Member of CfPS Advisory Board

List of background papers

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Papers open to public inspection

Description of paper:

Small Print, Big Picture: A guide to Scrutinising Public-Private Partnerships

Location:

<http://www.cfps.org.uk/pdf/publications/87.pdf>

Approved by Cabinet on: 15th July 2008

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