

PUBLIC PARTICIPATION AT HEREFORDSHIRE COUNCIL'S SCRUTINY COMMITTEES

Report By: County Secretary and Solicitor

Wards Affected

1. County-wide

Purpose

2. To consider increasing public participation at all of Herefordshire Council's Scrutiny Committee meetings.

Financial Implications

3. The proposals would incur additional expenditure on publicity. This would have to be met from existing service budgets.

Background

4. In preparing for the meeting of the Community Services Scrutiny Committee on 13th June 2005, the Chairman Councillor A.C.R. Chappell decided that he wanted to explore ways of enhancing the scope for members of the public to ask questions and encouraging them to contribute at Community Services Scrutiny Committee meetings. His wish was two-fold:
 - i) That members of the public be able to suggest issues which they would like to scrutinised; and
 - ii) That members of the public should be able to ask questions and contribute to the debate at scrutiny committee meetings.
5. The Constitution already contains a general provision allowing Scrutiny Committees to invite public participation at their meetings (Standing Order no. 7.3.2). After consultation with the Chairman of the Strategic Monitoring Committee, it was agreed to pilot a scheme that explicitly enabled the public to participate at the meeting of the Community Services Scrutiny Committee on 13th June 2005.
6. It was decided that a clear protocol was required so that public participation at Scrutiny Committee meetings could be effectively managed. A copy of the protocol included in the agenda for the pilot meeting of the Community Services Scrutiny Committee as a public information sheet, is attached at Appendix 1 to this report.

Action

7. A specific item was added to the Community Services Scrutiny Committee agenda as the first main item after the Committee's statutory business titled: 'suggestions from members of the public on issues for public scrutiny'.

Further information on the subject of this report is available from
Marie Rosenthal, County Secretary and Solicitor on 01432 260200

8. In relation to members of the public asking questions at scrutiny committee meetings it was decided to invite questions directly related to items listed on the agenda. To ensure that any questions from members of the public could be answered at the meeting it was requested that any questions should be submitted to the relevant Committee Officer no later than two working days before the meeting. However, as the protocol notes it was expected that the public would also be able to contribute to the discussion at the meeting.

Outcome of Pilot

9. Two suggested items for scrutiny were proposed, one of which, on County Museums will be considered against other priorities in the Committee's work programme. The other related to licensing. It was noted that this was outside the Committee's remit and the Chairman requested further information from the questioner.
10. No questions were received in advance of the Committee's meeting, despite the appearance of an article in the Hereford Journal inviting questions. At the meeting the Chairman did allow two questions from members of the public for which advance notice had not been received.
11. There were 23 Members of the public present and the Chairman exercised his discretion to invite them to contribute.

Conclusion

12. Enhancing public participation at Scrutiny Committee meetings would represent a positive development of the scrutiny function. If successfully managed it should be one means of encouraging greater engagement from the public. However, putting the mechanism in place would need to be accompanied both at an early stage in planning work programmes and again at the agenda preparation stage by a greater focus on making each meeting an event of public significance and interest and by ensuring that press releases are issued before each meeting. The Committee is asked to consider whether it wishes to apply the piloted arrangements to all scrutiny committees.

RECOMMENDATION

THAT the Committee considers whether it wished to extend public participation at Herefordshire Council's Scrutiny Committee meetings, as set out in Appendix 1 to the report.

BACKGROUND PAPERS

- None