

Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Combined Authority

Scrutiny improvement review (SIR): action plan

16 July 2021

Contact: Ed Hammond / ed.hammond@cfgs.org.uk

This action plan relates to a scrutiny improvement review (SIR) carried out by CfGS in the early summer of 2021. This was put to members of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 28 June and agreed. Members met subsequently remotely on 12 July to discuss in more detail how to take forward this commitment to change. This action plan is based on the outcomes of that discussion.

This paper sets out the agreed actions and then sets out a possible timetable for their implementation. The detail of the timetable (which sets out possible actions week by week until September, and thereafter monthly) is subject to review but in the broadest sense, it envisages the agreement of basic systems for information sharing and work programming over the summer, initial dialogue with the new Mayor running parallel, and the design of a set-piece Mayor's Question Time session over the same period. The plan assumes that the first MQT session will occur in late September and that this will assist members in clarifying their work programming priorities for the rest of the year.

The plan does not, for the moment, set out detailed proposals for engagement with the wider CA Board or with other CA partners. However such communication is likely to be necessary, probably after the committee meeting in September.

Agreed actions

Action 1: The Chair to convene an informal session for the committee to explore and decide on a renewed and more explicit focus for their work.

This focus will need to be based on:

- An understanding of the new Mayor's priorities and where opportunities to influence action on those priorities might exist;
- An awareness of the responsibilities and work programmes of other member forums – in particular, the audit committee and executive committees, and the scrutiny functions of constituent authorities;
- The need for the committee to continue to robustly hold the Mayor to account, and for the profile of this work to be enhanced.

Following this session the results should be fed informally to the Mayor and CA Board and senior officers to ensure that they have an opportunity to contribute to the recasting of the function. It should be stressed that how scrutiny chooses to change is a matter for scrutiny members themselves.

Action 2: The Chair, the Mayor and the CA Monitoring Officer to begin meeting regularly to ensure that the strategic purpose of scrutiny is understood and acted on (see also Action 8).

Action 3: When a clear role and purpose for scrutiny can be clearly articulated, work on internal communications to be carried out to ensure that this is understood by the wider CA (including CA Board members and officers).

In due course it may be that relationships would be assisted through the agreement of a protocol between the scrutiny function and the Mayor/CA, although time should be taken for new arrangements to bed time before action is taken here.

The approach described here should feed directly into the approach we suggest below on work programming.

Action 4: CA officers, in support of the Chair, to engage with constituent councils to better understand

- **how their nominated members can be better supported, and**
- **how the business of CA scrutiny can be administered to support members to attend and engage with the work of the function**

This will inform decisions on work programming, below.

Action 5: a role profile setting out mutual expectations for scrutiny members – including around information access, support arrangements and requirements around commitment – to be agreed and circulated.

While this will provide a useful part of an induction process for new members it could also form part of a wider guide to scrutiny at the CA which would be of use to members more generally.

Action 6: a new approach to the sharing of information with scrutiny members which involves:

- **an end to the regular sharing, and scrutiny of, Mayoral decisions at committee, with information being shared on an ongoing basis outside of committee to inform the appropriate escalation of issues to committee based on need;**
- **more clarity to members in the management of items and reports deemed to be exempt from publication**
- **the assignment of individual councillors to act as “rapporteurs”, to develop a subject expertise in specified areas of policy, to highlight issues of importance to the chair for escalation to committee and potentially to lead on questioning on such matters.**

Work programming discussions should lead to the use of information to identify one or two substantive items per committee agenda, consideration of which could benefit from external witnesses or the consideration of evidence wider than just officer reports. Scrutiny would discuss matters of strategic concern to the CA and the wider area – linked to Mayoral priorities and decision-making but not directly to the run of decisions in the forward plan.

We set out below how the agendas for these meetings would be put together. The subject matter for such agendas would still need to be informed by evidence.

Action 7: use of shared information, the forward plan and frequent Chair/Mayor/MO conversations to identify forthcoming decisions, and to discuss the developing work programme.

The parties to this conversation would be able to bring together an awareness of the ongoing business of the audit committee, Mayoral committees and the Business Board. There may be cause to engage in separate bilateral conversations with the chair of the audit committee has time continues. Based on these conversations the Chair and others would agree how and where information on Mayoral / CA activity would be shared with the committee for information, and to inform their judgements on the content of the work programme¹.

¹ In local authorities it is generally recommended that a regular “information digest” be prepared containing management information about the authority about its services, allowing members to keep a watching business over such matters. In a combined authority context there is less logic in the preparation of such a document / suite of documents – a bespoke approach to the proportionate sharing of information is likely to be needed, particularly if some is subject to circulation restrictions. Generally speaking though where a clear, defined role exists for the scrutiny function it should be easier to determine what information scrutiny requires to support that role.

Action 8: in the short term, the scheduling of regular, short, informal sessions for the committee to discuss and agree work programming priorities.

These meetings would be informed by the chair/MO/Mayor discussions mentioned above, and be scheduled so as to allow officer reports to be prepared in good time for committee which better meet members' needs.

Our expectation would be that once people are comfortable with the new arrangements these meetings could become e-mails.

Action 9: move forward with a proportionate approach to targeted task and finish working in the medium term

Capacity and resource to take forward on work programming is limited. For this reason we suggest a temporary delay in the establishment of separate task and finish working. Using September and October to clarify arrangements in committee, providing the opportunity for them to bed in, will ensure that the use of task and finish working can be taken forward from November onwards – based on a clear understanding from members about the commitment required to make such arrangements work. When it does begin, task and finish working should be focused, delivering short and sharp pieces of work which report back to committee quickly.

Action 10: the programming of a regular and general Mayor's Question Time to allow high profile, direct holding to account of the Mayor to continue

An MQT process would need to be modelled in a way that provides members with support to ask high quality questions at what would be a set piece event. Officer support on questioning would be needed to support these sessions – including the possibility of a committee pre-meeting immediately before the session.

Depending on the success in designing this approach (and resting on how the Mayor chooses to make decisions alongside the Board) the scrutiny of CA Board members might also follow this model.

Action 11: work by the MO and others to consider how scrutiny can productively be engaged in the ongoing governance of SPVs

This is contingent on the new Mayor making clear how he wishes to take service delivery forwards, and whether SPVs as currently organised provide his preferred mechanism for doing so.

Proposed timescale

Timescale (weeks commencing)	Action
12/7/21	<p>Information meeting (Action 1) to discuss way forward. This action plan developed and sent to members. Initial communication with the Mayor about scrutiny improvement plans.</p>
19/7/21	<p>Meeting between the Chair, Vice-Chair and Mayor (and involving officers) to discuss mutual expectations, and scrutiny's plans for improvement. The outcomes of this meeting will be sent to councillors and will be used where necessary to refine this plan. This begins to fulfil commitments under Action 2, and would be followed up with the schedule of subsequent regular meetings.</p> <p>Following this meeting the Mayor to be engaged in the early planning for the Mayor's Question Time session in September.</p>
26/7/21	<p>Communication with scrutiny members setting out</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • possible arrangements for first MQT session in September (Action 10). The MQT session will need to be focused, and following discussions with councillors on 12/7, this focus could be on better understanding the new Mayor's priorities and objectives and mechanisms by which his success can be judged. This communication would set out possible approaches for co-ordinating and managing questions on the day in order to maximise the impact of the session; • possible arrangements for the sharing of information on an ongoing basis (Action 6). Part of the justification for stopping regular review of Mayoral decision-making is the expectation that from now on information on key matters should be shared with councillors earlier. This process will need to be consistent, transparent and comprehensive. This communication can set out a possible way forward on these issues before detailed plans are developed.

2/8/21	
9/8/21	<p>Conversations with Mayor, Board and senior officers continue (Action 2). By this point we would expect an emerging picture of the kind of information on Mayoral / CA activity which would be shared regularly, and on the likely content and timescale for forthcoming Mayoral plans.</p>
16/8/21	<p>Communication with constituent councils. This communication should be directed at council's Monitoring Officers and/or Democratic Services Managers, copying in the Chair of Scrutiny at the council in question and the council's nominated scrutiny councillor on the CA. It would highlight the changes to scrutiny being made at the CA and invite early reflections on how members can be supported, particularly on attendance at meetings. The expectation should be that thoughts on these matters would be gathered and considered in the early autumn. This relates to Action 4.</p>
23/8/21	<p>Agenda despatch for first informal work programming session (in w/c 30/8)</p>
30/8/21	<p>Late August Bank Holiday</p> <p>First informal session for committee members to discuss and agree work programming priorities. By this point councillors should be able to get a good sense of emerging Mayoral priorities and objectives, plans for the strategies and systems which will deliver those priorities, and the information about Mayoral decision-making which they can expect to see on a regular basis.</p> <p>Our assumption is that these priorities will rest around transport, housing and growth, and these might be used to frame discussions.</p> <p>This meeting would also be used to plan for the first MQT session as well as to think ahead on possible work programme priorities beyond September. This relates to Actions 7 and 8. A work programme based on this discussion would be submitted to committee on 27/9.</p>

<p>6/9/21</p>	<p>Chair meets with Mayor (Action 2). At the discretion of the committee the Chair might share headline information about the overall themes that members will want to tackle in the MQT session at the end of the month.</p>
<p>13/9/21</p>	<p>Final agreement on information sharing arrangements. This might be the point at which a broad suite of information, the terms of which are agreed to over the summer, begins to be shared with members. This first tranche of information would help members to clarify their areas of focus for MQT.</p> <p>Agenda despatch for meeting on 27/9</p>
<p>20/9/21</p>	<p>(At members' discretion) Informal remote meeting to discuss tactics and approach for MQT session.</p>
<p>27/9/21</p>	<p>Committee meeting. This will involve:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The first Mayor's Question Time (Action 10). The terms of engagement for this session will have been set over the summer as set out above. This will constitute the bulk of the meeting; • Formal agreement of new information sharing arrangements. This would also include formal advice on the management of exempt information (Action 6) • Agreement of a work programme which takes account of the above and which takes account of an agreed focus for scrutiny reflecting CfGS's work and members' agreement (Action 1 and 7)
<p>October</p>	<p>Washup / debrief from 27/9 session</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Informal session for members (incorporating work programming discussions for November's meeting, Action 7); • Discussions between Chair and Mayor; • Reflections on whether the MQT format requires refinement. <p>Communications within the CA on scrutiny's new focus and the systems which support that focus, as agreed on 27/9 (Action 3)</p>

	<p>Communication with other external stakeholders on scrutiny's activities.</p> <p>Continued conversations with constituent authorities on councillor support arrangements. This will include, over the course of this month:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • First draft of a general member role profile, for circulation; • First draft of a possible approach on rapporteurs / lead members.
November	<p>Committee meeting (22/11)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Substantive debate and scrutiny on Mayoral priorities / plans / other matters identified by members in November; • Work programme further refined to identify possible task and finish topic(s) for late winter/early spring (Action 9) • Advice from the MO (possibly provided at committee) on possible approaches to ongoing scrutiny of SPVs, if relevant, followed by discussion and agreement (Action 11). • Agreement of member role profile and individuals to act as rapporteurs / lead members (Action 6).
December	<p>Regular information sharing (Action 6)</p> <p>Informal work programming session with councillors (Actions 7 and 8)</p>
January	<p>Committee meeting (24/1)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Possible reporting back of findings of task and finish group, depending on topic and scope.
February	<p>Regular information sharing (Action 6)</p> <p>Informal work programming session with councillors (Actions 7 and 8)</p>

March

Committee meeting (22/3)

- Possible time for second MQT