

Note of conversation with South Cambridgeshire DC – Lucinda Bell, Oct 2019

A local DC with a change of administration in 2017 from Conservative to Lib Dem majority. There are now 45 councillors: 30 Lib Dem, 11 Conservative, 2 Labour and 2 Independent. Pre-scrutiny introduced in 2018.

New admin modified existing Leader and Cabinet model, which is now considered to be working well. 7 members of Cabinet, including two deputies.

Emphasis on effective pre-scrutiny, introduced in 2018. Large agendas for this committee, but Cabinet meetings are shorter as decision makers are well informed and benefit from input of Overview and Scrutiny Committee (O and SC) input. Decisions tend to be taken collectively by the whole of Cabinet rather than by Lead Cabinet Members, but some decisions are taken outside of meetings by Lead Cabinet Members where there is a delegation.

Resourcing and training has been key. New post created – scrutiny and governance adviser. Democratic services post is separate.

Members have received training from Centre for Public Scrutiny. They also received and benefited from lots of training especially on areas such as planning.

Frequency and timing of meeting cycle: Monthly Cabinet meetings at which decisions are taken. Monthly O and SC meetings. Previously meetings were quarterly.

Role of O and SC: scrutinises reports etc before they go to Cabinet. Makes recommendations where appropriate. Not all decisions go through pre-scrutiny; the scrutiny and governance adviser meets monthly with the O and SC Chairman and Vice Chairman to go through the items scheduled for Cabinet and they will decide which items O and SC should consider in advance of the Cabinet meeting, with the focus being on where they think value can be added by doing so.

Strong chair of scrutiny is essential (opposition party member) and vice chair (Lib Dem). They work in a consensual, non partisan way.

Two advisory committees additionally: climate and environment and grants, which advise Cabinet directly. No overlap with scrutiny for these issues.

The change to more effective scrutiny has been very successful. Feeling that maybe policy and strategy has been neglected a bit as a result of the time and resources taken to bring about the changes to the governance model, but this is being addressed.

I spoke by phone to Victoria Wallace, Scrutiny and Governance Adviser. S Cambs happy to meet our members to discuss.