

New Political Management Arrangements **SCRUTINY THE MEANS: IMPROVEMENT THE END**

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A variation on these notes was published as an article in the Municipal Journal

Scrutiny has almost universally been the most difficult aspect of the new political arrangements to get up and running. There are three levels which make fresh demands upon both elected members and officers and all are critical to improving the scrutiny activity:

- Framing the overall scrutiny activity as an improvement process which requires different preparation, different meetings and different follow through from traditional committees;
- Focusing the scrutiny process by improving questioning skills, modifying behaviour and changing the culture;
- Making effective relationships with other Council forums and working across the new “separation of powers”.

1) **Framing the scrutiny activity**

For scrutiny to be effective there must be a shared understanding by members and officers of the overall activity. It requires an agreed and clear process which addresses the following four issues:

- The choice of topic – how, when and what is chosen?
- The preparation – is appropriate evidence being collected, analysed, visits arranged and officers involved?
- The debate and decision at the meetings - are the crucial issues identified, pursued and improvements agreed?
- The follow-up – is the scrutiny forum’s work effective influencing the Council’s activities and the results monitored?

A process chart devised in one authority is attached.

2) **Developing scrutiny skills**

An agreed framework of questions. While it is, almost by definition, impossible to know what deficiencies will emerge and need rectifying in any scrutiny process we have found it beneficial to have an agreed checklist of questions. These we have framed around the Best Value 4Cs but applied where appropriate to any item on the scrutiny agenda. A sample set of questions is attached.

Identified areas in which behaviour and culture need to change in your authority. This has led to different changes in different authorities. Some typical changes have been:

- focusing upon improvement and value added qualities rather than on party tribalism and point scoring as the primary task of scrutiny forums;
- individual members taking responsibility for familiarising themselves with the subject (possible with visits) and personally researching the subject;
- seeking the views of users and stakeholders in different and more active ways;
- increasing officer support to scrutiny members:
 - a) service and performance data and analysis of it – typically the responsibility of the relevant service department;
 - b) advice on what and how subjects need to be considered – typically this comes best from officers independent of the service delivery;
- providing documents that are clear, brief, well illustrated and sign post critical – we called them “crunch” – issues for debate and decision;
- chairing of scrutiny discussions which is inclusive, thematic (not allowing lots of topics at once) and sticks to the critical areas with potential for improvement;
- agreeing what specific action should follow, its timing, responsible persons and report-back mechanisms.

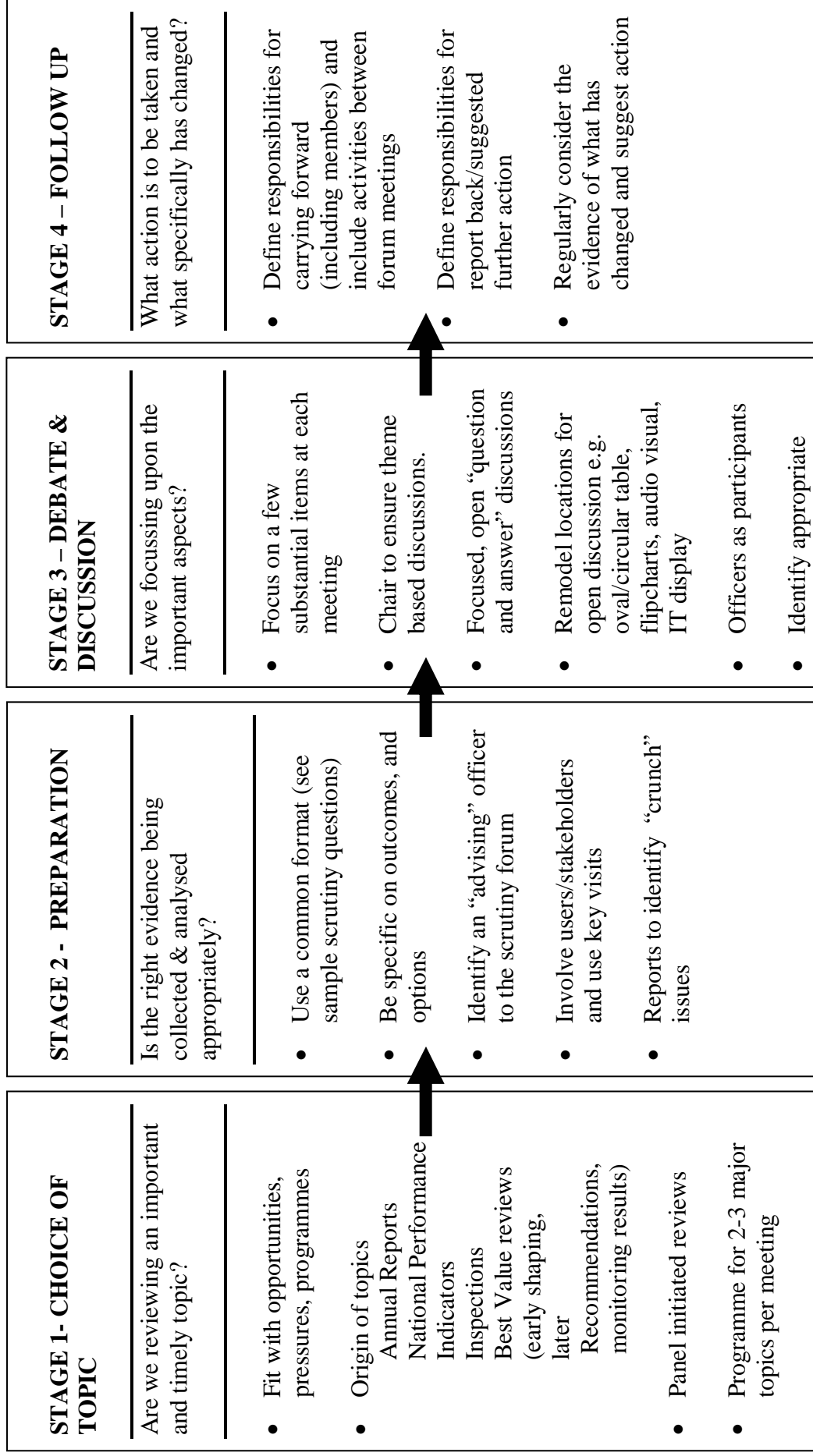
3) Making the new connections and building effective relationships

Creating new forums and establishing their roles and practices is only one part of making the new arrangements work. Making the connections is proving to be as difficult. Many authorities are finding that members and officers get a better grasp of the whole process by using workshop sessions to “walk through” the new arrangements and devising guidance or ground rules to deal with issues that emerge. Typically with scrutiny processes we are finding three types of connection are crucial:-

- with the cabinet as a whole and portfolio holders in particular – establishing a working relationship which is collaborative yet independent and challenging;
- drawing together cross cutting services which are notoriously the part responsibility of many departments and remain so unless challenged;
- ensuring that all the modernised forums are re-connected in an explicit and commonly understood manner

Scrutiny is perhaps the most problematic aspect of the modernisation agenda. Done well it contributes powerfully to the Council’s effectiveness and enhances the role of non-executive members. Done poorly and it will be wasteful and divisive.

SCRUTINY / PERFORMANCE REVIEW PROCESS



<h2>SAMPLE SCRUTINY QUESTIONS</h2>

<p>1. TERMS OF REFERENCE</p> <p>1.1 What is the scope of review?</p> <p>1.2 What outcomes are being sought?</p> <p>1.3 Why now?</p>	<p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p>
<p>2. CHALLENGE</p> <p>2.1 Why is the service provided?</p> <p>2.2 Why are we providers? Why are others providers?</p> <p>2.3 Why is the service to these standards? (public need or expectation/ policy laid down /professional judgement?)</p>	<p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p>
<p>3. CONSULT</p> <p>3.1 What are the views of service users?</p> <p>3.2 What are the views of stakeholders (others with an interest)?</p>	<p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p>
<p>4. COMPARE</p> <p>4.1 How does quality compare?</p> <p>4.2 How do our unit-costs compare?</p> <p>4.3 How do outcome standards relate to costs (e.g. VFM)?</p> <p>4.4 How do satisfaction levels compare?</p>	<p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p>
<p>5. COMPETE</p> <p>5.1 What evidence is there of competitive prices?</p> <p>5.2 Could the same outcomes be achieved at a lower cost? What are the implications?</p>	<p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p>
<p>6. CONTINUAL IMPROVEMENT</p> <p>6.1 What specific improvement outcomes/targets have been set?</p> <p>6.2 What needs to happen to deliver these targets?</p> <p>6.3 How and when will outcomes/targets be reviewed?</p>	<p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p>