ROYAL BOROUGH OF KENSINGTON AND CHELSEA

**FAMILY AND CHILDREN'S SERVICES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
1 FEBRUARY 2011**

DEEP LEVEL SCRUTINY – MINI GROUPS

This paper sets out the principles of an updated working group model for in-depth review, and submits a procedure note for the Committee's consideration.

FOR DECISION

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1.   INTRODUCTION

1.1   The Family and Children's Services (FCS) Scrutiny Committee established four Mini Groups at the November 2010 committee meeting, focusing on Community Learning and Libraries, Schools and Quality Standards, Triborough Working and Family Services. At the Committee's request, a procedure note has been developed to help guide this process (see Appendix A).

2.   BACKGROUND

2.1   Deep Level Scrutiny, as piloted by the FSC Scrutiny Committee, was intended as a halfway house between the traditional report to committee and the formal in depth review process (see paper A14, 22 November agenda). This new approach has proved a useful tool for the Committee, enabling Members to give detailed consideration to the significant changes being proposed in Family and Children's Services as part of the Triborough model, without sacrificing the ability to provide a swift response reflecting the fast pace of change.

2.2   Despite the success of the Deep Level Scrutiny approach, certain topics selected for Scrutiny still require a level of attention and detail that can only be achieved outside of the formal committee process, through groups of Members giving up additional time to form working groups to investigate the subject. However, it can be argued that the traditional working group model is constrained by the formal processes that surround its outputs.

2.3   The traditional working group format consists of three or four Members, appointed by the 'parent' Scrutiny Committee, who undertake regular evidence-gathering

meetings over a lengthy period of time (on average around six to eight months, but sometime significantly more). A formal written report is then produced, capturing the evidence heard, conclusions and recommendations. This report travels through a number of committees for approval or comment and, as such, is necessarily subject to delays due to the gaps between meetings in the Council calendar. Consequently, it can take some time before recommendations are adopted and implemented and, therefore, can sometimes limit Scrutiny's ability to influence decision-making in a helpful timeframe.

2.4 This traditional model has worked well in the past for Scrutiny investigations into broad topic areas, especially those areas where a detailed written bank of evidence supporting each recommendation was of greater importance than providing a rapid response. However, it is suggested that Scrutiny Committees may need new tools to deal with the new, rapidly changing policy framework.

2.5 A new, more flexible Mini Group model is proposed in this paper. Many aspects remain the same; the Group is still established by and responsible to the 'parent' Scrutiny Committee and three or four Members is still considered the optimum membership number to generate useful debate but still reach a consensus on how to move forward. However, the elements that slow down the process have been deleted or amended, as follows:

   o Once a Scrutiny Committee has agreed to establish a Mini Group, Members of that Group can start work immediately, without waiting for a scoping report and terms of reference to be agreed at the next formal Committee meeting. Members of the Mini Group set aside time in their first meeting to agree the boundaries and desired outcomes from the Mini Group review.

   o Mini Groups are intended for the scrutiny of narrower topics than the traditional working group model. Consequently, fewer meetings will be required – Mini Groups are expected to meet twice and some may only meet once. Additional meetings can be scheduled if necessary.

   o Mini Groups do not produce formal reports for agreement by the parent Scrutiny Committee. Instead the Chairman of the Mini Group, or another Member at the invitation of the Chairman, will give a verbal update to the appropriate Scrutiny Committee meeting summarising key evidence received, conclusions drawn and any ideas for improvement that the Committee might wish to take forward. This update is captured in the Scrutiny Committee's minutes, thus providing the formal record, and Members of the Scrutiny Committee as a whole decide whether they will adopt and champion any ideas for change that have been put forward.

2.6 Two further advantages also arise from the new model, as follows:

   o Scrutiny Committees are able to add a wider range of topics to their work programme. The recently published Scrutiny Guide, produced by the Scrutiny

Steering Group, sets out the principle that each Scrutiny Committee should commit to no more than two traditional in-depth reviews over the course of a year. However, due to the shorter time commitment and less intensive bureaucratic procedures required for each Mini Group, Scrutiny Committees using this model can undertake up to four Mini Groups over the course of a year.

o The new model of working promotes an analytical approach, rather than a focus on evidence-gathering. It is expected that the majority of Mini Groups will build on previous work undertaken by the Scrutiny Committee through traditional working groups. For example, the four Mini Groups established as part of the 2010-11 FCS Scrutiny Committee's work programme all take the report of the Finance and Priorities Sub-Group as their starting point. As this strong evidence base is already available, the Mini Groups can move forward swiftly to analysis and evaluation stages within their defined topic area. It is proposed that the general theme 'towards a new form of public services' be adopted to guide and focus discussion, and emphasis be placed on scrutinising services within the context of the new national policy framework, including developing the market of providers, sharing services, localism, transparency and citizen involvement.

2.6   It is noted that not all topics will be suitable for the new Mini Group approach; some will still benefit from the longer traditional working group model and others will remain suited to a short report for the committee's agenda or a Deep Level Scrutiny session in committee. However, if the Mini Group model is demonstrated successfully by the FCS Scrutiny Committee as a useful additional tool, it may be something that other Scrutiny Committees wish to adopt in future years.

3.   RECOMMENDATIONS

3.1   It is recommended that the procedure note set out in Appendix A be adopted to guide the informal Mini Groups process.

COUNCILLOR PROFESSOR SIR ANTHONY COATES, CHAIRMAN

FAMILY AND CHILDREN'S SERVICES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Background papers: None

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