



How can the voluntary sector strengthen local government Scrutiny?

Voluntary, Community & Faith Sector Health & Wellbeing Forum
March 2019

The central purpose of scrutiny is to hold decision makers to account, examine services provided by the Council and its partners, as well as to carry out in-depth reviews into specific service areas.

For this VCF Forum, Healthwatch Sheffield worked with Sheffield City Council to shine a light on Scrutiny Committees. These committees aim to continuously improve the delivery of local public services to residents. We wanted to look at how they engage members of the public, and how the local voluntary sector can work with Scrutiny to influence further improvements.

The Forum was chaired by Judy Robinson (Chair of Healthwatch Sheffield's Strategic Advisory Group) and included a discussion panel:

Pat Midgley
Chair, Healthier
Communities and Adult
Social Care Scrutiny and
Policy Development

Denise Fox
Chair, Overview and
Scrutiny Management
Committee

**Emily Standbrook-
Shaw**
Policy and
Improvement Officer

Who else was in the room?

Attendees came from a range of organisations and backgrounds: Sheffield 50+, Age UK Sheffield, Citizens Advice Sheffield, Sheffield Save Our NHS, South Yorkshire & Bassetlaw NHS Action Group, Carterknowle & Millhouse Community Group, Sheffield Parent Carer Forum, and family carers

Presentation (view it [here](#))

Emily outlined the role that Scrutiny Committees play in Sheffield City Council – which topics are covered by which committee, who sits on the committees, and what their powers are. She also highlighted how the public can get involved by attending meetings, asking questions, contributing to calls for evidence, and speaking to Scrutiny Councilors.

Q&A session

Pat, Denise, and Emily welcomed questions from those present. Some of the key questions and discussion points are summarised below:

The role of Scrutiny Committees now includes policy development as well as Scrutiny – why was this changed?	The panel discussed the policy development aspect, and explained that this new role meant that committees can call topics in at the early stages of development and be involved with decisions from the outset.
Who decides what policies to call in?	It is the Chair of each Scrutiny Committee who ultimately decides the topics, but other members can report concerns and draw attention to issues.
What is the role of an observer like Healthwatch Sheffield?	Healthwatch Sheffield sits as an observer on the Healthier Communities and Adult Social Care Scrutiny and Policy Development Committee. This means they cannot vote, but can ask questions and feed local people's experiences into the discussion. Pat highlighted that this is extremely valuable as a way of hearing from more people.
How does Scrutiny publicise the meetings? Members of the public reported difficulty in finding the information.	Meetings are publicised on the Council's website but Councilors agreed this should be reconsidered if it is difficult to find.
Sometimes consultations have short deadlines so people don't feel like they can get involved – how can Scrutiny adapt their way of working to allow people more time?	There was a lot of discussion around this – the group agreed that 12 weeks was a good timeframe for a consultation, but Councilors added that legal processes don't always allow for this. This is a key point at which voluntary sector organisations can have a large influence, representing the views of the people they work with where there isn't time to support a large number of people to get involved themselves. There was also discussion around which topics felt appropriate to use different engagement methods e.g. consultations, coproduction, expert witnesses.
How can people feed into the work that Scrutiny committees do? Committees seem so formal, where is the local level representation?	Members of the public can raise issues to a scrutiny committee, or ask a question at a scrutiny meeting. However, the Councilors agreed that this can seem difficult to people, so they will look at putting some guidance together to clarify the process. There was also discussion about 'community assemblies' which used to provide a more local platform but unfortunately has disappeared due largely to budget cuts.

Scrutiny Committee Takeover

Margaret Kilner, Chief Officer of Healthwatch Sheffield, introduced an activity. Each table took on the role of the Health Scrutiny Committee and sat down to plan the work stream for the year ahead, discussing how they would prioritise topics and ensure they heard from as many people as possible. Responses are collated below.

How would you decide which topics to include in the forward plan?	Who would you talk to?	Agree the top 3 topics you want the opportunity to discuss at the Scrutiny Committee.
-Look at existing evidence coming out e.g. CQC SEND review, state of sheffield survey etc. -What other information is already out there? -Ask the public what they'd like us to look at – but then how do you weigh that? Is it numbers affected, or most vulnerable people, or biggest possible impact? -Public concerns -Use technology – social media	-Voluntary sector groups eg parent carer forum -Healthwatch -Take views as widely as possible -Being aware of the roles people play – voluntary sector, service user, manager etc -VCF organisations	-Health and wellbeing of parent carers -Hospital services review -Mental health for children and young people -Integration of health and social care -Adult social care -Carers voice -Access to primary care -Access to specialist consultation/treatment - Difference between different parts of the city – life expectancy/ill health
How would you plan the sessions so that they're inclusive, engaging and hear from a range of perspectives?	What would your Key Lines of Enquiry be?	How could voluntary organisations and communities contribute effectively?
-Change of venue –community based? Variable venue/times -Advertise where the people affected are likely to be -Gather information before the meeting to hear from a range of perspectives -Publicity – social media -Different ways to be involved – in person, in writing -Committee members get out into communities to hear from people directly -Awareness that voluntary sector is stretched and can't always quickly respond -Close the feedback loop	-How are people who use services views impacting? -How are they being empowered to shape them?	-They could get involved by contributing feedback: both gathering new feedback, and submitting evidence they already hold. But need time to do this. -Ask them to publicise -Action groups around particular topics are likely to have historical knowledge too which helps to identify trends