

From Cllr Angus Jenkinson for CDC O&S

To GCC re GESSC

This is extracted from a requested feedback report sent by email to the Democratic services officer Rosie Kenyon and to Sophie Benfield, who will compile the report for GCC

I have been asked for feedback.

According to the protocol, as I previously advised to you, it ought to be discussed by the members of the committee. I therefore called for a meeting to have that discussion. That has not taken place. What has happened is that we are submitting individual comments without discussion. Therefore, my first comment is that I do not think this process has been constituted in the best possible way. That said I shall endeavour to give you my considered views and suggestions for what may be needed

I don't find any structure. So I am assuming that it is a free process.

I note:

The role that overview and scrutiny can play in holding an authority's decision-makers to account **remains fundamentally important to the functioning of local democracy**. Effective local authority decision-making is crucial for sector sustainability, and this updated guidance reinforces the role that overview and scrutiny has in making such decisions.

Effective scrutiny helps secure the efficient delivery of public services and drives improvements within the authority itself. **Conversely, poor scrutiny can be indicative of wider governance, leadership and service failure.**

It is vital that councils, combined authorities and combined county authorities know the purpose of scrutiny, what effective scrutiny looks like, how to conduct it and the benefits it can bring. This guidance aims to increase understanding in all four areas.

— Ministerial overview: Overview and scrutiny: statutory guidance

General

I am disappointed by the county's organization of its economic scrutiny.

This has been reported to and discussed in the Cotswold District scrutiny committee. There we have been learning to treat scrutiny as a more active process, which includes making recommendations, sometimes creating task and finish groups, and providing genuine scrutiny. It is my experience over some two years that the county tends to use it as a reporting and talking shop not as a genuine scrutiny process, although there have been exceptions. I have valued learning about various important subjects, which offers a positive balancing position.

It should be noted that for the larger part of a year there was a gap in meetings because of organizing the transition from one scrutiny committee to

another that we are informed does the same thing as the old one did [scrutinize the county's economic strategy] — see below.

Nevertheless, the following points should be made at the outset. The point of scrutiny is to bring a kind of benevolent scepticism [my phrase] and to cultivate the stance of a critical friend. While I think that the culture at the time of my joining was a bit too much of a benevolent friend and perhaps not enough of a critical sceptic. In raising concerns as I am it is because I recognize the significance of what is being done at county level and the value of the scrutiny process. I also recognize the intelligence and in many cases the great goodwill and hard work of officers. There have been a number of cases demonstrating inside initiative and value. I also think that the committee has at times delivered value to the county as well as the process providing value via the members to the districts. It is for the sake of amplifying and refining this that I make the following comments, beginning with...

BALANCING COMMENTS

I do note however that while GEGSC still existed, we did get a preliminary report on the development of the strategy. This was provided by Ben Watts. I want to use this example to illustrate the value of that process. Part of what a scrutiny committee provides is people with competence to be able to evaluate key aspects of the economic strategy. In this case, I can personally advise that an outcome was that Mr Watts valued my input as a specialist in farming with responsibility in the Cotswold district. He Asked me for recommendations used them in the final drafting of the strategy.

Discussion of spatial strategy, garden towns and villages, integrated master plans, connective transport and other big strategic ideas have been useful in providing contextual understanding at least in the CDC area. It is given some insight into how the county is thinking and the scope of options to be considered (carefully), and in some cases perhaps taken up.

GESSC

GOVERNANCE ARRANGEMENTS : *From November 2023*: These were discussed and I and others pointed out how opaque and unclear they are. In particular, GEGSC had an overview of all GCC strategy, and it was initially quite unclear and remained unclear into the next meeting exactly what the position now is. An assurance has been given that we remain the scrutiny committee for the whole of the Gloucestershire economic development, but the name was changed, apparently to satisfy Westminster. The composition was also changed for reasons I do not understand. How this helps and why is not clear. The explanatory transition was not clear. The wording of the governance documents were not clear.

Moreover, if we had responsibility for scrutiny of the whole of the county economic development, why were there months of delay while a "City Board" was set up? During those months of delay, the five-year strategy was developed and agreed. We did not get an opportunity to review that crucial strategy because of delays in the administrative process. I consider that poor process and bad management. It meant that a critical element in the cycle of management did not receive proper scrutiny.

In May 2024, we were told that: "The scrutiny arrangements that had previously been in place for the GEGSC will continue to oversee the activities of the Gloucestershire City Region Board (GCRB)."

I am inclined to think there should be some scrutiny of this process, in the form of a review. The view is that it is within GCC's own rights to determine what committees should exist and what their terms of reference should be. However, the Localism Act 2011 defines the requirement for O&S committees and this body has history. Moreover, the recent guidelines that was shared with this request also makes a number of statements. Given the following I cannot believe that it is entirely down to the county to decide what will be scrutinized. Scrutiny committees have statutory powers to review decisions, and so on:

Overview and scrutiny committees have statutory powers^[footnote 5] to scrutinise decisions the executive is planning to take, those it plans to implement, and those that have already been taken/implemented. Combined authority and combined county authority overview and scrutiny committees also have powers to review or scrutinise decisions made, or other action taken, in connection with the discharge by the mayor of any general (i.e. non-PCC) functions. Overview and scrutiny committees may make reports or recommendations to the authority or mayor about the discharge of their respective functions, and also on matters that affect the authority's area or the inhabitants of the area. Recommendations following scrutiny enable improvements to be made to policies and how they are implemented. Overview and scrutiny committees can also play a valuable role in developing policy.

In this same meeting, the CRB chair advised that CRB is an "executive body who will make decisions following processes" and then we will *subsequently* review those decisions and give the benefit of our "wisdom". In CDC we discuss decisions *before* they go to cabinet and therefore also before they go to council. We don't review every decision — we have some choice over it. We discuss what is coming up and decide what we wish to review although there are certain items such as the budget which inevitably come to us for detailed scrutiny. We also have the power of course to review decisions that have been made if that seems worthwhile. I find it hard to believe that the situation should be so different from one part of the county's authorities to another stop that is unless the establishment of the CRB is in some way a departure from the standard governmental process and scrutiny.

In consequence, I am inclined to think that the distinction between the two bodies is either larger than has been made clear all the hiatus that lasted for many months has no real justification.

GLOUCESTERSHIRE ECONOMIC EVIDENCE BASE

It is clear that the evidence base is not really up to scratch. That is indeed agreed by the team responsible for managing it and making it available. The cause of this problem is at least partly the government's own designs for information gathering and organization. We are a country that wanted to become digitally in the vanguard, but on the basis of this evidence, the country is very far from that situation. Some of the problem may also be down to the county level. It's difficult to tell. But even if this is so, the government is in a position to create better national tools to support both the local officer experts and users.

The problem is twofold. First it lacks granularity second it is woefully out of date. At this time, it is particularly affected by the special years of the pandemic.

Moreover, the designed use of the evidence base also fails to deliver what is needed. That is also accepted by several senior officers. There should be a correlation between data and policy projects. That is to say, it should be possible on the one hand to detect data constructs that yield insights that inform the necessity for certain actions or policies. On the other hand, it should be possible for decisions that need to be made to be able to access the information that is needed to make them. We have some way to go to make this really effective. That seems to be quite widely agreed.

Taking an example, I quoted. There is a major planning process going on that needs to determine whether a new primary school is needed in the town where I am councillor. The data is some years old and as a result of it the requirement for a primary school has been put in place. But the existing primary school is reporting that school numbers are falling despite increases in the population. This reflects a national trend. In another: Climate data is reported two years after the year of research, which in turn does not begin until some two years after the end of year. So what we know is that in 2021, climate emissions increased compared with 2019 but we do not know what the position was in 2023 nor what it is expect to be in 2024. The estimate that appeared in informal conversation amongst members was that we were well off target for achieving an 80% reduction in GHGs by 2030. There may be estimates but this would be in a different body.

There is therefore a dislocation between key policy decisions and the data needed to make them. It is clear that one significant element of this as the government's own database. We do not have adequate data to run this country well. That shows up in many forms if our own experience is any judge. But while we have not yet sufficiently scrutinized it, the impression is that it may also depend on the level of resource that is put in at county level. This will be something critical to resolve as we lose the granularity of local districts' local knowledge in a larger unitary and regional framework.

This in turn hampers the Scrutiny process.

The county should therefore be very active in reporting this problem to Westminster. We should be highlighting the issue. This may be a good example of a task and finish group supported by officers.

JOINT SCRUTINY

I am inclined to the view that the effectiveness of any organization depends on its capacity to share knowledge and integrate policies and activities.

In October 2023, a joint meeting was held with the Environment scrutiny committee. It was generally considered very successful. In discussion in the last meeting we decided not to make this a habit but to have such meetings with different scrutiny bodies from time to time where there is key overlap.

Given the critical importance of climate and ecology in the economy, This seems to

be an example of a topic that does need revisiting.

Another might be adult social care. We understand that adult social care absorbs a substantial portion of the county budget, which in turn puts pressure on other areas. These

- might need or benefit from economic development that the county cannot give, or
- Lead to reductions in service in areas that are critical to the economic health of the county.

In the first case, I'm thinking of activities such as supporting businesses, including farms, in migrating their business models and developing their potential as well as investing in support to incubate or develop innovation.

In the second case I'm thinking of something like roads. Businesses in my ward town our reporting sales down 30 60% over the last six months as a result of road works that were not well managed or coordinated. Several businesses have left the town and others have closed down. It may also be that this creates stress pressures that generate the need for social care.

I'm not at this point trying to recommend any specific topic but I believe it is something that GCC and the scrutiny process should consider and that relevant officers might wish to meet and review

FINALLY

1. I suggest that the county needs and therefore should provide the scrutiny committee with an integrated dynamic model of its economic strategy for us to scrutinise. County is not a company, but like any company it has an overall economic dynamic structural logic, a financial model and rationale that is in turn integrated with its values, goals, and situation. They interact. How these are understood and whether indeed they are understood is critical to the contextual decision of any one significant policy area. Nothing is done in isolation.
2. Secondly, the evidence from outside is that the processes and management of the county are not always well managed and of lean quality. I think this is an aspect that should receive scrutiny.
3. The county is committed to a net zero objective, which it seems clear it will not achieve. This has very considerable economic impact. It has not been brought to the scrutiny committee as a concern nor has a plan to deal with it being brought to the committee. This seems to me to be a critical area for the county and the danger is that with devolution and so on it will get sidelined. With devastating consequences.
4. I am aware of very large-scale transformation potential in the fields of ecology and climate that play very much to the strengths of the county and would benefit its overall economics and well-being. They would have large economic effects, but directly and in ecosystem externalities the directly provide value or provide value equivalence. I would like to see a scrutiny of the priorities for

addressing these and other critical challenges. Rural transport networks might be another example.

Best wishes with the review

Angus Jenkinson