

Report to: Stockport Partnership Board

2nd February 2010

**Stockport Partnership
Governance and Accountability:
The role of Scrutiny Committees**

Report of Assistant Chief Executive, Strategy and Democracy

1. PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

To review existing governance arrangements and the relationship between the Stockport Partnership with associated thematic boards, and Scrutiny Committees. This is with a view to consider whether developments are needed to enhance the democratic accountability and decision making process of the Partnerships.

2. BACKGROUND AND INTRODUCTION

Stockport has well established and effective partnerships and Scrutiny Committees. Relationships exist between these groups that have evolved in the past two years. There is however no consistent approach across each thematic board and each Scrutiny Committee regarding how information, plans and progress on issues are shared and Councillors kept informed. There is the added complexity of how and whether agendas and associated papers are shared with and available to all elected members and the public.

Democratic accountability of partnerships is increasingly important as the role of partnerships has been enhanced through the *Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007*. In addition we need to take account of the introduction of the Duty to Involve representatives of local people.¹

More recently the Audit Commission published a best practice guide to partnership working which challenged authorities to assess how well elected members on scrutiny and overview challenge the Local Strategic Partnership arrangements and its partners. Completion of the assessment locally identified a need for Stockport to develop further scrutiny of partnerships.

3. SCRUTINY

Scrutiny Committees currently receive resumes of meetings of the Stockport Partnership Board and the thematic partnerships. These provide information on matters considered by the partnership and officer contact details. They allow the Committees to request reports or obtain more information on items direct from officers as appropriate.

Members of Scrutiny Committee however have raised concerns on a number of occasions about the access elected members have to agendas, reports and

¹ Creating Strong, Safe, and Prosperous Communities Statutory Guidance July 2008

² Working Better Together, <http://www.audit-commission.gov.uk/nationalstudies/localgov/workingbettertogether/Pages/workingbettertogether.aspx>

minutes of the Partnership Board and thematic partnership boards. Whilst the resumes are seen to be useful, elected members consider that without access to the agenda and reports for the meetings they do not have sufficient information to enable them to gain any meaningful insight into the issues being considered and dealt with by the Stockport Partnership, any of the thematic partnership boards or indeed where they could add value.

The engagement of Scrutiny Committees with each thematic partnership also varies across each. For example a formal protocol exists setting out the relationship between the Safer Stockport Partnership and the Adults and Communities Scrutiny Committee, and arrangements are in place for representatives of the partnership board to attend Scrutiny Committee meetings twice yearly. There is however no such formal arrangement in place with regard to any other thematic partnership. This results in planned formal reporting of two thematic boards to the relevant Scrutiny Committee but scrutiny of other boards takes place on a more adhoc basis.

It is also noted that as not all thematic boards' agendas and associated papers are circulated via publicly accessible web pages it is difficult for elected members to assess which areas they would suggest for further scrutiny review.

3.1 Proposed Arrangements

To provide for enhanced transparency, accountability through Scrutiny, and stronger partnership governance arrangements, the following arrangements are proposed, subject to the agreement of the Stockport Partnership Board. These will introduce a level of consistency into the availability of information and the engagement between Scrutiny Committees, the Stockport Partnership Board and thematic partnerships.

- Agendas and reports (except those containing exempt information according to an agreed criterion) of the Stockport Partnership Board and thematic partnerships will be made available through the electronic @gendas service. This means all papers will be available for public and all elected member viewing.
- Resumes will continue to be submitted to Scrutiny Committees to provide regular feedback on the work of the Board and thematic partnerships
- Arrangements will be made for representatives of the Partnership Board and thematic partnership boards to attend the relevant Scrutiny Committee on a planned basis to present at the very least an annual report (generally once a year). This would enable Scrutiny Committees to engage with and examine the work of each partnerships. Additional attendance and information could be requested by a Scrutiny Committee on a relevant area of focus of a thematic partnership boards' work should the need arise but should be a considered and agreed request of the Committee. (and not of an individual elected member)

RECOMMENDATIONS:

The Partnership Board is asked to:

- Consider and comment on the Scrutiny arrangements proposed in section 3.1