



Cambridgeshire Police and Crime Panel

June 2021

Dear Members

Short Scrutiny Improvement Review – CfGS consultancy support

I am writing to thank you for inviting the Centre for Governance and Scrutiny (CfGS) to carry out an evaluation of Cambridgeshire Police and Crime Panel (CPCP). This letter provides feedback on our review findings and offers suggestions on how the Panel could further develop.

Background

The Panel agreed to review how effectively and efficiently it carries out its functions, and whether there is scope to explore improvements which can be embedded into the way it operates. It decided to set up a review to investigate how it might develop good practice that leads to generating challenging and constructive scrutiny of the Police and Crime Commissioner (PCC).

CfGS was approached to conduct the review, to contribute an external perspective and independent authority to the process whilst providing additional help with any subsequent changes necessary.

CfGS undertook evidence gathering through conversations with Members of the Panel and Officers supporting the Panel in late January and early February 2021. In addition, we observed Panel meetings online, and reviewed key documents.

The review was conducted by the CfGS staff:

- Ian Parry – Head of Consultancy - Centre for Governance and Scrutiny
- Kate Grigg – Senior Research Officer – Centre for Governance and Scrutiny

The findings and recommendations presented in this letter are intended to advise CPCP in strengthening the quality of scrutiny activities, increasing the impact of its outputs, and through its Members, to develop a strong and shared understanding of the role and capability of the Panel.

Summary of findings

Overall, there are no critical issues with the Panel, and many Members sitting on the Panel are clearly passionate about ensuring better outcomes for the safety of their communities. However, it was recognised that improvement was needed to ensure the time and resource dedicated to the Panel delivered more impact and greater value.

Considering the changes since the 2021 local and PCC elections, there is now a need for the Panel to reflect on how they to adapt existing ways of working that embraces and responds to more effective and robust scrutiny. There is also an opportunity for the Panel, and the new PCC, to consider their respective roles and how they best work together to challenge, support and advise.

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Suggested areas of improvement

1.1. Clarity on the Panel's role and responsibilities

The Panel's overall role is to hold the PCC to account, to review and make recommendations on the matters relating to the PCC and the draft Police and Crime Plan, and to enhance public accountability of the police force.

Generally, this role is well understood, and most Members are able to articulate the purpose and contribution the Panel should be making. However, it appears that in practice, challenge can often focus on operational matters and the work carried out by Cambridgeshire Constabulary. There is evidence of the Chief Constable or Officers in some cases being scrutinised more than the PCC. The experience from elsewhere is that when the PCC is the focus of questioning, a more strategic exchange takes place and better recommendations are achieved.

- Our conversations suggest a need for more clarity on how the Panel's role is undertaken. This is about developing a shared understanding of the particular and unique way for the Panel to add value to the work of the PCC. There needs to be more of an emphasis on seeing the Panel as a vital part of governance regarding its important role in supporting and holding the PCC to account.

1.2. Panel – PCC relationship

It is important to have a culture of trust, transparency and mutual respect between the Panel and the PCC, to enable open and candid exchanges. Without regular communication and information sharing, the Panel will be unable to act in a supportive capacity to the PCC. Positive engagement between the Panel and PCC, both formal and informal, is vital to the scrutiny process and with a new PCC in position there is an opportunity to 'reset' relationships that are not conducive to effective scrutiny.

- The Panel may wish to consider formalising engagement with the PCC and the way it wishes to operate through a protocol. A CPCS – PCC protocol could outline and reaffirm expectations, improve communication and co-ordination between the panel and the PCC. A protocol should deal with the practical workings of the Panel as well as the cultural dynamics. It might also be useful for feedback on the Panel's recommendations to be formalised within the protocol, in order for the Panel to monitor the progress of their output.

1.3. Collaborative and committed approach to the Panel's working

In the discussions we conducted most Members agreed with the principle that scrutiny is more effective when it is cross-party, with politics left at the door (as much as is practicably possible), and an equal voice given to all. Members also recognised the importance of having strong and productive working relationships within the Panel.

There is a mixed level of engagement in the work of the Panel from some Members, but there was a broad agreement that all Members have a duty to uphold their responsibilities, attend meetings and work towards a shared goal in meetings. This is an aspect that needs further emphasis.

1.4. The Panel's focus

The Panel would benefit from a clearer focus on where it can add value and there is a recognition that the Panel needs to focus more on strategic issues, where it can have influence. For the majority of the substantive items on agendas there is not a clearly articulated outcome from scrutiny's consideration of the topic. When topics are reviewed the focus tends to be operational rather than strategic or outcome focused. Often, items taken to meetings are updates and many reports do not ask Members to "do" anything other than to note them.

The Panel should focus its attention on cross-cutting issues which affect communities across the area, avoiding parochial issues affecting single wards. There are missed opportunities for the Panel to add value to reviewing the PCC's police and crime plan, and in challenging how the PCC will deliver on objectives.

- For the Panel to be more strategic there needs to be change from both the Panel and the PCC. If the PCC wants more emphasis on strategic challenge and holding to account, then the Panel will need earlier access to information and data and greater involvement with the process of developing and reviewing the Police and Crime Plan.

1.5. Work programming and agendas

Work programming is key to ensuring the Panel stays focussed on strategic issues where it can make an impact, whilst making the best use of time and resources. Greater collaboration with the PCC and using the Police and Crime Plan as a basis for planning forward work could improve the focus of work programming and the creation of agendas. In this respect prioritisation is essential, and the Panel could benefit from an agreed methodology to filter and select topics for the work programme. Furthermore, the Panel will need to organise a work programme that is Member-led in order to have ownership over activity.

It is important to emphasise that work programming is an ongoing process and not just a one-off event. Whilst a workshop will help identify priorities and provide structure to work for the months ahead, there will need to be flexibility in the work programme and time set aside in meetings to regularly revisit the relevance of topics as the local context changes.

- We recommend an annual process for developing the work programme engaging Members, Officers, partners and the public to prioritise the topics for review. Work programming could take place through a Member workshop, where a shortlist of priority topics for the next 12 months are identified according to a selection criteria, discussed on their merit for scrutiny, and voted on.
- It was also noted that agendas often contain 10 items, or more. We would recommend a maximum of two or three substantive items on the agenda, to give adequate time and meaningful discussion to each one.

1.6. Meeting preparation

From our observations of meetings, there is little evidence of co-ordinated questions or Members acting as a team with clear lines of inquiry. It has been highlighted that a number of Members do not prepare sufficiently for meetings, leading to a missed opportunity for insightful questioning.



It is important the Panel receives the right strategic information and reports in order to sufficiently hold to account and support the PCC. The practice of submitting lengthy reports, reports for noting or for information should be avoided. Instead, these updates can be circulated to Members outside of meetings through a briefing or information digest.

- The Panel should extend the use of its pre-meetings to effectively provide the space to set common objectives and questioning strategy, and possibly to reach consensus on lines of enquiry.

1.7. Member development and diversity

To get the most out of being on the Panel, Members need a clear sense of what is required of them as, and the work involved which allows good scrutiny to happen. A lack of training was raised by some Members, who were clearly aware of the gaps in their own knowledge and understanding. The engagement and contribution from Members is varied with often just a few Members asking most of the more probing questions. Members may benefit from more training and experience in the area of questioning techniques.

It was also highlighted in many of our conversations that there is a significant lack of diversity on the Panel and the Panel's working would benefit from more diverse views.

- We recommend 'refresher' training, with an update on Police and Crime Panel essentials, as well as a specific focus on good questioning skills and chairing skills.

Thank you and acknowledgements

We would like to thank all of the Panel Members and Officers who took part in for their time, insights and open views.

Yours sincerely,

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