

Overview & Scrutiny

Annual Report (01 April
2017 31 March 18)

Produced in June 2018

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What is Overview & Scrutiny

Overview and Scrutiny is the process whereby Executive decision-makers are held to account. Overview and Scrutiny Committees also have an important role to play in the Council's policy development process and to raise any concerns about the Council's services. Whilst they do not make decisions they provide recommendations to the Executive or full Council, which are taken into account before the Council makes any final decisions.

If committee members feel it is necessary they can also "call-in" decisions of the Executive. During a call-in an OSC re-considers a decision that has been taken to determine whether the decision should be implemented straight away or referred back to the decision maker to be reconsidered. They can also undertake detailed enquiries of topics outside of formal committee meetings where Members review a topic in detail and then report their outcomes to a public committee.

Scrutiny committees can consider a wide range of issues but they also have statutory responsibilities in relation to scrutiny of health and crime and disorder matters. Issues relating to crime and disorder are considered at least once a year and substantial changes to health services within Central Bedfordshire must be reviewed by one of the OSCs before implementation.

Overview and scrutiny adds value in the following ways:-

- Giving non-Executive Members and residents an opportunity to influence the items considered by the Council
- Engaging non-Executive Councillors and co-opted members early in the process of policy development
- Providing a forum for discussion in which the public and partners can ask questions
- Creating informal opportunities to discuss key topics and enhance understanding

The Council's OSCs

There are four OSCs in Central Bedfordshire, each of which meet approximately 8-weekly as follows:-

- Children's Services OSC
- Corporate Resources OSC
- Social Care, Health and Housing OSC
- Sustainable Communities OSC

There is also a Co-ordination Panel (OSCP) consisting of the Chairmen and Vice-Chairmen of the OSCs, which co-ordinates the function and matters that are relevant to more than one OSC and meets at least four times a year.

In addition to the elected Members appointed to the OSCs, there are three parent governors and two diocesan representatives, one for each of the Church of England and Roman Catholic churches, appointed to the Children's Services OSC. A representative of Healthwatch Central Bedfordshire also attends meetings of the Social Care, Health and Housing OSC as an observer.

Papers for these meetings and video recordings are available via the Council's website at the following address:-

<http://centralbedfordshire.gov.uk/council/committees-meetings-agendas/landing.aspx>

The remainder of this annual report sets out more detailed information regards the activity of the OSCs during 01 April 2017 to 31 March 2018 around the key priorities for the process previously identified by Members.

Activity led by OSCs and residents as well as the Executive Forward Plan that adds value

Members have expressed a preference to reduce the size of their agendas to be able to add more value to a smaller number of items. During 2017/18 the OSCs have been able to slightly reduce the total number of items that were received although the average number of items per meeting remained at four. Nationally, 80% of scrutiny committees discussed between one to four items per meeting.

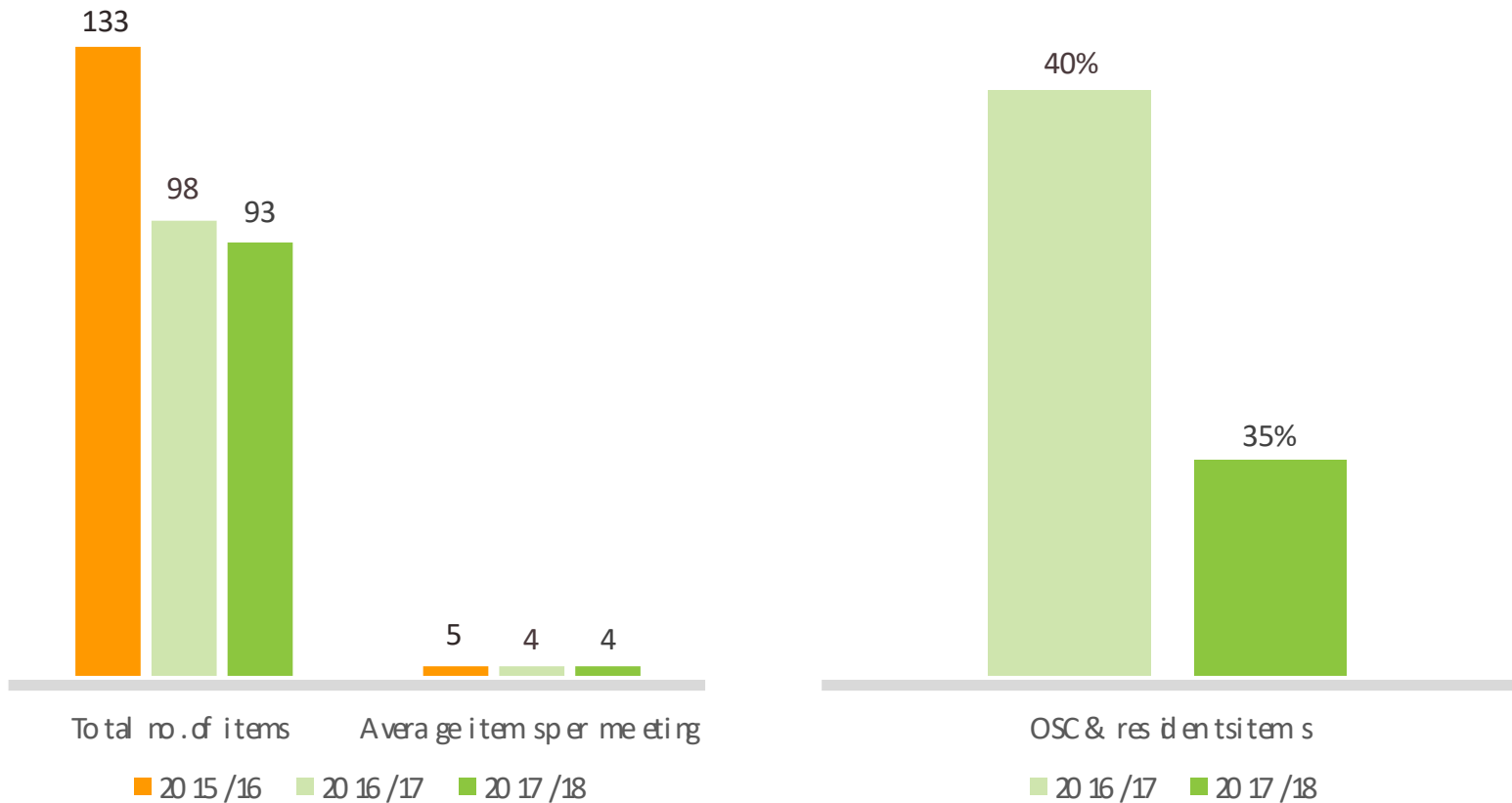
Whilst Members felt it was important to increase the number of items that originated from specific requests by residents or OSC Members the total percentage of these items fell by 5%. Nationally, 34% of work programmes were developed by scrutiny councillors and 2% were based on public opinion.

Whilst this figure has fallen many of the suggestions that we have received during the year have been considered by other committees. To enhance transparency we have also published a list of those items that have been proposed for consideration on the Council's website, providing information on where these items will be considered if not by the OSCs or why some items are not being considered. Of those that were proposed a total of 65% have been considered somewhere. You can view the list via the link below: -

<http://centralbedfordshire.gov.uk/council/committees-meetings-agendas/suggest-topic/overview.aspx>

Whilst the OSCs have been able to reduce the total number of items presented this year they have not yet addressed the balance of items that originate from the committees themselves, which still stands at 35%. It is proposed that a more fundamental annual review of the OSC work programmes be undertaken to enable Members to identify and prioritise those items that are not listed on the Executive Forward Plan but are felt to be of importance to OSC members and co-optees.

Overview of items



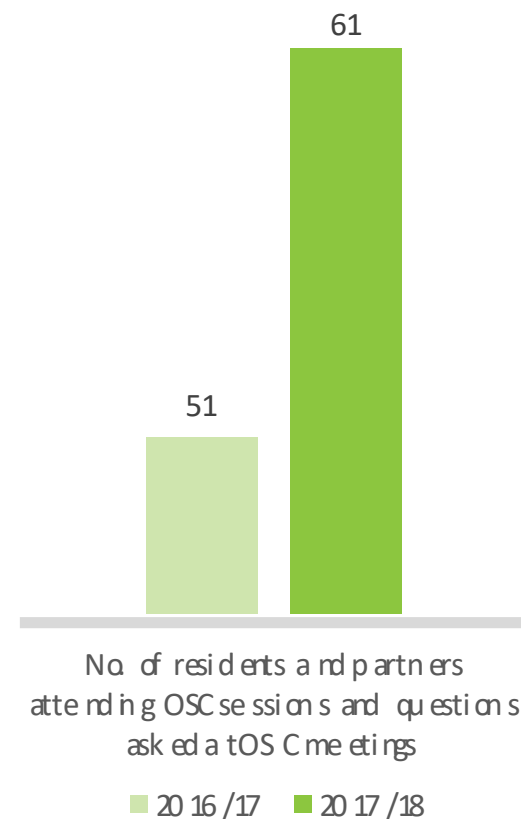
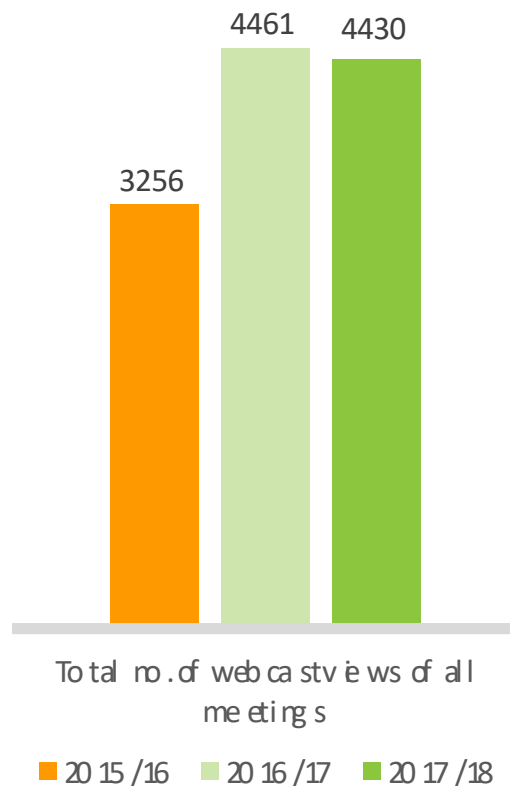
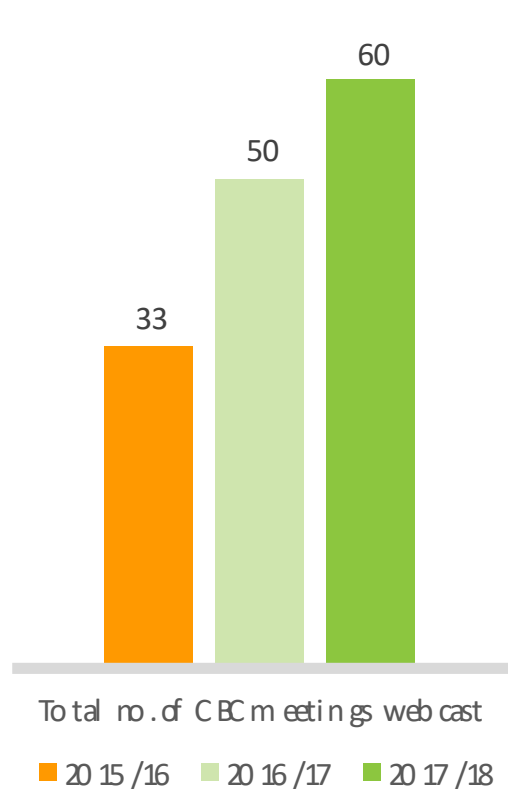
Providing a forum for discussion

OSCs provide a forum to engage non-Executive Members, residents and partners in the process of making decisions. The OSCs are encouraged to identify people that they would like to specifically invite to attend meetings. Residents are also welcome to attend meetings and ask questions. To support openness and transparency the OSC meetings are also webcast on the Council's website providing the opportunity for residents to view meetings at any time without attending. Nationally, the Centre for Public Scrutiny annual survey (2018), illustrates that only 25% of committees seek public views on issues.

During 2017/18 the majority of invites to partners to attend meetings have been targeted at Social Care, Health and Housing OSC or the detailed enquiry meetings, which has increased the number of contributors at meetings. This has also included invitations to experts on specific topics, which nationally, the Centre for Public Scrutiny annual survey (2018), indicates that 35% of other authorities also use experts in meetings. As a whole the Council has also webcast more meetings this year, with the vast majority of viewers watching these meetings up to 6 months after they have taken place. To enhance transparency via the webcasts there is no longer a limit to the period within which they must be watched, under the current arrangements webcasts now continue to be available via the Council's website after a period of 6-months and will not be removed.

Whilst the number of residents and partners attending and contributing to meetings has increased by 20% during 2017/18 this can be improved further through the use of online channels and a more proactive approach to identifying contributors on specific topics. It is proposed that more proactive use is made of social media in the future and that the Chairmen and Vice-Chairmen of the OSCs be more proactive in seeking the views of others in advance of OSC meetings and during detailed enquiries in collaboration with service areas. During 2018/19 it is proposed that more work be undertaken to engage residents and partners and to enhance understanding of the opportunities that exist for others to engage in formal committee meetings.

Engaging the public and partners

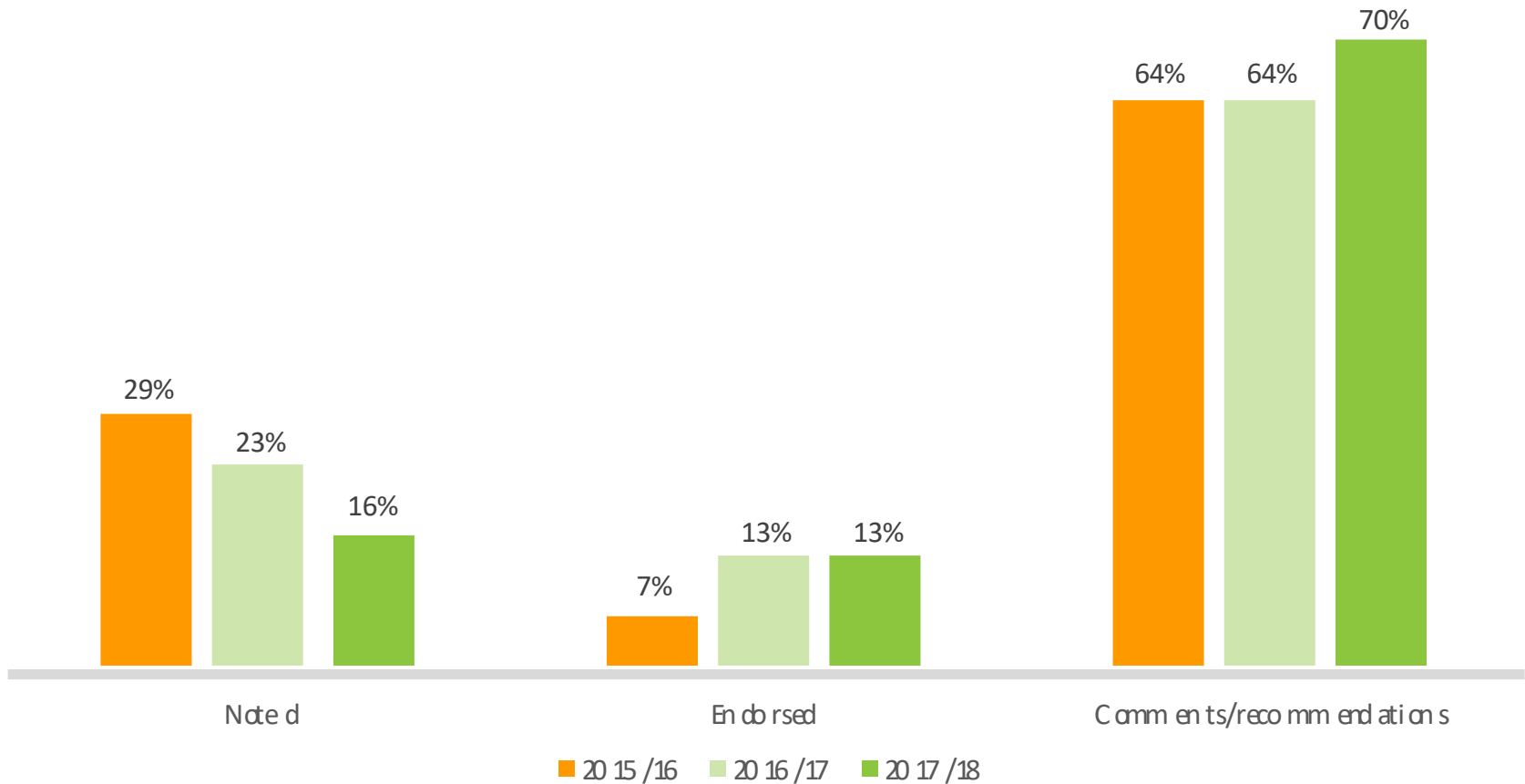


Activity that enables outcomes

As a result of continuing to rationalise the number of items on the agenda the OSCs have been able to focus on improving the recommendations that arise from meetings. Nationally, the Centre for Public Scrutiny annual survey (2018), illustrates that 70% of respondent believed that scrutiny was making some or a lot of impact. During 2017/18 the number of items at CBC that were noted has continued to fall and the number of items on which Members have discussed and agreed new recommendations or comments to be taken into account by the Executive has increased.

Despite approximately 95% of OSC recommendations being accepted by partners or the Executive, determining the amount of value that is added by the process is not straightforward. Whilst some items might not result in specific comments or recommendations there is a value in increasing awareness of an issue and offering Members an opportunity to air any concerns they might have. These conversations in themselves often influence thinking without a definitive recommendation being concluded. Thinking and preferences can also change over time following the initial consideration of a matter. Many recommendations take time to come to fruition due to the long-term nature of many of the Council's strategies and policies. Due to the nature of many of the agreed recommendations, if they are not specific or measurable it is not always easy to determine whether they have had the desired effect. It is proposed that Members continue to focus on agreeing recommendations at OSC meetings that are specific and measurable so that their impact can more clearly be measured in the future. A mechanism will be implemented from April 2018 to enable the implementation of the recommendations of the OSCs to be tracked more adequately. Consideration will also be given to identifying a mechanism that enables Members to determine the ways in which OSCs have helped to shape thinking without the use of specific recommendations.

Overview of outcomes



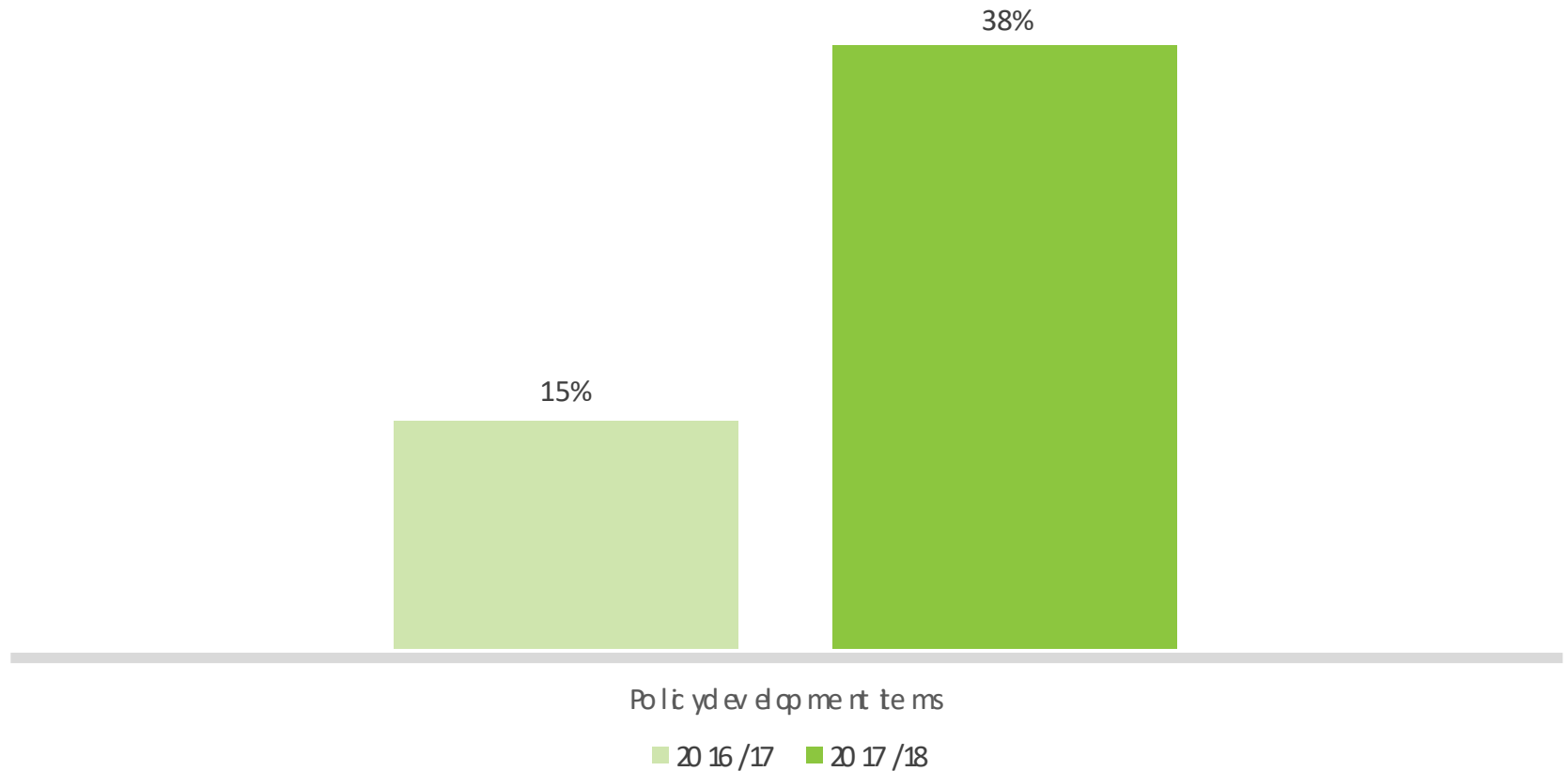
Enhancing policy development activity

OSCs have continued to prioritise items on their work programmes where they relate to policy development. Priority has been given to those items where the committees have longer than a couple of weeks to influence the final policy under development and Members have continued to try and encourage the Executive to engage the OSCs at the very outset of policies being developed. As a result there has been a 150% increase in the amount of policy development activity that has been undertaken in 2017/18.

Whilst the percentage of policy development activity has increased in 2017/18 the figure of 38% still does not reflect the degree of priority that Members have placed on reviewing activity of this nature. The majority of agenda items are still scrutiny (backward looking) or relate to proposals that are so far into their development that there is very little influence that OSCs can have on the final outcome. Given the priority that Members have stated they wish to place on this area of work more emphasis will be given during 2018/19 on increasing the proportion of policy development activity. It is proposed that all Members be encouraged to engage in conversations earlier in the municipal year on the policy development matters that they would like to focus their agendas on in order to further address this balance going forward.

Additionally, there is a perception that Members ought to be presented with fully formed proposals, which is not always the case. The use of reports does not encourage an informal approach to reporting at meetings so it is proposed that more emphasis be placed on the use of presentations, setting the general principles and approach for a policy at an early stage in its development, giving Members more opportunity to influence proposals earlier.

Policy development activity



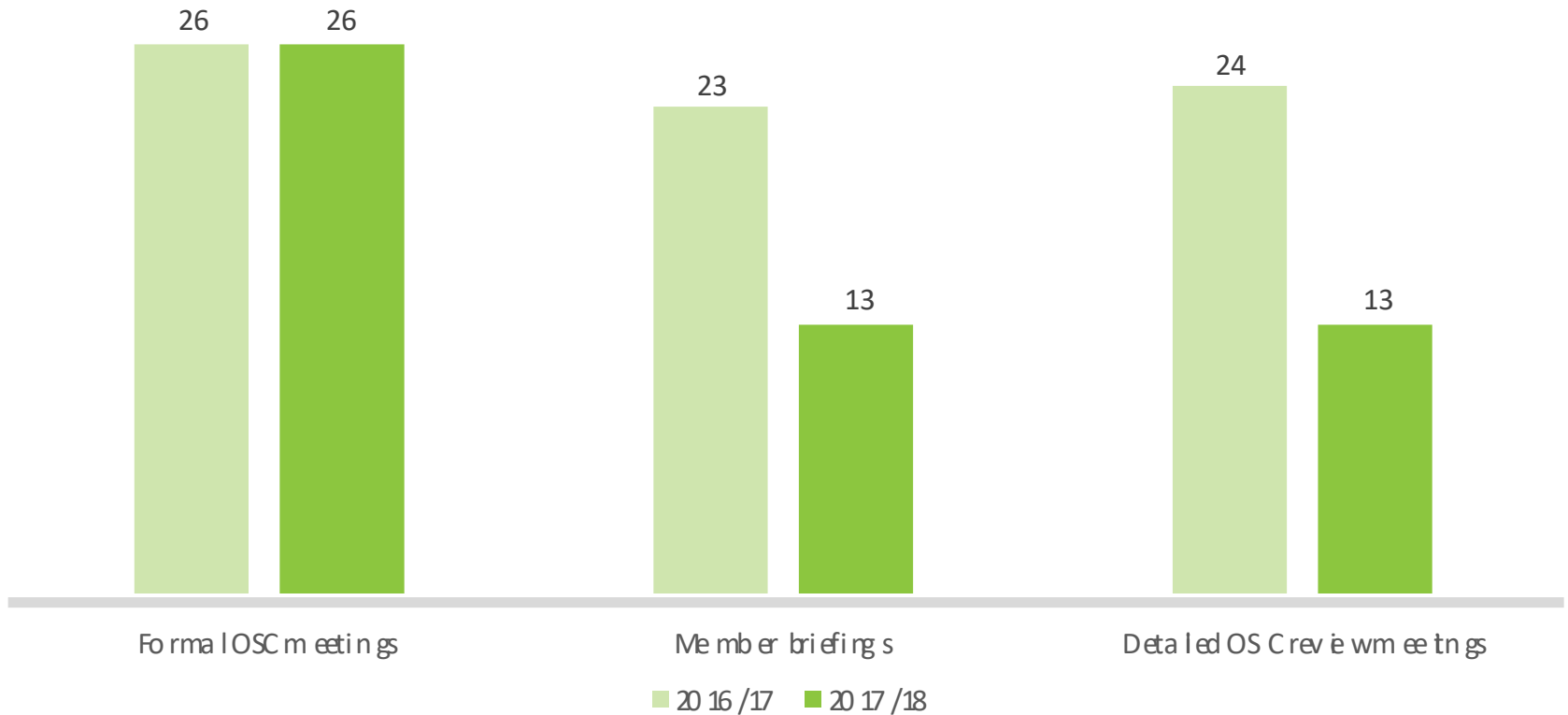
Creating more informal opportunities for meetings on key topics

Members have previously expressed concern about the pressure of having too many meetings and the impact this has on their ability and that of officers to achieve outcomes. Members wanted to develop a good balance of both formal and informal activity, providing the opportunity to enhance their understanding of key topics in an informal setting, whilst also having opportunities to consider matters formally via OSC meetings or detailed reviews.

During 2017/18 the number of formal OSC meetings has remained static but the amount of informal activity has fallen. Members will be encouraged to address this balance during 2018/19, reducing the number of formal committee meetings whilst providing opportunities to consider matters in detail in a more informal setting and reporting back to formal committee meetings.

Presently, Members are not delivering on their aspiration to hold fewer formal OSC meetings and to meet more regularly via informal mechanisms such as briefings or detailed enquiries that continue to provide opportunities for residents to be involved. By publicising evidence gathering sessions on the Council's website in a similar fashion to the Parliamentary Select Committees this will give members of the public the opportunity to attend many informal meetings if they wish. Should Members agree to increase the amount of informal activity, such as enquiries, this needs to go hand in hand with a reduction in formal committee meetings.

Informal activity



Detailed policy development enquiries

Those Members who have had the opportunity to take part in detailed enquiries regularly comment that they are the most effective way of undertaking detailed policy development activity and are the best way of adding value through the overview and scrutiny process. Nationally, the Centre for Public Scrutiny annual survey (2018), illustrates that 69% of respondents felt that these groups were the most impactful method of undertaken overview and scrutiny.

These enquiries provide the opportunity for a smaller group of Councillors to review a topic in a greater amount of detail and to carry out more informal research or visits to schemes that are considered to be examples of good practice. This year the Council has concluded the following detailed enquiries originating from the Overview and Scrutiny Committees:-

Pupil attainment in Central Bedfordshire

This enquiry gave Members the opportunity to gather evidence from a wide range of sources relating to improving pupil attainment and the long-term life chances of children and young people in Central Bedfordshire. It also enabled Members to undertake a call for evidence from Headteachers of schools in Central Bedfordshire who were able to directly inform the findings and recommendations of the enquiry. Members used this enquiry as an opportunity to undertake their own research and evidence gathering from the education sector that would not otherwise have been possible in a formal meeting. It also gave Members the opportunity to focus on the support and training provided for governors, which is an issue that members had been keen to consider for some time. The outcomes of this enquiry will feed into the Council's wider transformation of education in Central Bedfordshire.

Detailed policy development enquiries

Your Health, your social care, the way forward

Following the success of the first phase of this review undertaken during 2017, this enquiry provided Members with an opportunity to visit sites in Central Bedfordshire and other national vanguard schemes that promoted the integration of health and care services in central hubs. Members commented on the importance of this review in helping them understand the journey that the Council was on and the potential benefits of other models of care and encouraging different parts of the sector to cooperate in the delivery of services to residents. Alongside the work underway in the directorate the principles agreed as part of this review and its outcome will have a significant impact on the model of health and social care in Central Bedfordshire for many years to come.

Whilst Members regularly comment on the rewarding experience of taking part in enquiries and that they are typically the most effective way of adding value to the work of the Council there are a limited number of enquiries that are proactively proposed by Members. During 2017/18 there have been fewer enquiries and fewer enquiry meetings delivered than in previous years.

Due to the intensive nature of the enquiries and the amount of support required for them, both from Members and officers, it is only feasible to deliver a small number per year but the downward trend does not reflect the importance and value that Members have placed on this activity. More, time-limited, enquiries can be delivered but it will require a reduction in the amount of other briefings and particularly formal OSC meetings in order for support to be available.

Learning from others

Throughout 2017/18 the Overview and Scrutiny Co-ordination Panel has reviewed the outcomes of various high-profile national and local reviews, such as the outcome of the council's own peer review; the governance review into the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea; the national review of scrutiny effectiveness; and the best value review of Northamptonshire County Council. As a result a number of specific changes to the OSCs working practices have been recommended that will be a focus alongside the priorities for 2018/19 as follows:-

- That greater focus be placed on scrutinising the delivery of the larger efficiencies identified in the Council's MTFP as part of the quarterly budget monitoring reports to Executive and Corporate Resources OSC to enhance visibility
- Members to ensure that the OSCs are adequately able to act on the concerns of residents when raised
- Corporate Resources OSCs to be appraised of the early thinking with regard the content of the Council's MTFP and budget in November ahead of a more detailed review of the specific proposals in January on an annual basis
- That it be made explicit in the role of the Chairmen of the OSCs that they must attend the Corporate Resources OSC meetings to engage in scrutiny of the quarterly budget monitoring information for their area
- That the OSCP annual report include a summary of weaknesses identified by the statutory scrutiny officer and proposals to remedy these weaknesses agreed in consultation with the Chairman of the OSCP.
- That External experts and partners continue to be engaged in OSC meetings and task forces but always in a managed way, so as not to create unforeseen negatives that may impact on the Council's ability to achieve its objectives.

Looking ahead to 2018/19

The Overview and Scrutiny Coordination Panel have agreed that during 2018/19 a more robust approach is necessary to drive the overview and scrutiny process forward. This will necessitate the Chairmen and Vice-Chairmen of the Committees taking greater responsibility for those areas of focus previously described in addition to the following priorities: -

1. That the OSCs add more value through a strategic approach to prioritising and selecting appropriate topics for consideration
2. That the OSCs provide more robust and strategic questioning of topics
3. That more activity be received by the OSCs that is led by non-Executive members and residents
4. That more policy development activity be undertaken by the OSCs
5. That the balance of formal and informal activity be addressed to encourage an overall reduction in the number of meetings



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