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Cllr Pauleen Grahame
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Dear Pauleen

As you may know I have raised the issue of “call-in procedures” on a couple of occasions, and I have a number of concerns about the current procedures we employ. I believe these procedures should be reviewed and as such I welcome the opportunity to provide you with my comments on this subject.

I read with interest your report on this subject and found of particular interest the analysis of other Local Authorities. All of whom it seems to me have better systems in place than ours in Leeds. I think that the first piece of information presented at point 4.2 might more accurately state that 86% of authorities do not require cross, or multi-party support for a decision to be called-in rather than saying that 14% do. Why is Leeds in of this minority of Authorities? I also see from your analysis that we are alone in the Core Cities in requiring cross party support for a call-in. I think this alone is compelling evidence for a change in our procedures.

My interest in this issue is two fold and is far from being a desire to “whip” the scrutiny process as you state at 3.6 of your report. In fact I believe that our current systems reliance on cross-party support does itself imply that members act along party lines and are “whipped” to do so by excluding an action from one party alone.

Firstly, I would like to see an empowered scrutiny process which all members value and which Executive Members feel accountable to. Secondly, I am concerned that the opportunities to call-in decisions are limited because of the current political composition of the council. It is a fact that all political groups apart from the Labour Group are in support of the Lib Dem Conservative coalition in that they voted for the continuance of the coalition at this annual meeting.

It is interesting to note that the Centre for Public Scrutiny in their report “An investigation into the call-in procedure across English Local Authorities” state that “it could equally be argued that due to the nature of Local Authority Politics, securing cross-party support for a call-in request effectively prevents the use of the procedure.” I would tend to agree with them.

This Centre for Public Scrutiny report also contains an analysis of the amount of decisions “called-in” across the country. Metropolitan councils on average “call-in” just less than 4 decisions a year, and unitary authorities average around 8 a year. There have only been 7 “call-ins” in Leeds in total since the start of the municipal year 2004 – 5. This is substantially below the national average and I would suggest this reflects the difficult and inflexible nature of our current system.

I believe therefore and I have consulted with members of the Labour Group that we should move to a system which is more open, accessible and flexible and allows backbench members to participate in the “call-in” process along the lines of option 4 in your report. I am sure that individual Labour Group members of OSC will offer their comments either in the OSC meeting which discusses this issue or in writing.

Local member involvement in this very important scrutiny function would I believe improve it. For example Cllr Ted Hanley’s desire to call-in the delegated decision relating to car parking charges came about in no small measure because of concerns expressed by Cllr Brian Selby. Wouldn’t a system where Cllr Selby himself could have participated in calling-in this decision not have been better? He would then have been able to discuss with the Overview and Scrutiny committee what his local concerns were.

The procedures that we currently employ in Leeds although they may appear to work on the surface do so only because of the goodwill and flexibility of a couple of members of the Morley Borough Independents notably Cllrs Leadley and Gettings. What we require are procedures that work despite the people involved, we must not rely on goodwill alone, especially now we are in the era of coalition and minority rule.

What I want as I have said before is to make sure that the scrutiny processes we have in place in Leeds are robust and defensible and ensure that all decisions are taken in an open, transparent and accountable way.

I hope you find my comments helpful.

Yours sincerely



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