

To: Scrutiny Committee
Date: 4 June 2019
Report of: Head of Law and Governance
Title of Report: Scrutiny Annual Work Plan Review

Summary and recommendations	
Purpose of report:	To form an indicative Scrutiny Work Plan for 2019/20, including the establishment of any review groups.
Key decision:	No
Scrutiny Lead Member:	Councillor Gant, Chair of the Scrutiny Committee
Corporate Priority:	An Efficient and Effective Council.
Recommendations: That the Scrutiny Committee resolves to: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Agree which items in the long list will be included in the Scrutiny Committee Work Plan for 2019/20. 2. Elect a Chair for the Companies Panel 3. Appoint members to the Finance, Housing and Companies Panels; and 4. Note that the subject of the first scrutiny review group to be scoped will be agreed at a future meeting when resources are in place to take this work forwards. 	

Appendices	
Appendix 1	Scrutiny Work Plan longlist of Items
Appendix 2	'TOPIC' scoring criteria for Work Plan items

Introduction and background

1. Each year, the Scrutiny Committee formulates an annual Work Plan, following the appointment of its new membership at Annual Council in May. The Scrutiny Work Plan is a live document that sets out what issues will be considered by Scrutiny and at which meeting. The Plan is reviewed on a rolling basis at each meeting, and remains flexible to new priorities throughout the year. This report sets out an indicative work plan for review and adoption, prepared by the Council's Scrutiny Officer, and endorsed by the Committee's Chair and Vice-Chair.
2. This report also asks the Committee to appoint members to the Finance, Housing and Companies Panels. The current Scrutiny Officer has accepted a new role with

the Oxfordshire Growth Board starting in June. Until a new Scrutiny Officer is in post, support will be provided from within the Committee and Member Services Team. However, this will only cover the core administrative functions of the Scrutiny Committee and its panels. The successful recruitment of a new Scrutiny Officer will affect when the first review group can begin its work.

Forming an Effective Work Plan

3. The Centre for Public Scrutiny (CfPS) advocates that Committees form an indicative Work Plan at the start of the year, so that items can be scheduled for consideration and reports produced in a timely manner. The Work Plan also provides members of the public with a forward view of the Committee's work, which they may want to contribute to. The CfPS explains:

Effective work planning is the bedrock of an effective scrutiny function. Done well, it can help lay the foundations for targeted, incisive and timely work on issues of local importance, where scrutiny can add value. Done badly, scrutiny can end up wasting time and resources on issues where the impact of any work done is likely to be minimal.¹

4. The Scrutiny Officer contacted all councillors and senior officers in March 2019, and provided supplementary reminders, to request suggestions for the Work Plan. This year, a [press release](#) was also issued inviting members of the public to submit suggestions for the work plan through an [online form](#). This received local press and TV coverage and a total of nine submissions were received. All of these submissions focussed on matters of cycling, congestion, road safety and air quality.
5. The Committee has been provided with a longlist of items at Appendix 1 which sets out each of the submissions received as part of the Work Plan consultation process. This also includes topics that roll over from the previous years' Work Plan, and upcoming Cabinet key decisions listed in the [Forward Plan](#).
6. Scrutiny best practice stipulates that work plans should be developed based on sound criteria with a clear rationale for topic selection.² Accordingly, in preparing this report, the Scrutiny Officer has refined the 'TOPIC' scoring criteria (Appendix 2) developed last year as a guide for prioritising scrutiny items. This approach has since been adopted by some other local authorities, and featured in the [CfPS insights blog](#) as a best practice feature. Importantly, the scoring system is nuanced and aspires to be objective, but the Committee should use its best judgement in agreeing which items to take forward.
7. The Scrutiny Officer has carried out an initial assessment to score each of the items based on his own judgement and understanding of the issues, and has reviewed the longlist together with the Chair and Vice-Chair. It is recommended that items scoring 9 or higher should be included in the Work Plan. A full explanation of the scoring methodology is set out in Appendix 2.

¹ The Centre for Public Scrutiny. 2011. *A Cunning Plan: A guide to effective work programming*.

² Auditor General for Wales. 2014. *"Good Scrutiny? Good Question!": Scrutiny in Local Government Improvement Study*.

8. An effective work plan will:

- strictly prioritise key issues
- set out the rationale of why issues should be investigated
- limit the number of update reports and reports for noting
- deploy appropriate scrutiny methods for the issue under review
- provide attendees with sufficient notice to prepare for meetings

Standing Panels

9. The Committee previously agreed on 15 May 2019 to re-establish the Finance, Housing and Companies Panels to undertake detailed scrutiny of decisions and issues relevant to their remit. These Panels have some autonomy to control their own work plans, but remain accountable to the Scrutiny Committee for their work. Where time permits, the Standing Panels will report to the Scrutiny Committee before their recommendations are submitted to the Cabinet.
10. Standing Panel chairs for the Finance and Housing Panels were appointed on 15 May 2019, and it was agreed that four members would sit on the Finance and Companies Panels, and six on the Housing Panel. Owing to a short notice meeting of the Companies Panel on 28 May, the Committee is asked now to elect a chair for that panel at this meeting. Nominations for councillors to sit on each of the standing panels received from group secretaries will be presented by the Scrutiny Officer at the meeting on 4 June.

Review Groups

11. In some instances, the Scrutiny Committee may consider it more effective to establish a small sub-group to carry out a detailed review, where it would be impractical for the whole committee to be involved. Review Groups are informal task and finish groups established by the Scrutiny Committee to gather evidence and produce a report and recommendations on a specific issue within a limited timeframe. It is advised that no review groups are established until such a time as appropriate officer resources are in place (see available resources section). The committee may want to take a view on priority suggestions however.
12. The work of a review group should be focussed, time limited, and involve in depth research and scrutiny in the interest of developing recommendations for service improvement. The recommendations emerging from review groups are supported by a comprehensive report produced by the Scrutiny Officer, in consultation with the review group chair.
13. Often, review groups seek the help of external experts to inform their work, and involve the public where possible. Members of these groups should have the interest and time to commit to undertake in-depth scrutiny and policy development work. For the time and commitment they require, review groups are widely

considered to be the most effective form of scrutiny, so long as they remain well targeted, well supported, councillor led reviews.³

14. In accordance with the Committee's Operating Principles, the chairs of any review groups should be members of the Scrutiny Committee, but the remaining members can be any non-executive members of the Council. It is recommended that review groups are chaired by those members of the Committee who champion a specific issue for review. As with any standing panels, review groups should reflect a cross-party make up of four to six councillors. The timing of review work will be subject to officer resources in particular the capacity of the newly appointed Scrutiny Officer. The Committee will be asked to agree the topic of its first review and to appoint a chair of that review group when resources allow.

15. To date, the issues that have been suggested as review group topics are set out below, which have been listed in the order of those with the most information available:

- Public participation in decision making and citizen engagement

A partial scoping template submission has been received for this item from three councillors. The proposal is to establish a review group to consider methods for improving engagement with the public, how they might operate in Oxford, and to understand what resources are available within the Council to deliver such activities. Matters of public questions at Full Council, scrutiny engagement and public consultations are highlighted as areas for review. The proposal focusses on how other best practice organisations, the public and experts might help the Council to improve its engagement.

- Climate Emergency / Carbon management

The Committee indicated at a meeting on 15 May 2019 that it may wish to establish a standing panel and/or review group at some stage to consider issues concerning climate change. Separate submissions have also been made to the work plan longlist on this issue, where a further description can be found. Councillors are advised to ensure that any work is well defined, and does not duplicate work already being undertaken in the by the Council in response to the January 2019 climate emergency motion. The Committee may wish to receive an update on ongoing work to better situate any further enquiries.

- Air quality

This issue was shortlisted by the 2018/19 Committee, and Councillors requested that it be presented in the 2019/20 longlist also. This item was previously not taken forward owing to resource constraints within the relevant service area at the time of scoping in June 2018.

- Universal Credit

The Committee previously commented in 2019 that Universal Credit was an area that they may wish to investigate through the use of a review group. The Council held two councillor briefings on Universal Credit in 2018/19.

³ Stoker, G., John, P., Gains, F. Greasley, S and Rao, N. 2007. *The New Council Constitutions: The Outcomes and Impact of the Local Government Act: Evaluation of Local Governance Research Project*. Department of Communities and Local Government.

- Apprentices and those Not in Educational Employment or Training (NEETs)
This proposal includes reviewing the role of the Council in supporting apprenticeships, and wider issues concerning NEETs and low pay in the City.
- Council housing stock condition and its relationship with personal health
This proposal concerns reviewing the condition of the Council's own housing stock, and its relationship with occupant health. Requires further scoping.

Co-option

16. The Scrutiny Committee's Operating Principles allow for additional non-voting members to be co-opted onto the Committee or its standing panels. This enables external experts, services users and other members of the public to become members of a panel over the course of one year. The Housing Panel, when originally established by the previous Communities and Partnership Scrutiny Committee, was asked to recruit an Oxford City Council tenant to sit as a non-voting co-opted member.
17. Since then, the Housing Panel has had a Council Tenant co-optee in its membership. More recently, the Panel has become increasingly focussed on matters of homelessness, and feedback has been that Councillors would wish to welcome a new co-optee from this sector in future years.
18. The current co-optee's fourth annual term has expired, and it is proposed that the new Housing Panel's membership will need to take a view on future co-option arrangements, which will need the formal agreement of the Scrutiny Committee in due course. Officers in the Tenant Involvement Team and senior management advocate for council tenant representation continuing on the Panel.

Available Resources

19. An effective work plan will make best use of the resources available. The Council has one dedicated Scrutiny Officer post responsible for supporting the work of the Scrutiny Committee, its standing panels and review groups. As set out in the introduction, the recruitment of a new Scrutiny Officer will affect the level of resource available, and the start date of any review groups.
20. Where the Committee requests to consider a Cabinet report, the resource implications will be nominal because the report will have already been produced. Where the Committee commissions its own report from officers on a new issue, the resource implications are more significant for both the Scrutiny Officer and the officers involved in producing the report, which will be in addition to their normal duties. Therefore, careful consideration should be given to the purpose and desired outcomes of any commissioned reports. The resource requirements are most significant for review groups, where there is potential to increase the workload for several council officers and councillors. Accordingly, the organisation has capacity to carry out one review at a time.
21. Some service areas will also come under greater scrutiny than others, which will place a greater draw on officer time in that department. For example, in 2018/19,

the Rough Sleeping and Single Homelessness Team had a significant increase in their work load owing to a scrutiny review group and several commissioned reports. Similarly, this year's work plan longlist had 5 separate item suggestions concerning homelessness issues. The Committee is therefore advised to be mindful of the resource implications that each of their requests will have on this small team, and strictly prioritise. The principle of considering fewer issues in detail is more effective than considering many issues in brevity. As the Centre for Public Scrutiny highlights:

To help ensure that scrutiny has an impact, scrutiny committees may have to balance a desire to examine a large number of topics with the likelihood of securing greater impact through focusing on a small number of items in more detail.

22. [New Government Guidance](#) issued this year similarly explains:

Scrutiny members should accept that shortlisting can be difficult; scrutiny committees have finite resources and deciding how these are best allocated is tough. They should understand that, if work programming is robust and effective, there might well be issues that they want to look at that nonetheless are not selected.

23. Between the Scrutiny Committee, its standing panels and review groups, a total of 46 formal meetings were held in 2018/19, up from 35 in the previous year. This is principally due to an additional review group, and further ad-hoc meetings within those review groups. A total of 19 reports were submitted by the Committee to the Cabinet, together with approximately 65 recommendations for the Board to respond to. Over 50 people external to the Council engaged face to face in the scrutiny process in 2018/19. The Scrutiny function as a whole was able to deliver approximately 90% of its agreed Work Plan in 2018/19. Any delay in the scheduling of items principally related to changes in the timeliness of considering such issues, or the availability of officers to deliver such reports.

Conclusion and Next Steps

24. The Committee is asked to agree the recommendations as set out in this report. The Scrutiny Officer will begin to schedule items for the Committee Work Plan in line with the decisions made at this meeting.

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Background Papers: None