

To: Scrutiny Committee
Date: 06 July 2020
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 2020/21 |
| Key decision: | No |
| Scrutiny Lead Member: | Councillor Gant, Chair of the Scrutiny Committee |
| Corporate Priority: | All |
| Recommendations: That the Scrutiny Committee resolves to: | |
| 1. | Agree to include in the Scrutiny work plan longlist of items (Appendix 1) with a TOPICC score of 8 or more. |
| 2. | Note that the topic, draft scope and Chairs of the Scrutiny Review Groups will be agreed at Scrutiny's August meeting. |
| 3. | To note the Council Forward Plan (Appendix 4) and agree the proposed Scrutiny work plan to September (Appendix 5). |

| Appendices | |
|-------------------|--|
| Appendix 1 | Scrutiny work plan longlist of Items |
| Appendix 2 | List of reports within differing TOPICC thresholds and where they will be considered |
| Appendix 3 | 'TOPICC' scoring criteria for work plan items |
| Appendix 4 | Council Forward Plan |
| Appendix 5 | Scrutiny work plan items to September |

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 for consideration by the Committee.

Forming an Effective Work Plan

2. 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

3. The Scrutiny Officer contacted all councillors and senior officers in June 2020 to request suggestions for the work plan.
4. 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 reports listed in the [Forward Plan](#).
5. 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 'TOPICC' scoring criteria (Appendix 3) developed previously as a guide for prioritising scrutiny items to reflect the particular stresses on Council resources of the Covid-19 response. 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.
6. 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 8 or higher should be included in the work plan. To aid consideration of which topics would be included, and at which meeting Appendix 2 provides a list of scenarios to show which reports would be included if the TOPICC minimum score were to be 10+, all the way down to 6+. A full explanation of the scoring methodology is set out in Appendix 3.
7. 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

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*.

- deploy appropriate scrutiny methods for the issue under review
- provide attendees with sufficient notice to prepare for meetings

Standing Panels

8. The Committee previously agreed on 02 June 2020 to establish the Finance and Performance, Housing and Homelessness, 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. The Scrutiny Committee has agreed that at each meeting a brief verbal report be made back by a Panel representative of the happenings of any Panel meetings held since the last Scrutiny Committee meeting.
9. Standing Panel chairs were appointed on 02 June 2020 for the Finance and Performance and Companies Panels, with Housing and Homelessness to be appointed at the first meeting. It was agreed that four members would sit on the Finance and Performance and Companies Panels, and six on the Housing and Homelessness Panel.

Review Groups

10. 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.
11. The work of a review group should be focused, 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.
12. 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
13. In accordance with the Committee's Operating Principles, the chairs of any review groups must be members of the Scrutiny Committee, but the remaining members can be any non-executive members of the Council. It is recommended that review

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.

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.

14. To date, the issues that have been suggested as review group topics are set out below:
 - Domestic Violence services
 - Public participation in decision making and citizen involvement
 - Budget Review Group
15. The Scrutiny Operating Principles state that the agreed capacity for Review Groups is two per year if, as has been agreed, the Committee runs three Standing Panels. It is recommended that the Committee consider questions of which review groups to select, Chairmanship, and broad timing at its meeting on 04 August 2020, by which time a draft scope for each will have been developed.

Available Resources

16. 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.
17. Where the Committee requests to consider a Cabinet report, the resource implications will be minimal 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.
18. In light of the particular demands on staff resources faced by the Council in response to the Covid-19 pandemic the Scrutiny Committee has agreed only to consider Cabinet reports until September 2020. Whilst by September it is expected that the emergency response will have passed, demands on Council resources are expected to remain elevated beyond that date. As such, the TOPICC scoring criteria has been temporarily amended to reflect the additional resources required for non-Cabinet reports.
19. 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.
20. 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. 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 CfPS 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.

Conclusion and Next Steps

21. The Committee is asked to agree the recommendations as set out in the summary of this report. The Scrutiny Officer will begin to schedule items for the Committee work plan in line with the decisions made at this meeting.

| | |
|----------------------------|--|
| Report author | Tom Hudson |
| Job title | Scrutiny Officer |
| Service area or department | Law and Governance |
| Telephone | 01865 252191 |
| e-mail | thudson@oxford.gov.uk |

Background Papers: None

This page is intentionally left blank