

Appendix 2a

Proposals for Changes to the Scrutiny Work Plan

Background

Historically, Scrutiny has sought to agree a work plan towards the start of the year which agreed the topics Scrutiny wished to consider, the forum at which those reports would be considered, as well as the date. These reports would be made up of a combination of Cabinet reports and Scrutiny-commissioned papers. However, Cabinet papers can be delayed for a multitude of reasons. This can have a number of consequences – too many reports for one meeting to consider and therefore some reports on the work plan not being included, or too few reports at a particular meeting. The latter is exacerbated by the fact that if a report is delayed at a late stage it is not fair on officers or Cabinet members to require their attendance at Scrutiny at the last minute.

To date, the Scrutiny Officer has held the responsibility to smooth over these fluctuations as far as possible, but inevitably in the previous year there were times when Scrutiny did not have a full complement of reports to consider at its Committee or Panel meetings, or items of priority to Scrutiny members were not brought forward.

A Worked Example

Appendix 2b of the main report is a worked example of what this flexible approach would look like. The month of June has been included because it illustrates a number of the pressures and trade-offs involved.

In each month to September are listed the Cabinet reports which appear on the Council's Forward Plan, and any Scrutiny-commissioned reports. These reports are listed in order of priority; prioritisation is based on a number of factors – the TOPIC criteria,¹ whether Scrutiny is required to consider a report under the Constitution, and other factors such as whether there will be multiple opportunities to hear a report on a particular issue. It is important to emphasise that the Scrutiny Committee is not passive in deciding the prioritisation; this is the framework for determining what will be heard and the Committee will be asked at each meeting to agree the list of priorities or to amend it if it does not.

Generally speaking, it is felt that the Committee can engage meaningfully with three substantive (as opposed to administrative, such as the current one) reports at a meeting. More than that and the level of scrutiny possible faces the danger of drop off for lack of time. This limit does mean there are times where an important report cannot be considered. At the time of the original drafting of this report, for example,

¹ TOPIC is an acronym used to assess possible reports against objective criteria:

Timeliness – is there a reason why this report should be considered now and not another time?

Oxford Priority – does this relate closely to a Council priority

Public Interest – is there significant public engagement in the issue?

Impact – can Scrutiny have a meaningful impact?

Cost – does the item involve significant expenditure or savings?

Appendix 2a

the Oxford Electric Vehicle Strategy was scheduled to go to Cabinet in June (it is now scheduled for July). However, despite being a very high priority for the Committee it was not proposed to go onto the agenda of the current Scrutiny Committee meeting. This was simply a consequence of the number of important papers going to the June Cabinet, and the relative prioritisation of it and the other available high priority reports.

An additional bit of information included on the list is which forum – the main Scrutiny Committee or one of its particular panels – would be preferred to hear such a report. What is suggested is not binding and the overriding factor will be which issues the Committee deems as priorities. This is the reason, for example, why a report which would best be suited to the Housing and Homelessness Panel (Rough Sleeping) is on the agenda at Scrutiny. There is not a Housing and Homelessness Panel meeting scheduled to coincide with the report, and it is deemed too important to overlook.

For ease of reference, the Committee will be presented with a proposed work plan, which will be based on the priorities previously identified and meeting dates scheduled (see Appendix 3 to the main report, for an example). In light of the uncertainty over report dates, it will cover the current and forthcoming two months but not further. Should the Committee disagree with the prioritisation suggested by the Scrutiny Officer the work plan will be reworked in light of those changed priorities.

Once Scrutiny has agreed the reports it wishes to commission, these will be included on the work plan to the end of the year, simply because they are less liable to be delayed.

Conclusion

In agreeing its priorities rather than the precise reports it wishes to consider and no more, Scrutiny will be better able to deliver a full timetable of the most relevant reports.