

To: Scrutiny Committee
Date: 14 July 2021
Report of: Head of Law and Governance
Title of Report: Scrutiny Commissioned Reports

Summary and recommendations	
Purpose of report:	To agree the topics on which Scrutiny wishes to commission reports for consideration during the year
Key decision:	No
Scrutiny Lead Member:	Councillor Wade, Chair of the Scrutiny Committee
Corporate Priority:	All
Recommendations: That the Scrutiny Committee resolves to:	
1.	Agree the list of priority topics (in green in Appendix 1) for Scrutiny-commissioned reports, having made any amendments required, and note that the Scrutiny Officer will apportion those topics to the relevant dates and forums for consideration.
2.	Agree to consider drafts scopes of the currently listed topics for Review Groups at its 03 August meeting and select the priority topic for a Review Group at that point.

Appendices	
Appendix 1	Scrutiny longlist of topics for Scrutiny-commissioned reports
Appendix 2	Explanation of the TOPIC scoring criteria

Introduction and background

1. Each year, the Scrutiny Committee formulates a 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. At its meeting of 08 June 2021 the Committee agreed to a flexible work plan, under which its priorities would be identified, allowing movement in the timing of reports on the Council's Forward Plan to be managed more in line with the Committee's wishes. One consequence of this is that it is not helpful to plan which reports from the Forward Plan the Committee wishes to consider more than three months in advance.

2. However, Scrutiny does not simply consider Cabinet items on the Forward Plan. It may also scrutinise issues independently of the work of the Cabinet. This it may do through Scrutiny-commissioned reports, and its Review Groups.
3. The Committee is therefore asked to identify and agree the topics on which it would like to commission reports, and to take steps to narrow down its choice of Review Group topic.

Selecting Topics for Scrutiny-commissioned Reports

4. The Scrutiny Officer contacted all councillors and senior officers in April and May 2021 to request ideas for Scrutiny-commissioned reports. The Committee was asked to email ideas for additional Scrutiny-commissioned reports to the Scrutiny Officer. The combined list of these suggestions forms the basis of Appendix 1, which also provides the recommended list of items to take forward.
5. Scrutiny best practice stipulates that work plans should be developed based on sound criteria with a clear rationale for topic selection.¹ Over recent years the Scrutiny function has relied on the 'TOPIC' acronym as its criteria for scoring different proposals. A key for understanding the TOPIC scoring system is included as Appendix 2. 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 in Appendix 1 to score each of the items based on his own judgement and understanding of the issues. These provide an indicative score but are not the sole basis for deciding between items; for example, one suggestion was over the value for money of the Covered Market, a topic the Committee discussed about at its last meeting. Consequently, it has not been included within the recommended list even though it would have merited it in terms of its importance as a topic.

Resource Implications of Selecting Scrutiny-commissioned Reports

7. The Council has one dedicated Scrutiny Officer post responsible for supporting the work of the Scrutiny Committee, its standing panels and review groups.
8. 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.
9. Owing to this, meetings of the Scrutiny function should seek to have an average of one Scrutiny-commissioned report per meeting. Ignoring the number of Companies Scrutiny Panel meetings held due to changes to be agreed at this meeting, there are 18 meetings between August and the end of the civic year. The Committee is asked to agree a list of around 22 priorities from the list of suggestions. The extras

¹ Auditor General for Wales. 2014. "Good Scrutiny? Good Question!: Scrutiny in Local Government Improvement Study.

to enable greater flexibility over the topics, and therefore which Committee or Panel meeting they are sent to.

10. A few issues to note for clarity: some Scrutiny-commissioned reports are already scheduled. These are included in the number of potential reports. Also, the Chair of the Housing and Homelessness Panel has suggested that the Panel have a running theme of tenant engagement throughout the year, and that it dedicates its allotted reports to looking at that in greater depth. This has been included within the Scrutiny Officer recommendation.
11. 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 and the Committee should consider any advice from officers on the timeliness and scheduling of review work.

Review Groups

12. 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.
13. 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.
14. 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.²
15. It is recommended that review groups are chaired by those members 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.
16. To date, the issues that have been suggested as review group topics are set out below:
 - Child Poverty
 - Covid bounce-back
 - Budget Review Group

² 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.

17. 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. As part of its remit, the Finance and Performance Panel is tasked to undertake a review of the budget, meaning there is one space remaining. Draft scopes of the other topics will be available for consideration at the Committee's 03 August 2021 meeting unless the Committee wishes to make a decision on its preferred topic now, whereupon a fuller scope would be put forward to the Committee for sign-off at its 08 September meeting.

Conclusion and Next Steps

18. 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 discussion with relevant officers based on the priorities provided.

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Background Papers: None