

**To:** Scrutiny Committee

**Date:** 10 June 2025

**Report of:** Director of Law, Governance and Strategy (Monitoring Officer)

**Title of Report:** Scrutiny Operating Principles and Standing Panel and Review Group Arrangements

Summary and recommendations	
<b>Decision being taken:</b>	To adopt a set of operating principles for the Scrutiny Committee for the 2025/26 municipal year, establish working groups and review groups, and appoint standing working group and review group membership and chairs.
<b>Key decision:</b>	No
<b>Lead Member:</b>	Chair of the Scrutiny Committee 2025/2026
<b>Corporate Priority:</b>	All
<b>Policy Framework:</b>	All

Recommendation(s): That the Scrutiny Committee resolves to:	
1.	<b>Agree</b> the proposed Committee Operating Principles for the 2025/26 municipal year, as set out at Appendix 1;
2.	<b>Recommend</b> to Council to amalgamate the Operating Principles into Part 13 (Scrutiny Committee Procedures) of the Council's Constitution
3.	<p><b>Agree</b> to establish the following working groups for the 2025/26 municipal year with the following remits:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) Finance and Performance Working Group – finance and budgetary issues and decisions, annual review of the Council's budget, quarterly monitoring of finance and performance (including performance of the Council's companies), executive decisions made in relation to any companies wholly or partly owned by the Council.</li> <li>b) Housing and Homelessness Working Group – strategic housing and landlord issues and decisions, homelessness, housing services performance and interaction with the Tenant's Forum.</li> <li>c) Climate and Environment Working Group – climate and environmental issues and decisions, progress and performance monitoring, monitoring delivery of existing strategies, policies and projects.</li> </ul>

4. **Agree** to appoint members and chairs of the Finance and Performance, Housing and Homelessness, and Climate and Environment Working Groups or any other working groups as agreed by the Committee in accordance with nominations made by political groups.  
  
**Finance and Performance:** Cllrs James Fry, Christopher Smowton, Chris Jarvis and Ian Yeatman  
  
**Housing and Homelessness:** Cllrs Lizzy Diggins, Theodore Jupp, Rosie Rawle, Anne Stares and Edward Mundy  
  
**Climate and Environment:** Cllrs Jemima Hunt, Katherine Miles, Kate Robinson and Judith Harley
6. **Agree** to establish a Budget Review Group, comprising the membership of the Finance and Performance Working Group, noting that the proposed scope will be agreed at a future Scrutiny Committee meeting.
6. **Agree** the schedule of meetings as presented within the report;
7. **Agree:**  
The preliminary Work Plan covering the period to September 2025 as detailed at Appendix 2; and  
  
That Committee members will send additional ideas for topics for Scrutiny-commissioned reports to the Scrutiny and Governance Advisor by e-mail for consideration at future Committee meetings.
8. **Delegate** authority to the Scrutiny and Governance Advisor, in consultation with the Chair of the Scrutiny Committee, to endorse and forward Working Group recommendations to the Shareholder and Joint Venture Groups and be reported back to the Scrutiny Committee at the next meeting.

Appendix No.	Appendix Title	Exempt from Publication
<b>Appendix 1</b>	Draft Scrutiny Committee Operating Principles	No
<b>Appendix 2</b>	Preliminary Work Plan to September 2025	No
<b>Appendix 3</b>	List of suggestions for 2025/26 Scrutiny Work Plan	No
<b>Appendix 4</b>	A Guide for Scrutiny Committee Members	No

### Introduction and background

1. At the start of a new municipal year the Scrutiny Committee is asked to re-establish the key principles by which the Committee, and its working groups and review groups, will operate. This provides clarity to Members, officers and the public about how Scrutiny will manage and organise its activities during the year.
2. The Committee is able to delegate responsibility for scrutiny of certain issues to specific working groups, which report back to the Committee with recommendations

(where time allows). The Committee should consider whether it wishes to reconstitute the previous standing arrangements or establish different working groups. As working groups are established, it is recommended that the number of seats, political composition and membership of panels is agreed; and Chairs appointed.

3. The Committee may also establish review groups to undertake issue-led and time-bound 'task and finish' reviews of specific issues, before concluding their work with a report and recommendations, usually to Cabinet. As review groups are established, it is recommended that the number of seats, political composition and membership of review groups is agreed; and Chairs appointed.

### **Role of the Scrutiny Committee**

4. Scrutiny operates to provide democratic oversight and public assurance that the Council is carrying out its business effectively; and to act as a check and balance function to ensure that decisions are taken in the best interests of the people of Oxford. Scrutiny carries out research, reviews and hears from independent experts, as well as Council officers, making recommendations for service improvement where necessary. One focus of the Committee's work is to hold the Cabinet to account, but Scrutiny may also pursue its own agenda by commissioning reports from officers on priority issues, assisting the Council in developing policy. As outlined in the Council's Constitution Part 8.3, the Committee can:
  - a. Develop and review policy:
    - Help Council and the Cabinet to develop policy by studying issues in detail.
    - Carry out research and consultation on policy.
    - Consider and introduce schemes to involve the public in developing policy.
    - Work with national, regional and local organisations to promote the interest of local people.
  - b. Hold the Cabinet to account:
    - Review the performance and decisions of the Cabinet, and Council officers (but not decisions on individual planning or licensing applications).
    - Review the Council's progress in achieving its policy aims and performance targets.
    - Review the performance of individual services.
    - Review executive decisions in respect of any companies wholly or partly owned by the Council and hold the shareholder to account for the performance of those companies (*the decisions of Council-owned companies do not fall within the remit of the Scrutiny Committee*).
    - Ask Cabinet members and senior officers questions about their decisions and performance – these may be questions about general performance or about particular decisions and projects.
  - c. Require senior officers and Cabinet Members to attend meetings and answer questions.
  - d. Hold other public service providers to account (though there is no legal requirement for them to engage).
5. Members of the Committee are encouraged to read the relevant guidance supplied as Appendix 4 which provides a detailed review of how the Committee operates, how to be effective as a scrutiny councillor, and the support and development opportunities available to members. Similar guides and training are available from

the Local Government Association (LGA), Local Government Information Unit (LGiU), and the Centre for Governance and Scrutiny (CfGS). Training for all Members will be organised for later in the municipal year.

### **Scrutiny Operating Principles**

6. The Council's Constitution sets out the role (Part 8) and procedures (Part 13) of the Scrutiny Committee, but it is not prescriptive about how the Scrutiny function will be organised and managed. In previous years, the Committee has agreed a set of operating principles to govern key aspects of its work which are not covered by the Constitution. Key matters addressed in the document include resource expectations, membership guidelines for panels and meeting frequency.
7. The Operating Principles are designed as a reference document to guide the Committee's work; a draft set of principles for adoption are set out at Appendix 1. The Committee may make revisions as it sees appropriate within the confines of the Constitution, relevant legislation and resource capacity. Members are asked to discuss any proposed changes to the Operating Principles in advance with the Scrutiny and Governance Advisor or take advice at the meeting.
8. The Committee is recommended to adopt the draft Operating Principles as set out at Appendix 1 and recommend to Council to amalgamate these into Part 13 of the Council's Constitution. This is broadly in line with how other authorities govern their Scrutiny Committee and the wider impact the committee has in scrutinising the Council's delivery. For future years, this will allow the Scrutiny Committee to set up the scope of the Working Groups and allow the Constitution Review Group to annually review the committee procedures.

### **Other implications**

9. In previous years, the Committee has established Finance and Performance, Housing and Homelessness, Climate and Environment, and Companies Scrutiny Panels to undertake detailed scrutiny of decisions and issues relevant to their remit. The reason being that small groups of members with an interest in these priority areas can build up specialist knowledge and insights and use these to produce better scrutiny outcomes. These panels have a degree of discretion to manage their own work plans but remain accountable to the Scrutiny Committee for their work.
10. Working groups will report to the Scrutiny Committee for their recommendations to be endorsed before being submitted to Cabinet. However, this is unlikely to be possible when the working group is reviewing a report that is already scheduled for Cabinet due to time constraints. To mitigate against potential delays, particularly in the case of the Finance and Performance Working Group making recommendations to the Shareholder and Joint Venture Groups (SJVG) on Council Companies matters where meetings overlap, the Committee is asked to delegate authority to the Scrutiny and Governance Advisor, in consultation with the Chair of the Scrutiny Committee, to endorse and forward Working Group recommendations to the SJVG, and report back to the Scrutiny Committee at its next meeting.
11. The draft Operating Principles at Appendix 1 set out that, in any given year, the organisation ordinarily has capacity to support either:
  - a. 2 Working groups and 3 Review Groups; or
  - b. 3 Working groups and 2 Review Groups

12. The Committee is invited to agree the remits of standing working groups for the year and is recommended to re-establish the Finance and Performance, Housing and Homelessness, and Climate and Environment Working Groups. This amounts to the maximum of three working groups which the organisation has capacity to support. It is also recommended that the annual Budget Review Group be re-established for 2025/2026 (see paragraph 21 below).
13. Assuming the Committee agrees to re-establish the recommended working and review groups, capacity within the Scrutiny function remains for approximately five meetings, with six meetings for the Finance and Performance Working Group to align with the Shareholder and Joint Venture Groups. The Committee is recommended to give consideration as to whether it wishes to establish an additional review group focused on a priority topic of the Committee's choosing, or alternatively the Committee could choose to allocate additional meetings to working groups, should the panels require them. There is no requirement for the Committee to make an immediate decision as to how to allocate the remaining capacity, therefore it may decide to keep this issue under review.
14. After agreeing which working groups to establish, the Committee is recommended to appoint Chairs and agree their full membership. The proposed Operating Principles stipulate that each panel should comprise either four or six councillors, with cross-party representation be cross-party. For this year, it is recommended that all working groups be established with four members to support more efficient scheduling and ensure consistent attendance.
15. The quorum for all working groups with members is set at two. If this quorum is not met, some Cabinet reports may proceed without formal cross-party scrutiny, and consideration of other items may need to be delayed.
16. Given that working group meetings are not formal committees of the Council, there is no legal requirement for them to be held in-person. In addition, it is established Council practice that most officers may attend meetings virtually. To mitigate any potential governance risks, the Working Groups will not be livestreamed, as previous practices did not fit within the access to meetings rules within the Local Government Act 1972. The Committee is recommended to consider the additional resource that in-person and hybrid meetings place on the organisation and agree that meetings of working groups will be held virtually. Due to capacity constraints, hybrid meetings will not be possible.
17. The Members Allowances Scheme allocates a Special Responsibility Allowance (SRA) equivalent to 25% of the Basic Allowance (£1,500.39 in 2025/2026) to a maximum of two standing working group chairs, on the basis that panels meet at least five times a year. If there are more than two working groups set up, then 50% of the Basic Allowance (£3000.78 for 2025/2026) will be divided between the total number of panel chairs. This SRA is to reflect the additional responsibility of standing working group chairs.

### **Scrutiny Review Groups**

18. Each year, the Scrutiny Committee ordinarily establishes a Budget Review Group to examine the Council's budget proposals for the next financial year, which helps ensure good financial governance practices.
19. It is recommended that the Scrutiny Committee agrees to establish a Budget Review Group for the 2025/26 municipal year to examine the Council's budget

proposals for 2026/27 and that the proposed scope be presented at a future Scrutiny Committee meeting for agreement.

20. Given the Finance and Performance Working Group's involvement in scrutinising the Council's finances, it is recommended that the membership of the Budget Review Group align with that of the Finance and Performance Working Group (should it be re-established). Additionally, the Chair of the Finance and Performance Working Group should also serve as the Chair of the Budget Review Group.

- Cllrs James Fry, Christopher Smowton, Chris Jarvis and Ian Yeatman

21. Due to the busy time of year during which the Budget Review Group takes place and the absence of a legal requirement for the review group to meet in-person, it is recommended that meetings of the Budget Review Group take place virtually.

### **Schedule of meetings**

Members of the Committee are invited to agree the schedule of meetings for the remainder of the municipal year and to diarise these where necessary:

<b>Month</b>	<b>Scrutiny Committee</b>	<b>Finance and Performance</b>	<b>Housing and Homelessness</b>	<b>Climate and Environment</b>
June 2025	10 June	17 June	24 June	-
July 2025	1 July	16 July	-	22 July
August 2025	5 August	-	-	-
September 2025	9 September	-	29 September	4 September
October 2025	14 October	29 October	-	8 October
November 2025	11 November	26 November	4 November	-
December 2025	2 December	-	-	-
January 2026	13 January	-	-	27 January
February 2026	3 February	-	18 February	25 February
March 2026	10 March	25 March	31 March	-
April 2026	7 April	14 April	-	-

### **Alternative options for Working Groups**

22. The Committee is not required to reappoint the recommended working groups, and it may choose to appoint panels with different remits.
23. If the Committee decides to set up different standing panel arrangements, the Scrutiny and Governance Advisor will liaise with the Scrutiny Committee Chair and return to a future meeting with a revised proposal for agreement. Consideration would need to be given to the organisation's capacity to support the number and remits of working groups.

### **Co-Option**

24. The Scrutiny Committee has the right to co-opt members as non-voting members under the Local Government Act 2000 (section 9FA(4)). Part 13.3 of the Council's

Constitution allows the Scrutiny Committee to 'appoint non-voting co-opted members to serve for a specific policy review or until the next annual Council.'

### **Scrutiny-Commissioned Reports**

25. As referenced above, Scrutiny has the power to commission its own reports. However, it should be recognised that doing so is significantly more resource-intensive for officers than presenting a report which is already being written for Cabinet. The draft Scrutiny Operating Principles recognise this, stating that 'items will be taken forward as resources allow, and the Committee must provide officers with sufficient notice and guidance on what they are requesting to consider, mindful of the impact on resources and the constraints of the organisation. The Scrutiny Committee and its Panels will provide as much notice as is possible when commissioning reports from Council officers (minimum 8 weeks).'
26. As a guideline, to allow time for consideration of reports in sufficient depth whilst maintaining timely meetings of Scrutiny and its working groups, each meeting will aim to have three reports for consideration. It is recommended that the Committee is mindful of resource implications of Scrutiny-commissioned reports and seeks to average no more than one Scrutiny-commissioned report per meeting over the municipal year.
27. The Committee is recommended to agree that ideas from Members will be sent to the Scrutiny and Governance Advisor by e-mail for collation outside the meeting.
28. Attached to this report at Appendix 2 is a draft Work Plan to September 2025, which provides a recommended Work Plan until that date, enabling items to be considered until such point as the Committee has had time to organise its own priorities for the remainder of the municipal year.
29. Attached to this report at Appendix 3 is a list of suggestions already made; these are comprised of suggestions made by Members and senior officers to date, recurring Scrutiny-commissioned reports and Cabinet reports currently listed on the Forward Plan.

### **Alternative Options Considered**

30. The Scrutiny Committee could consider not to approve the Operating Principles, however this would mean that further work on the principles would need to happen before the Working Groups could start their function. This would also impact the work in Scrutinising the Council's Companies ahead of the Shareholder and Joint Venture Groups due in June and July.
31. Any additional or replacement Working Groups would need to be reviewed by the Scrutiny and Governance Advisor before being set-up by the committee, which could delay the impact of the scrutiny function. It is recommended that any changes to the Working Groups is discussed in advance to ensure capacity and scope is outlined.
32. The Committee could also not recommend to Council to amalgamate the Operating Principles into the Constitution. However, this approach would not be consistent with practices in other Councils where such principles are embedded in their Constitution. Adding them would allow the Scrutiny Committee to focus on its core work, with the Constitution Review Group taking on the annual review as part of its broader oversight of committee procedures.

## Financial implications

33. No financial implications arise from this report, however ensuring the Council's financial position and that of the Council's Companies are critical for the Scrutiny function of the authority.

## Legal issues

34. No legal implication arises from this report, however failing to have an effective Scrutiny Committee could lead to the authority receiving legal challenges in the future.

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<b>Background Papers:</b>	
1	<a href="#">Local Government Act 2000, Section 9FA</a>
2	<a href="#">Oxford City Council Constitution Part 8 – Role of the Scrutiny Committee</a>
3	<a href="#">Oxford City Council Constitution Part 13 – Scrutiny Committee Procedures</a>