

A Guide for Scrutiny Committee Members

Scrutiny is essential for ensuring that council policies and decisions are effective, fair, and in the best interests of residents. Acting as a 'critical friend' to Cabinet, Scrutiny Committee provides oversight and constructive challenge which ultimately contributes to a more transparent and accountable council.

What is Scrutiny?

The Local Government Act 2000 brought about significant changes that transformed the way decision-making took place in local authorities. Previously, local authorities operated under a committee system where decisions were made within service-specific committees. However, a 1998 Audit Commission report found this approach inefficient and lacking public transparency.

The 2000 Act introduced an executive model, separating decision-making (Cabinet) from oversight (Scrutiny). This ensured that policies and decisions are independently reviewed, creating a more accountable and transparent governance.

What is the role of the Scrutiny Committee?

Oxford City Council's Scrutiny Committee is comprised of 12 cross-party councillors who are not members of the Cabinet. Their role is to carry out a 'check and balance' function to the Cabinet by reviewing policies, decisions, and key issues affecting residents.

Scrutiny operates to provide public assurance that the Cabinet is carrying out its business effectively, taking decisions in the best interests of the residents of Oxford. To provide this assurance, the Committee carries out research, reviews and conducts evidence-led discussions.

While the Committee does not have direct decision-making powers, it can make recommendations to the Cabinet arguing for change and service improvement. It can also delay decisions for further scrutiny through the power of 'call-in', however this must only be used in exceptional circumstances. The Committee can require Cabinet to respond in writing within two months to recommendations made, stating whether it agrees or disagrees with the recommendations.

Key roles of Scrutiny:

- **Review and Develop Policy** – Reviewing existing policy to ensure it remains fit for purpose, and contributing to the development of new policies before they are implemented. Monitoring policy implementation may also take place.
- **Hold the Cabinet to account** – Scrutinising decisions of the Cabinet either before or after they are implemented, to ensure that the right decisions are made at the right time, and in an open and transparent way.
- **Reflect the concerns of the public** – Promoting the views of the public through scrutiny and engaging with a diverse range of issues and people. The Committee Work Plan should reflect the concerns and aspirations of local people.
- **Challenge performance** – Reviewing the performance of council services to ensure they provide value for money and are meeting targets.
- **Scrutinise externally** – Examining how external organisations contribute to the benefit of the City and recommend ways to improve their contributions. Notably, there are limitations to the level of influence over external organisations, and reputational and relationship risks.

How does the Committee prioritise its work?

Effective scrutiny requires a strategic approach to selecting and reviewing topics. Given the breadth of council services and policies, the Committee must prioritise and plan its work to aim and achieve positive outcomes.

The Committee does so by agreeing an annual schedule of work each June. This Work Plan remains flexible and is kept under review throughout the year. Officers and members are encouraged to suggest issues for scrutiny, however it is important to note that not every suggestion can be pursued.

An effective work programme will:

- Prioritise on key issues
- Clearly define the purpose of why items are being considered
- Minimise the number of update reports or routine items that do not require scrutiny
- Ensure that agendas are realistic and well-structured
- Use a combination of scrutiny methods (pre-decision scrutiny, post implementation review, and internal/external engagement)
- Provide attendees with sufficient notice to prepare for meetings
- Establish review groups to undertake detailed work

The Committee is encouraged to use a systematic approach called ‘TOPIC’ scoring criteria as a guide for prioritising issues:

Timely	Is the need for a review timely and not duplicated elsewhere?
Oxford Priority	Is the issue featured in the Council’s Corporate Plan?
Public Interest	Is the issue of significant public interest?
Influence	Is the Committee realistically able to influence the issue?
Cost	Is the issue an area of high expenditure or savings?

What are Review Groups?

In some instances, the Scrutiny Committee may consider it more effective to establish a small group to carry out a review, where it would be impractical for the whole committee to be involved. The work of a review group should be focused, time limited, and carry out in depth research and scrutiny in the interest of developing recommendation for service improvement. Often, review groups will seek the help of external experts to help inform their work. Members of these groups should have the interest and time to commit to undertake in-depth scrutiny. Review group meetings are not bound by the same rights of public access to meetings. Chairs should be Scrutiny members, but the remaining membership can be from across the council.

The five stages of a scrutiny review are:

SCOPING

The scoping of a scrutiny review is fundamental to the effectiveness of the review process. This starts with identifying outputs and objectives, and clarifying what members hope to achieve. It also considers what evidence is needed, the timeframe for the review, who should be involved and any publicity.

EVIDENCE GATHERING

Evidence is gathered in accordance with the review scope. This principally involves speaking with experts, but could also involve site visits, consultation exercises, examining performance, desktop research and holding public workshops.

REVIEWING EVIDENCE

Once all of the evidence has been gathered, it then needs to be reviewed. This is where members take stock and assess the evidence, and decide if enough information is available to draw reasonable conclusions and recommendations

REPORTING AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The Scrutiny and Governance Advisor, in consultation with the Chair, will produce a detailed report on the review group's work, outlining the rationale for its conclusions and recommendations. Following endorsement from the Scrutiny Committee, recommendations will be put to the Cabinet for a written response.

MONITORING AND EVALUATION

Although responsibility for the implementation of any accepted recommendations rests with the Cabinet and officers, it is essential that the Scrutiny Committee monitors progress usually at 6 or 12-month intervals.

Who is involved in Scrutiny?

The role of the Chair and Vice-Chair:

- the Chair leads the Scrutiny Committee and presides over its meetings
- the Vice-Chair supports the Chair and deputises in their absence
- the management of the Work Plan is with the whole Committee but the Chair and Vice-Chair take an "organisational role" between meetings
- the Chair updates Full Council about the work of the Committee

The role of all Scrutiny Members:

- to contribute to the Work Plan and participate at Scrutiny Committee meetings
- to think strategically about City-wide issues, using local knowledge
- to be mindful of and actively seek community views
- to be questioning, deliberative and evidence based
- to be robust and constructive in challenging; not oppositional

The role of the Scrutiny and Governance Advisor:

- to support all the work of scrutiny and to co-ordinate its Work Plan
- to provide policy advice and best practice guidance
- to prepare and support witnesses attending the Committee
- to draft reports and recommendations on behalf of the Committee
- to act as a champion for scrutiny within the organisation

The role of the Committee and Member Services Officer:

- to clerk Scrutiny meetings
- to prepare the meeting agenda and minutes
- to provide advice on procedural and constitutional issues
- to provide other general support
- to act as champion for members within the organisation

What are Working Groups?

In addition to carrying out time limited scrutiny reviews, the Scrutiny Committee can also establish yearly standing working groups to help manage its workload. In previous years, the Committee has opted to establish three working groups; Finance and Performance, Housing and Homelessness and Climate and Environment. Each Working Group is tasked with scrutinising decisions related to their delegated area, and reporting back to the Scrutiny Committee with recommendations. The membership of these working groups is made up of between four and six members, and accountable to the Scrutiny Committee. Regular agenda items for these Working Groups include annual and quarterly performance reports.

How can Scrutiny add value?

Scrutiny is improvement-focused and solution-driven. It provides an additional mechanism to evaluate and develop policy and assures that decisions are taken in the best interest of residents. Scrutiny enhances transparency by involving the voices of the public, independent experts, and stakeholders who might not otherwise contribute to Council decision-making.

Scrutiny also serves as a valuable tool for Cabinet members and officers by offering detailed feedback on proposed decisions and council services. By acting as an early stage sounding board, the Committee helps confirm broader member buy-in to important decisions. The Committee contributes to the continuous improvement of services through evidence-based recommendations.

What do effective recommendations look like?

The [Centre for Governance and Scrutiny](#) advocates that recommendations should be evidence-based, specific, and realistic enough to be implemented. They should have a clear focus on outcomes and advocate for a measurable change.

Where possible, recommendations should be developed in partnership with other interested parties and should take account of the Council's financial realities.

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