

TOPIC GROUP PROTOCOL

1 Background

- 1.1 In response to a call for change in the way the Council conducted its Scrutiny arrangements following a seminar with the Chairs and Vice-Chairs of the Seven Scrutiny Panels, the Scrutiny Overview Committee agreed at its meeting on 16th October 2006 that they would promote small, less formal, time bound Topic Groups to consider specific scrutiny issues in detail. The topics could derive from a number of sources both internal and external including Members (including on occasion the Executive), officers, external agencies and the general public.
- 1.2 The first stage in the process will be to explore the scope of the scrutiny topic to fully understand what is being proposed and produce a short scoping document for presentation to the (Scrutiny Overview Committee (SOC) (Action: originator of topic, Scrutiny Officer (SO), Chair and/or Vice-chair of SOC).
- 1.3 If the proposal is agreed in principle (as presented or modified) then a scrutiny template will be completed, if the template meets the criteria for scrutiny then the appropriate Topic Group will be set up. (Action: SO/Chair/Vice-chair SOC. Can be via Email or if a number to be done via a face to face with the aforementioned people).
- 1.4 In accordance with the Articles of the Constitution – Article 6 – Overview & Scrutiny (b) Policy development & review (i), (ii) & (iii) all refer to the role that Scrutiny has with regards to Policy Development. If the issue is a Policy Development matter than the originating Scrutiny Member & Chair and/or Vice-Chair of SOC, with the assistance of the Scrutiny Officer, scopes, sets objectives and parameters for the Topic Group.

2. Size of a Topic Group

- 2.1 As a general rule Topic Groups should have a minimum of the three Members and no more than seven, ideally five Members would be the optimum number (3 majority group and 2 opposition).

3. Membership of a Topic Group

- 3.1 It is envisaged that the membership would be drawn from those Scrutiny Members who either (i) have some expertise in the specific area or (ii) are interested in the specific issue.
- 3.2 There is a standing invitation for the Chair of Scrutiny Overview Committee to attend any Topic Group.

4. Chair of Topic Groups

- 4.1.1 For the remainder of this Municipal Year 2006/07 the Chairs of the Topic Group will be the same Chair as the Parent Scrutiny and Value for Money Panels. If the Chair is not present at the meeting the Chair of Scrutiny Overview Committee will Chair the meeting, if neither are present then Members will appoint a Chair for that meeting.

- 4.2 The Chair of the Topic Group will report on the progress of the Topic Group at Scrutiny Overview Committee meetings.

5. Investigating and Reporting

- 5.1 A Topic Group should carry out its investigation by calling the appropriate Witnesses or experts to give it advice on the particular subject under consideration. As well as expert witnesses Members may call Executive Members and Chief and senior officers to answer questions.
- 5.2 A Topic Group does not have any powers to take any decisions. It should consider the issues it has been asked to investigate and submit a report to the Scrutiny Overview Committee, which will then decide whether or not to make any recommendations to the Executive or Council.

6. Collecting Evidence

- 6.1 Written evidence may be gathered from a wide variety of sources. Depending on the matter being scrutinised, each Topic Group will decide and record on a case-by-case basis what is needed. This will form an appendix to the final report, which will outline the methodology.
- 6.2 Oral evidence is a useful way to gather evidence as it enables questions to be asked and clarification to be sought. The Scrutiny Overview Committees have the power to require Executive Members and officers to appear before them. In addition, the Topic Groups working on behalf of the Scrutiny Overview Committee can invite any other people to appear who may be able to help them with their enquiries, but they cannot require those people to attend. Where possible, it will generally be helpful to combine oral evidence with a written brief that Committee Members can study in advance of the meeting. This assists Members in identifying the questions they wish to ask and makes for a more productive meeting. Where appropriate or possible questions should be provided in advance especially where witnesses external to the council are involved. However the topic group should not be restricted as often ideas for supplementary questions are generated via the interviewing process. (See also para 7.2 below).
- 6.3 If Scrutiny Members wish to obtain information about specific aspects of an area of work under review it is often beneficial to talk to the people who are actually providing or are recipients of a service. Members may therefore need to undertake site visits. The Committee may also carry out a public consultation exercise involving public meetings. This may be a useful method of receiving the views of a large number of people in a relatively short space of time. Additionally it may be necessary to commission some other focussed consultation.

7. Members and Officers Giving Evidence

- 7.1 As well as reviewing documentation the Committee may require any Executive Portfolio Member, the responsible Head of Service and/or any Senior Officer to attend before it to explain matters within their remit, including:
- any particular decision or series of decisions;
 - the extent to which the actions taken implement Council policy; and/or
 - The effectiveness of such actions (i.e: to cost, time and in addition to compliance with policy)

- 7.2 When a Member or officer is required to attend a Topic Group meeting they will usually be informed in writing giving at least 5 working days notice of the meeting (unless the Topic Group is convened urgently). The letter will inform them of the subject being scrutinised and where appropriate a list of questions to be answered. When the Topic Group requires the person attending to provide a written report sufficient time will be given to allow for preparation of that documentation. Where the Member or officer is unable to attend on the required date, an alternative date will be sought which is acceptable to all parties. (within the timescale set by the topic group).

8. Evidence Provided by Others

- 8.1 A Topic Group may invite other people to address it, to discuss issues of local concern and/or answer questions. It may for example wish to hear from residents, stakeholders and Members and officers in other parts of the public sector and shall invite them to attend. Any person invited to attend a Topic Group should be informed about the nature of the item on which they are requested to attend to give evidence and whether any papers are required to be produced for the Topic Group. It would be sensible to inform them in writing (either email or letter) of the subject being scrutinised and where appropriate a list of questions to be answered. This will help the person concerned to prepare the information the Topic Group are likely to be interested in. When the Topic Group requires the person attending to provide a written report sufficient time should be given to allow for preparation of that documentation. It may necessary on occasion to interview externally where it is not possible or appropriate for attendance at the topic group. This may be with the SO and with members but if members of the topic group are involved the SO should be present.
- 8.2 The Council has made budgetary provision for the engaging of consultants to assist in research or act as an expert witness. The engagement of consultants will be made by the Scrutiny Officer in consultation with the Chair of the Scrutiny Overview Committee.

9. Summing up after each Topic Group

- 9.1 At the end of each Topic Group meeting the Scrutiny Officer should sum up what the meeting had agreed and the Topic Group will agree whether it's a fair summary. This could include whom to interview, what line of questioning, what witnesses had said, conclusions, actions etc.

10. Notice of Meetings, Notes, Actions of and Public Access to Topic Group Meetings

- 10.1 Notices for Topic Group meetings will be by email and circulated only to Members of the Topic Group with a copy sent to the Chairman of the Scrutiny Overview Committee.
- 10.2 As Topic Group meetings are informal they are not bound by the same rights of public access to its meetings as a formal Council meeting would be. Topic Group meetings may be held during days and at times and venues best suited to Members. The Topic Group may decide that because of the subject matter of its investigation that it may be more appropriate to hold meetings away from the Council offices at Daneshill House and at a venue more closely associated with

that subject. It may be appropriate for meetings to be held away from the Council offices when the Topic Group is conducting a site visit.

- 10.3 Progress on each Topic Group will be reported by the Scrutiny Officers Update Report and orally by the Chair of the relevant Scrutiny & Value for Money Panel to the next meeting of the Scrutiny Overview Committee (in order to keep the Committee up to date with the way in which the Topic Group's work is progressing) which will be recorded in the Minutes of the Scrutiny Overview Committee.
- 10.4 Following each Topic Group meeting the Scrutiny Officer will write up the Notes of the meeting with any actions required clearly stated and circulate them to the Members on the Topic Group.
- 10.5 At the conclusion of the Topic Groups findings, the Scrutiny Officer will write the report including the recommendations of the Topic Group to the Scrutiny Overview Committee, having first circulated the report to the Topic Group Members for comment.