

**Meeting: OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY  
COMMITTEE**

**Agenda Item: 5**

**Date: 16 MARCH 2015**

**2015/2016 SCRUTINY WORK PROGRAMME**

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**1. PURPOSE**

- 1.1 To agree the Scrutiny Work Programme for the Overview & Scrutiny Committee for the new Municipal Year.

**2. RECOMMENDATIONS**

- 2.1 That feedback from the Scrutiny Evaluation Questionnaire completed by Members be noted.
- 2.2 That having considered ideas previously agreed and suggestions put forward by individual Members from their Scrutiny Evaluation Survey through January and February 2015 (see section 5.1), the Committee determine the subject matter of its Scrutiny Study for 2015/2016.
- 2.3 That consideration be given to including in the workplan specific monitoring or review of recommendations from previous studies (see section 6.2).
- 2.4 That the Policy Development work identified for the Committee (see section 7.1) be noted.

**3. BACKGROUND**

- 3.1 The Overview and Scrutiny Committee and the Select Committees are asked to draft their workplan ahead of the new Municipal year in order that work may begin as soon as the Committees are appointed at Annual Council. Any outstanding/unfinished studies, where applicable, might also need to be included.
- 3.2 During February 2015 Members provided feedback from the Scrutiny Evaluation and Work Programme Planning Survey that had been circulated for Scrutiny topics for the 2015/2016 Municipal Year.
- 3.3 When considering what work to undertake in the coming year Members may wish to consider if the matter in question is of a cross cutting nature and might lend itself to being considered jointly with the relevant Select Committee.

3.4 Officers have also been requested to bring to the Committee's attention Policy Development items that the Select Committee might be requested to consider and comment on before reports thereon are submitted to the Executive.

3.5 The Committee may also consider whether specific time should be allocated for monitoring or review of recommendations of previous studies. It is recognised that there is a limited dedicated officer resource for the Scrutiny work of 3 Scrutiny Committees and therefore it is important to ensure that workplans are in place in order that the call on those resources and on each Committee's time on all its activities are prioritised and evenly spread across the year.

3.6 The draft calendar of meetings for 2015/2016 previously circulated to Members includes dates for meetings of Overview & Scrutiny Committee that are time critical as they are considering decisions taken by the Executive and Budget & Policy Framework matters. For other meetings of the Select Committees a number of dates have been reserved and once the workplans for each Committee have been drafted these specific dates can be allocated.

### 3.7 Budget & Policy Framework Items

3.7.1 The Overview and Scrutiny Committee has responsibility to scrutinise Budget and Policy Framework items. The following matters have been identified for scrutiny by the Committee as Budget & Policy Framework items -

- The 2016/2017 HRA and Rent Setting
- General Fund Budget and Council Tax Setting
- Savings and Growth Proposals
- Stevenage Borough Local Plan
- Council Tax Support Scheme
- New Homes Bonus Allocations

3.7.2 The Committee may be required to scrutinise any further Budget and Policy Framework items as and when required in accordance with the Council's Constitution, Article 4 and Section 4 Rules of Procedure.

## **4. SCRUTINY – SUMMARY OF EVALUATION BY MEMBERS**

4.1 In January 2015 all Members of Select Committees and the Overview & Scrutiny Committee were provided with an Evaluation Questionnaire to gauge the positive aspects of Scrutiny work undertaken, how Scrutiny might be more effective and ideas for future studies. The following summary is based on the 7 replies received from the 13 Members on the Overview and Scrutiny Committee that returned a survey. Overall there were 15 replies received from the 22 Members who are on one or more of the Council's Scrutiny Committees.

4.2 As part of the Survey, Members were asked what aspects of Scrutiny could be improved to provide a better service. By and large Members expressed satisfaction with the way Scrutiny is being undertaken but provided challenge around the following areas:

- I know there are time constraints but sometimes more time is needed so a better evaluation can be achieved
- More involvement of an opposition member, for example chairing OSC or a Select Committee even for one topic
- I think the biggest problem is continuity. I have sat on at least two meetings this year, which discussed work commissioned several years ago by previous members of the committee that were out of date and where hardly anyone on the committee had comments to make. I think those reports could be for noting.
- The minutes should be more detailed.
- Before new Committee members start I would be beneficial if they have a short meeting prior to the first Committee meeting to update them on the current position of that group, as it would enable them to understand where the group is at in the process of a Scrutiny
- Better communication to members of select committees
- Need to re-visit past reviews to see what changes have actually been made
- Briefing prior to the scrutiny beginning so members are aware of the issues around the scrutiny subject would I hope focus the committee to ask pertinent questions while the committee is sitting. These briefing could also include packs signposting members where to find further information
- More support for the Scrutiny Officer
- Concerned that the recommendations for the review into training and employment opportunities for young people had not been carried out
- I feel that there needs to be de-brief sessions following the scrutiny work meetings in order that the members appraise their own performance and share what they hope to come from the scrutiny – in terms of what they have contributed and how they may follow up any matters arising. When topics are in the plan that members are not familiar with there needs to be a more formal way of being informed well before the meeting which would avoid members arriving to the meeting and asking questions that would have been better answered prior to the meeting. This would leave the scrutiny meeting to focus on the progressive rather than reflective stance that sometimes prevails
- The amount of paperwork at O&S is still huge and Members get muddled by it – providing page numbering has been helpful

4.3 Following a similar process in February 2014, Members identified issues for improvement. For Members assistance the following progress against these suggestions are presented in the table below:

<b>You said</b>	<b>We did</b>
More support for the admin / investigation side of the Scrutiny Section	Given the pressures on resources, it is not possible, nor likely in the future that there would be capacity to provide further dedicated admin / investigation support for scrutiny. All meetings are now clerked which is an improvement on the position of some years ago.
That reviews be conducted in more detail with more meetings but understand that resources & officer time are limited so could restrict this	Given the reduction in the overall number of Scrutiny Committees in recent years it is now possible to spend more time (with more meetings) on reviews
The Portfolio Holders should have no influence during deliberations	The Scrutiny Officer is not aware of any circumstances during the current Municipal Year where any Portfolio Holder has had any direct influence over scrutiny deliberations. Executive Portfolio holders only attend meetings when invited.
Continued monitoring of previous reviews	During the 2014/15 Municipal Year monitoring of previous review recommendations was undertaken by the two Select Committees. The Annual Scrutiny Report to Council will provide full detail.
Allow an opposition Member to Chair one Select Committee	This matter is determined by the Majority Group and therefore not something that officers can influence.
Use a "4 C's methodology of Best Value Reviews (Challenge / Compare / Consult / Compete) as a template for relevant service reviews	This methodology, although not without merit, is perhaps not wholly relevant to the way reviews are undertaken, specifically "compete" which is not relevant to Scrutiny. Reviews do however involve an element of challenge and comparison with the use of a "critical friend" in reviews.
Allow time to ensure a thorough review is completed	As stated above, with fewer Committees it is now possible to complete reviews in more depth.
Provide more questioning skills & scrutiny training for newer Members	A training session was provided to Scrutiny Members by South East Employers on 23 July 2014. This will be revisited in 2015/16.
Find out what third party contractors are doing when carrying out a service on behalf of the Council	This very much depends what the subject matter of a review might be. However, the review into Decent Homes involved a degree of close

	scrutiny of the external contractors who delivered the service.
That information from officers (in some cases) could be provided in a more timely fashion to help Members undertake their review	Officer responses to information requests have been received consistently in a timely manner.
That the Scrutiny Officer continues to make sure that issues from previous reviews are not lost when the Committee structure changes	As stated above, monitoring of previous review recommendations and Executive responses have continued to be undertaken by the appropriate Select Committee.

## 5. POTENTIAL SCRUTINY TOPICS FOR 2015/2016

- 5.1 At its meeting on 20 March 2014 it was agreed by the Committee that it should scrutinise SBC Media and Communications, it was then subsequently agreed by the Committee at its meeting on 28 July 2014 to defer this item to the 2015/16 Work Programme. Members are therefore reminded that they have previously committed to review this subject. This subject has again been raised by an O&S Committee Member during the canvassing for scrutiny ideas for 2015/16, with the following comments were received:

“I would like to scrutinise Communications between the council and the public – specifically in relation to the website. I would like to scrutinise the training received by officers who respond to the public – not just the call centre but officers who respond via email. The reason for this is that it has been suggested on a number of occasions by the public that they are unhappy with the manner in which they are spoken to on occasion or allegedly been ignored.”

“Communication with the Public – Council’s skills and ways to improve communications”

“Scrutiny of Residents Meetings – linked to how the Council engages with the community, is there a better way, looking at other models, are they cost effective? In this digital age would the use of Facebook pages, twitter etc be a better way to engage the Community? (Community Select Committee)

- 5.2 Following the canvassing of Members through January and February 2015 the following further topics have been suggested:

- 5.2.1 Local Community Budgets. This issue was raised by three Members in their survey responses and was raised by a number of Members in last year’s canvassing for scrutiny ideas. A review of the Local Community Budgets could be undertaken jointly with Community Select Committee as there are aspects of a review that could focus on the use of revenue but also have a community development focus. This suggestion has also been raised with the Community Select Committee as a potential joint scrutiny review with the Overview & Scrutiny Committee.

5.2.2 The following comments regarding the Scrutiny of Local Community Budgets were received:

“Scrutiny of Local Community Budgets”

“I would like to scrutinise how councillors spend their Local Community Budgets and how the system could be improved”

“LCB budgets, what should be considered value for money? A scrutiny of what LCB budget money is spent on and where it may arise – to hold members to account on their decisions and ask recipients of LCB money what in fact the money has done to further their cause or how the community has benefitted”

5.3 The following issues for consideration have been raised by Members:

- Use of volunteers in helping to provide council services and if we might increase this
- The potential for increasing revenues to SBC by sale of advertising space in/on our premises

5.4 The Strategic Director (Resources) has also suggested two potential issues that might suit a Scrutiny review (i) The IT Partnership with East Herts DC, how well is this working? and (ii) SBC Media and Communications (as was agreed previously by the Committee in 2014/15 and detailed at 5.1 above).

## **6. MONITORING/REVIEW OF RECOMMENDATIONS**

6.1 Members have commented that they would like to see a more formal process for the monitoring of previous review recommendations. Proposals for a new process to monitor review recommendations and associated actions will be presented to Members in the annual Scrutiny report to Council in the summer.

6.1.1 Ahead of any revised monitoring arrangements the Committee may consider there is a need to undertake some follow-up work on recommendations arising from previous studies. It may be considered sufficient to simply request update briefings from the relevant Heads of Service to be circulated to Members at appropriate intervals. However, if the Committee requires more detailed consideration or examination of the progress of previous recommendations this should be factored into its workplan.

6.2 Reports within the remit of this Committee that have been issued over the last Five years include –

- Members’ Expenses and Hospitality 2013-14
- Council Tax Support Scheme 2012-13
- Treasury Management Strategy 2011-12
- Communications 2010-11

## **7. POLICY DEVELOPMENT WORK FOR 2014/2015**

- 7.1 The following matters have been identified, in consultation with the Strategic Director (Resources), for potential Policy Development to be worked on with the Portfolio Holder for 2015/2016 –
- Design of the 2016/17 Council Tax Support Scheme
  - Concessionary Policy – looking at all of the concessions that the Council currently provides and whether these are still appropriate
- 7.2 Any further information available regarding other Policy Development for the Committee will be updated orally at the meeting.

## **8 IMPLICATIONS**

### **8.1 Financial Implications**

There are no direct financial implications arising from the recommendations in this report.

A small budget is held to support the work of the seven Committees in their research and study.

### **8.2 Legal Implications**

The role of Scrutiny and Overview Committees is set out in the Local Government Act 2000. The recommendations made in this report are to facilitate the Committees for fully undertake this role.

### **8.3 Equalities and Diversity Implications**

There are no direct Equalities and Diversity implications arising from the recommendations in this report. Specific Equalities and Diversity Implications are considered during each scrutiny review.

## **BACKGROUND PAPERS**

- Completed Evaluation Questionnaires – February 2015

## **APPENDICES**

None