

TITLE	Select Committee Inquiry into Overview and Scrutiny in Local Government
FOR CONSIDERATION BY	Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee on 22 November 2017
WARD	None Specific
LEAD OFFICER	Andrew Moulton, Assistant Director, Governance
LEAD MEMBER	Keith Baker, Chairman of the Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee

OUTCOME / BENEFITS TO THE COMMUNITY

Overview and Scrutiny is one of the checks and balances which ensure that the Council and its partners make and implement effective decisions.

The House of Commons Select Committee for Communities and Local Government Inquiry may make recommendations to the Government which seek to strengthen the Overview and Scrutiny process with the aim of achieving more positive outcomes for local residents and community groups.

RECOMMENDATION

The Committee is recommended to:

- 1) consider the latest developments relating to the Select Committee Inquiry;
- 2) consider the key questions posed by the Select Committee within the context of Overview and Scrutiny at Wokingham Borough Council.

SUMMARY OF REPORT

As reported to previous meetings of the Committee, the House of Commons Select Committee for Communities and Local Government is undertaking an Inquiry into the operation of Overview and Scrutiny in Local Government. The Inquiry is looking at the effectiveness of Overview and Scrutiny, how independent the process is and the impact of budget reductions in local government.

Councillors Ferris and Richards attended the House on 30 October 2017 to observe an evidence taking session of the Select Committee. Councillor Richards also attended an informal working group session with MPs from the Select Committee.

The report highlights the key issues under consideration as part of the Select Committee's Inquiry.

Background

The House of Commons Select Committee for Communities and Local Government is undertaking an inquiry into the effectiveness of Overview and Scrutiny in Local Government. The inquiry's terms of reference include:

- Whether scrutiny committees are effective in holding decision-makers to account;
- The extent to which scrutiny committees operate with political impartiality and independence from executives;
- Whether scrutiny officers are independent of and separate from those being scrutinised;
- How scrutiny chairs and members are selected;
- Whether powers to summon witnesses are adequate;
- The potential for local authority scrutiny to act as a voice for local residents and service users;
- How scrutiny topics are selected;
- The support given to scrutiny by political leaders and senior officers;
- What use, if any, is made of specialist external advisers;
- The effectiveness and importance of local authority scrutiny of external organisations.

The Select Committee has received oral and written evidence from a range of stakeholders including Government Ministers, local authorities, the Centre for Public Scrutiny, resident and community groups and academics.

The Council was invited to send representatives to the House of Commons on 30 October 2017 to take part in an informal session with MPs and to observe a meeting of the Select Committee. Councillors Ferris and Richards attended along with officers from Democratic Services.

The key questions debated in the informal session were:

- Do local authority scrutiny committees operate with political independence and in a non-partisan way?
- Do officers and Members working on scrutiny have sufficient resources, expertise and knowledge to deliver effective scrutiny?
- If you could make a single change, what would you change about the way scrutiny operates in your authority?

From the evidence submitted to the Select Committee to date it appears that there is a wide range of custom and practice relating to the operation of scrutiny in local authorities. This includes the amount of resources available for scrutiny, the number and seniority of scrutiny officers, the way scrutiny interacts with the executive, the level of support and training for scrutiny Members and the way in which an authority's "culture" impacts on the independence and effectiveness of scrutiny.

In terms of its recommendations the Select Committee appears to be considering whether further legislative direction could address some or all of these issues in order to

bring all scrutiny functions up to a similar standard. However, the risks of this approach would be a restriction on local autonomy and the ability of local authorities to adopt structures which suit local needs and circumstances. It would also be difficult to enforce changes of this nature. Another option could be to make peer review of scrutiny (via the Local Government Association) mandatory rather than the current voluntary arrangements.

The Select Committee has now finished its evidence taking sessions and will be meeting to finalise its report and recommendations to the Government. The Select Committee aims to finalise its report by mid-December 2017. The report's findings and recommendations will be submitted to a meeting of the Management Committee for discussion in early 2018.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE RECOMMENDATION

The Council faces severe financial challenges over the coming years as a result of the austerity measures implemented by the Government and subsequent reductions to public sector funding. It is estimated that Wokingham Borough Council will be required to make budget reductions in excess of £20m over the next three years and all Executive decisions should be made in this context.

	How much will it Cost/ (Save)	Is there sufficient funding – if not quantify the Shortfall	Revenue or Capital?
Current Financial Year (Year 1)	NA	NA	NA
Next Financial Year (Year 2)	NA	NA	NA
Following Financial Year (Year 3)	NA	NA	NA

Other financial information relevant to the Recommendation/Decision
NA

Cross-Council Implications
Overview and Scrutiny oversees all Council services and services provided by key partners.

List of Background Papers
Evidence submitted to the Communities and Local Government Select Committee Inquiry on Scrutiny in Local Government.

Contact Neil Carr	Service Democratic Services
Telephone No 0118 974 6058	Email neil.carr@wokingham.gov.uk
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