

<b>TITLE</b>	<b>Overview &amp; Scrutiny – Ideas for Improvement</b>
<b>FOR CONSIDERATION BY</b>	Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee on 22 July 2020
<b>WARD</b>	None Specific
<b>DIRECTOR</b>	Graham Ebers, Deputy Chief Executive

## **OUTCOME / BENEFITS TO THE COMMUNITY**

A key aim of the Overview and Scrutiny process is to engage with residents to identify topics of importance and to provide evidence of satisfaction with Council and partner services such as the NHS and Thames Valley Police. Another key aim is to provide assurance that public money is being spent wisely and is being targeted on the stated priorities of the public service providers. The proposals in the report aim to make Overview and Scrutiny more effective, to promote its achievements more widely and to generate greater interest and involvement from residents and community groups.

## **RECOMMENDATION**

The Committee is requested to:

- 1) consider the proposed ideas for improving the Overview and Scrutiny process, set out in the report;
- 2) consider the presentation on Scrutiny progress from Devon County Council (appended to the report);
- 3) agree on any changes to the Scrutiny process to deliver improvements and better outcomes for residents.

## **SUMMARY OF REPORT**

The Council has a well-established Overview and Scrutiny process. As Council resources become more constrained it is important that Overview and Scrutiny focuses on key elements of service delivery and policy development, both inside and outside the Council. At the same time it is important that residents are aware of the role of Overview and Scrutiny and how they can get involved in the process by attending meetings, asking questions and submitting evidence and ideas for investigation and review.

Research into best practice has identified a number of potential improvements. These relate to improving public awareness about the process, making meetings and reports more effective, greater use of social media and ensuring that the implementation of recommendations is reported back to Members. These ideas for improvement are set out in the report for Members to consider. Also appended to the report is a presentation from Devon County Council on best practice initiatives to improve Overview and Scrutiny.

## **Background**

Overview and Scrutiny at Wokingham Borough Council has been operating since 2000. It is a well-established part of the checks and balances which ensure that the Council and its partners deliver high quality services, value for money and customer focus.

In order to deliver continuous improvement it is timely for the Management Committee to consider potential improvements to its internal procedures and its engagement with residents and community groups. Research into best practice across the country has identified a number of ideas and initiatives which have proved successful elsewhere. These are set out below. Members may also have other ideas and suggestions to contribute to the debate.

## **Member Training**

Introductory/refresher Scrutiny training has been provided for Members for a number of years. This year, specific training for Members of the Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee has also been delivered by the Centre for Public Scrutiny. Further training could be provided on specific issues to enable Members to drill down into topics of local interest. Scrutiny training is funded from the general Member training budget.

## **Member Briefings**

Overview and Scrutiny Committee Agenda are typically very full with a wide range of issues to consider. It is important, therefore, that the Agenda are focussed on key issues and make effective use of the meeting time available. Some Councils use a form of Agenda/Briefing meeting one week before the Agenda is despatched. This allows the Chairman to consider the draft items coming forward and to decide on the shape of the Agenda together with appropriate timings.

The Committee has operated a briefing process for the Chairman and Members of the opposition groups for several years. It is suggested that the other Overview and Scrutiny Committees consider introducing a similar briefing arrangement for Members.

## **Reports**

The reports submitted to Overview and Scrutiny are a key method of providing information and focusing on key issues of importance. It is essential that reports contain clear and concise recommendations to enable Members to make the most effective use of their time. As discussed above, the Agenda setting process can help to ensure that Members receive reports that are fit for purpose. The Chairman can also look at the report recommendations and determine whether any reports for “noting” are circulated to Members outside the O&S meeting, or are deferred to a future meeting. Report recommendations should be based on the SMART principles – Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic and Time-bound.

## **Calls for Evidence**

Providing assurance to the public is an important function of Overview and Scrutiny and engaging the public in reviews is an important mechanism to achieve this outcome. Using the example of the Parliamentary Select Committees some Councils issue Calls for Evidence when new inquiries (e.g. Task and Finish Groups) are being launched.

The Call for Evidence includes a press briefing on the main themes of inquiry, use of social media and the Council’s website. The aim of the Call for Evidence is to raise awareness of the issues under consideration and generate public interest in the form of

questions, written and oral evidence. This, in turn, will raise awareness of the role of Overview and Scrutiny.

The Committee has used Calls for Evidence over the past two years, for example as part of the Scrutiny review of Grounds Maintenance and the Estate Infrastructure Task and Finish Group. The Calls for Evidence generated a large number of comments and suggestions from residents, community groups and Town and Parish Councils.

### **Council Website**

The Council's website contains information on the role of Overview and Scrutiny and allows residents to submit issues for Scrutiny reviews. However, the Overview and Scrutiny pages are not especially easy to find – the route is:

*Home/Council and meetings/Meetings/Ways of participating/Take part in Scrutiny*

It is suggested that the Overview and Scrutiny pages should be more prominent on the Council's website. A number of Councils also provide an update on progress on current reviews on the relevant web pages which enables residents to see how reviews are progressing and any upcoming meetings, milestones or events.

### **Social Media**

The Council's presence on social media is increasing steadily with, for example, over 7,000 followers on Twitter. Social media is currently used to give details of upcoming Overview and Scrutiny Committee meetings with a link to the Agendas. It is suggested that this work is expanded to give more frequent posting and more details on the role of Overview and Scrutiny, Calls for Evidence and feedback on issues considered by each Committee and Task and Finish Group.

### **Wokingham Borough News**

Wokingham Borough News is distributed to every household in the Borough. The magazine updates residents on strategic developments, service issues and upcoming events. Overview and Scrutiny updates in the Borough News would be an effective way to raise awareness of the work of Overview and Scrutiny and to demonstrate its impact, especially amongst residents who do not use social media. An item on Scrutiny was included in the Borough News in 2018/19. It is suggested that further items on Scrutiny be included in future editions.

### **Work Programme - Tracking of Recommendations**

It is important for Members to be aware of progress relating to the implementation of recommendations made by the Overview and Scrutiny Committees and Task and Finish Groups. It is suggested that the Management Committee receive an update report every six months with details of progress. This will allow Members to assess the impact of Overview and Scrutiny more effectively. It will also provide useful data for inclusion in the Committees' Annual Reports. A proposed Work Programme Action Tracker is set out elsewhere on the Agenda.

### **Scrutiny Improvements at Devon County Council**

Appended to the report is a presentation given by the Head of Scrutiny at Devon County Council to the Centre for Public Scrutiny's annual conference in December 2019. The presentation gives examples of innovative measures aimed at making Scrutiny more relevant and accessible to residents and community groups. Members are asked to consider the presentation and any ideas which be used at WBC.

## Next Steps

Following Member discussion, any ideas which are supported will be implemented. Progress will then be reported to the Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee at future meetings. It is important that Overview and Scrutiny is able to demonstrate positive impacts and better outcomes for residents across the Borough.

## 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)	0	0	N/A
Next Financial Year (Year 2)	0	0	N/A
Following Financial Year (Year 3)	0	0	N/A

### Other financial information relevant to the Recommendation/Decision

None

### Cross-Council Implications

Effective Overview and Scrutiny helps to drive service improvement, policy development and the achievement of value for money for the Borough's residents.

### Public Sector Equality Duty

Due regard has been given to Council's the Public Sector Equality. The ideas for improvement aim to raise the profile of Overview and Scrutiny for residents across the Borough, including residents with protected characteristics as defined under the Equality Act 2010.

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