

TITLE	Overview and Scrutiny Work Programmes for 2024-25
FOR CONSIDERATION BY	Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee on 6 February 2024
WARD	None Specific
LEAD OFFICER	Neil Carr – Scrutiny Officer

OUTCOME / BENEFITS TO THE COMMUNITY

Effective Overview and Scrutiny helps to improve services, holds decision makers to account and engages with local communities. In so doing it helps to demonstrate that the Council and other public service providers are open and transparent and are delivering high quality, value for money services.

RECOMMENDATION

The Committee is requested to:

- 1) agree the process and timeline for developing the Overview and Scrutiny Work Programmes for 2024/25;
- 2) agree the process for public consultation on the draft Work Programmes;
- 3) agree to finalise the Work Programmes at the meeting on 6 March 2024;

SUMMARY OF REPORT

Effective work programming is a Member-led process aimed at shortlisting and prioritising issues of community concern together with issues arising out of the Council Plan and major policy or service changes. It aims to:

- reflect local needs and concerns;
- prioritise topics for scrutiny which have the most impact or benefit;
- involve local residents and stakeholders;
- be flexible enough to respond to new or urgent issues.

Each year the Committee approves work programmes for itself and the Council's Overview and Scrutiny Committees. The report considers the process for identifying potential items for inclusion in the Overview and Scrutiny Work Programmes for 2024/25. The 2024/25 Work Programmes will be finalised at the Committee's meeting on 6 March 2024.

Background

An effective Overview and Scrutiny function is underpinned by robust work programming. Effective work programming lays the foundations for targeted scrutiny of issues of local importance. It helps to ensure that Overview and Scrutiny adds value and makes a difference. Effective work programming helps to:

- prioritise issues for in-depth work where Overview and Scrutiny can make an impact and add value;
- reduce the need for “information only” reports;
- achieve a balance between pre-decision scrutiny, policy development and performance/budget monitoring;
- contribute at an earlier stage in the decision making process;
- increase public and stakeholder involvement in Overview and Scrutiny;
- retain flexibility in order to respond to urgent issues arising during the year.

The Centre for Governance and Scrutiny has produced a template for developing an annual Overview and Scrutiny Work Programme. The key elements of the process and suggested timeline are:

- January – initial consultation with Scrutiny Members, Leader and Executive Members, senior Officers and partner organisations. Public engagement with residents, Town and Parish Councils, community groups and partners via the Council’s website and social media;
- February – discussions between Scrutiny Chairs, the Executive and CLT to consider the suggestions received and highlight top priorities for inclusion in the Work Programmes;
- March – Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee agrees the Work Programmes for 2023/24;
- April – publication and implementation of the Work Programmes;
- November – mid-year review of the Work Programmes by the Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee.

Policy Development and Pre-Decision Scrutiny

Effective Overview and Scrutiny can assist in the development of new policies in support of the Council’s priorities. In recent years the Leader of the Council and Executive Members have attended the Committee’s meetings to discuss priorities for the year ahead and to identify issues which could benefit from input from Overview and Scrutiny. The discussions indicated a consensus that Overview and Scrutiny could play a larger role in policy development. This could be via pre-decision scrutiny of new policies or in depth reviews of specific issues which could lead to new policy development. The current Leader has emphasised the important role that Overview and Scrutiny can play in this respect. Publication of the new Community Vision and work on a new Council Plan will help to identify key strategic priorities which will inform the Overview and Scrutiny Work Programmes moving forwards.

In Depth Scrutiny Reviews

An important strength of Overview and Scrutiny is the capacity to carry out in depth reviews of policies or services provided by the Council or its partners. In depth reviews allow Members to drill down into a particular issue and consider evidence from service users, community groups, experts and other stakeholders. They also enable Members to carry out research and broaden their knowledge of best practice in the public and private sectors.

In recent years a number of Scrutiny Task and Finish Groups have been established to look at issues including Climate Emergency, Estate Infrastructure, Tree Protection and Biodiversity, Social Housing Providers and Active Travel. A further Task and Finish Group was established recently to scrutinise the provision and co-ordination of litter bins across the Borough. The Task and Finish Groups made a number of recommendations to the Executive, the majority of which were accepted. This Committee also produced a major report reviewing the Council's response to the Covid-19 pandemic.

2023/24 also saw the fourth iteration of Budget Scrutiny, carried out by the Community and Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee. The Committee examined draft proposals for growth, savings and Capital investment. Members scrutinised Executive Members and senior managers about Budget options, risk and the longer term financial horizon. The Committee is currently working on a Budget Scrutiny report which will be submitted to Budget Council in February 2024.

Building on the successful outcome of the Scrutiny process, highlighted above, it is suggested that each Overview and Scrutiny Committee again consider identifying one or more topics for in-depth review during 2024/25, the reviews to be carried out by the Committees themselves or by Task and Finish Groups.

Scrutiny Review Issues

The issues identified for consideration by Overview and Scrutiny should be of interest or concern for local residents and generate public interest and involvement in the Overview and Scrutiny process.

In order to generate ideas and involvement from local residents, community groups and stakeholders, it is suggested that the Council's website and social media be used to publicise the development of the work programme and to invite suggestions for inclusion. In considering potential issues for review, Members should take into account the previously agreed selection criteria:

- Whether the issue is of local, and preferably current, concern;
- Whether undertaking the review can be linked to the Council's Vision, priorities and underpinning principles or would help achieve these;
- Whether the topic is already being reviewed elsewhere within the Council (e.g. as part of the Continuous Improvement Programme);
- Is the topic one that is capable of being influenced by one of the Overview and Scrutiny Committees;
- Is the topic of manageable scope – not too wide-ranging and yet of sufficient size to warrant a scrutiny review;
- Whether sufficient resources are available to support the scrutiny review; if a review is warranted, should it have a high, medium or low priority?

- Whether the review should be undertaken by the Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee itself or be delegated to an Overview and Scrutiny Committee or a Task and Finish Group.

Scrutiny Improvement Review

Members will recall that, following a corporate Peer Review in 2021, the Council commissioned the Centre for Governance and Scrutiny to carry out a Scrutiny Improvement Review (SIR), looking at the Council’s Scrutiny function and making recommendations for improvement. Recommendations arising out of the SIR were considered by the Committee at its meeting in November 2022 and September 2023. The SIR emphasised the importance of effective work programming and greater emphasis on Scrutiny’s shaping role, with a clear mapping for Scrutiny in early policy development and key decisions. The SIR report stated:

“It is important that Scrutiny carries out reviews and assesses performance, but there is an important missed opportunity for it to add value to Council policy and strategy through greater emphasis on the big challenges ahead for the Council. The future is where the opportunities, challenges, risks and threats are present, and Scrutiny has a vital role to play in asking about the Executive’s plans and preparedness for what is ahead”.

Scrutiny Issues

As a reminder, the Action Tracker report, later in the Agenda, sets out the range of issues considered by the Committee in 2023/24 to date. The Forward Work Programme report sets out the issues to be considered in the remainder of the Municipal Year.

Work Programme development should allow flexibility for the consideration of urgent issues and the call-in of decisions made by the Executive. Once approved, the work programme issues will be timetabled into the programme of Overview and Scrutiny meetings during the 2024/25 Municipal Year.

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	NA	NA
Next Financial Year (Year 2)	0	NA	NA
Following Financial Year (Year 3)	0	NA	NA

Other financial information relevant to the Recommendation/Decision

In depth Budget Scrutiny is carried out each year by the Community and Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

Cross Council Implications

None

Public Sector Equality Duty

The Scrutiny issues raised during 2024/25 will raise the profile of Overview and Scrutiny across the Borough, including residents with protected characteristics defined under the Equality Act 2010. The aim is to achieve better outcomes and value for money for all the Borough's residents. Progress against the Council's Equality Plan will be considered at the Committee's meeting in March 2024

Climate Emergency – The Council has declared a Climate Emergency and is committed to playing as full a role as possible – leading by example as well as by exhortation – in achieving a carbon neutral Wokingham borough by 2030

The reports of the O&S Climate Emergency Task and Finish Group have included recommendations aimed at strengthening the delivery of the Council's Climate Emergency Action Plan. A Climate Emergency Overview and Scrutiny Committee has now been established. The Committee met for the first time on 4 January 2023

List of Background Papers

None

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